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The Becoming of a Hero

Identity conflicts in contemporary Hindi cinema: the protagonist as a site for political, social and religious conflicts

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List of abbreviations

RDB   Rang De Basanti

KPC   Kai Po Che

DCH   Dil Chahta Hai

BJP   Bharatiya Janata Party

VHP   Vishwa Hindu Parishad

RSS   Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh

Introduction

Long years ago, we made a tryst with destiny, and now the time comes when we shall redeem our pledge, not wholly or in full measure, but very substantially. At the stroke of midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom.

Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru on August 14, 1947

Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru delivered this speech, one of the most iconic speeches of the 20th century, on the eve of India's independence, while the country reeled from violence and struggled to come to terms with an incomprehensible loss of life and property. 77 years later, revisiting this speech has become a necessity – as modern India reels, yet again, from repeated violence against minorities and faces the resurgence of communal forces. It seems like India is all set to undo its tryst with destiny and become a nation obsessed with defining a single variant of 'Indian' based on religion, caste and ethnicity rather than allowing one to be Indian, irrespective of those backgrounds. The identities that constitute an Indian are becoming more decisive and important than the Indian identity itself. In the turbulent times of today, a series of political renaissances is underway, not just in India but across the world. Our *Zeitgeist* is being defined by phenomena like globalisation, modernisation, new media and media convergence, transculturality and more importantly, identities – identities inspired by our cultural understandings and behaviours that are being constantly altered due to the arising conflicts and clashes based on different understandings of it. Discussions surrounding various identities, the assertion of these identities and possible conflicts resulting from them have become our constant companion in modern times and have been a significant contributing

factor to some of the most complicated events of our times – civil wars being fought over ethnic and religious identities, cultural clashes owing to an aversion to, or an absolute rejection of religions; societal conflicts out of a sense of belonging and loyalty to a particular group or a complete lack thereof between patriarchal systems of power and the elements of a society that defy this patriarchy. Whatever the nature of an individual identity, an attempt at asserting this identity is being met with resistance from different quarters of the society and is being instantly transported into the virtual space of the internet, thus magnifying its relevance.

Identities and identity conflicts have influenced the past in decisive ways and continue to do so with the present. The issue of identity (or identities) has always been a part of the broader socio-political discourse in any given timeframe, in any given geographical context. Nonetheless, in an increasingly intertwined world, concepts like culture, identity and identity conflicts have become relevant like never before. Today, the world is witnessing massive migrations – vast numbers of people continue to migrate to the so-called developed world in search of better opportunities or in many cases, displaced and forced to leave their homes due to armed conflicts or civil wars. Either way, as they move away from home and are exposed to new influences, the fear of losing one's *Own* culture, fear of the *Other*[1] and the resulting complicated process of a change in their identities, become more real. As the possibility of settling down in any place other than *Home* starts to appear on the horizon, boundaries start to emerge. These boundaries are guarded by two groups of people. One is a group of people who are indigenous, who insist on propagating a very hegemonic, mostly very narrow and monolithic version of culture, claim monopoly

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1   I refer to the term *Other*, with all its limitations, in the context of Brent Plate in his book *Imag(in)ing Otherness. Filmic Visions of Living Together* published in the year 1999. He uses the term Otherness to denote that which resides outside the margins of the dominant cultural representations, outside the social-symbolic order. Within the framework of this thesis, the parameters of what marks a dominant culture, an accepted social-symbolic order have been set according to the evolving socio-political realities in India and elaborated upon at relevant points.

over how history is perceived and feed into the nationalism debate. On the other side of the boundary are migrants, who face the challenge of adjusting to a new cultural, socio-political environment, combined with their anxieties and fears about losing their culture and identity. As they try to persistently hold on to their *Own*, the boundary between the *Us* and *Them* becomes increasingly visible. In either case, both the groups claim some exclusivity, in terms of what their culture means, along the lines of a *Leitkultur*[2], who their culture accepts, deciding who belongs and who doesn't. All these mechanisms ensure a marginalising and even a rejection of the *Other,* leading to a pervasive clash of cultures and identities in the society. And then there is a third group of people – those who are situated between these two groups that represent the *Own* and the *Other*. They are still partly rooted in their *Own* but aren't averse to the idea of exposing themselves to the *Other* and exploring it. This group of people are situated in a *Part-Culture* or *In-Between*[3].

The phenomenon of expanding paradigms of culture, of changing and negotiating identities and the emerging identity conflicts, isn't restricted to any one particular society or to one particular walk of life in times of *Cultural Chaos*[4]. Political establishments across the world have identified their *Other* and given this *Other* a face. They have found ways of introducing this rhetoric into mainstream political discourse – some have done it in subtle

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2   *Leitkultur* is a term that was first used by the political scientist Bassam Tibi in his book *Europa ohne Identität? Die Krise der multikulturellen Gesellschaft* published in 2000. It primarily refers to a German societal system, largely based on European values, which separates the migrants and the locals. This term has become increasingly politicized after Friedrich Merz of the CDU used it for the first time in 2000 in the context of migration and integration of migrants and spoke of the 'German *Leitkultur*'. It has repeatedly been used since then and in the current political discourse, it is often understood as an antonym for Multiculturalism.

3   Homi Bhabha, "Culture's In-Between" in *Questions of cultural identity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay, (London/ Thousand Oaks/ New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1996), 54.

4   Brian McNair, *Cultural Chaos: Journalism and Power in a Globalised World*, (Oxon: Routledge, 2006).

ways while others have made it crystal clear. *Make America Great Again*[5] has the migrants as the *Other*, *PEGIDA*[6] and the *AfD*[7] in Germany have the Muslims as well as the migrants as the *Other*, Hindutva forces in India have very exclusive notions about who they consider to be Indian and so the list goes on. Conservative elements in a lot of societies see emancipated, educated women, modernisation and globalization as the *Other* – the *Other* is something that threatens to disturb the *status quo* and is probably a figure to be afraid of. One need not engage with this *Other* but should ideally treat this *Other* as the enemy.

These events – clashing ideas of culture and conflicts surrounding notions of identity – not only influence our present but will play an important role in laying out the future course of our world. The chaos and turbulence that define our times are being expressed through a variety of arts – including the medium of cinema. Films are often considered to mirror the society at any given point in time. Even while set in a constructed world, they still reflect on contemporary socio-political realities. This process of constructing realities leads to cinema playing an ambivalent role. On the one hand, cinema tries to highlight the similarities in the contexts of the viewer and the protagonist in an attempt to make the viewer a part of the narrative to evoke emotions arising out of familiarity. On the other hand, it also helps creating an illusion for the viewer – that he/she is not a part of the narrative in the film, that he/she has the luxury of distance to the plot. Whereas in reality, it is, in fact a depiction of a broader context, reality if you may, of which he/she is a part of. One may or may not agree with this view, but

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5   *Make America Great Again* popularised by the republican candidate Donald Trump in 2015/16 during the campaigning for the presidential elections in the United States of America.

6   *PEGIDA* stands for *Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes* (Patriotic Europeans against the Islamisation of the Occident) and is a German far right, nationalist, anti-Islam political movement.

7   AfD stands for *Alternative für Deutschland* and is a German right-wing political party. It is the biggest opposition party in the German parliament at the moment and gained prominence since the 2017 Federal Elections in Germany. AfD can be termed as having strong Anti-Migrant, Xenophobic and Islamophobic tendencies.

the connection between reality and films nonetheless exists. Observing how filmmakers, over a period of time, have continuously tried to capture the spirit of their times, it would only make sense to look at films as messengers or carriers, they not only present the legacy and problems of their times to a time bound audience but also preserve them as cultural heritage for the future generations.

When I decided to look at identity conflicts through the lens of a researcher, I had a feeling that I don't need to look beyond myself, or people around me, for examples. I am a child of globalisation. I belong to a generation where people were born somewhere, grew up elsewhere, studied in a completely different place, are working somewhere else altogether and so on. During this, we are exposed to thousands of other people who are just like us. Our personas represent an amalgamation of identities that we take on – I am a woman, who was born into a Hindu Brahmin middle class family, raised in a mid-sized Indian city called Pune, lived in Oman for a short while, moved to Germany and have been living here since. All these phases, accompanied by a series of experiences in my personal life, each taking place in a culturally and geographically different place, and subsequently in a different context, have left a permanent impression on me. They have not only added a series of traits and aspects to my personality, certain characteristics I identify myself with today but also helped me get rid of some aspects of my identity that may have made a peaceful existence in my new surroundings problematic. I choose to look at it as a process of enrichment, but at the same time, the current debates prompt me to think that I am not exclusive enough – not Indian enough for Indians anymore, neither am I (and I doubt if I ever will be) German enough for the Germans around me. Who am I?

A part of growing up back in India was an introduction to cinema – world cinema to a small extent but mostly Indian cinema. I refer to Indian cinema as an overarching broad term, encompassing very diverse films that portrayed (and maybe even contributed to stereotyping certain regions) the diversity of the Indian society. The influence of cinema on Indian society

– in India as well as abroad – cannot be highlighted enough. It ranges from cult followings, temples for movie stars, actors becoming influential politicians based solely on their popularity and not on their political ideology, to its influence on the fashion industry – the list goes on. The popularity of cinema in India, as opposed to theatre, in recent times speaks volumes about the potential and scope of influence that this medium has. It is a psychological medium – a medium that engages the unconscious of its audience by reproducing familiar contexts on the screen. The medium of film not only creates new myths but also reproduces myths prevalent in a society while 'endorsing the dominant values of the society that produces them as right and natural, while marginalising and delegitimising alternatives and others'[8]. This aspect helps us understand the contemporary dynamics of a society, public discourses around various issues while also giving rise to new monomyths and heroic figures. It is important to consider here that a cinematic product can invoke a variety of responses in different parts of the country depending on the local societal and cultural setups. Another important factor that also contributed to the success of the medium, especially in India, is the manner in which this medium brings together different performing arts, from antiquity to modernity to our current present. It's a wonderful amalgamation of complex and diverse cultural and artistic influences to portray an equally complex and diverse range of issues. When I started to look for answers to the question on portrayal of identity conflicts, I realised that among other art forms, Bollywood had also been trying to address this complex question of (clashing) identities and bringing these clashes to the big screen. Thus started my interrogation of how popular films – from Bollywood as well as films that are representative of an intersection between Bollywood and Parallel Cinema – both of which have a mass-reach, were dealing with this issue, portray diverse cultural positions and understandings, the evolution and shifts in identities and ultimately, identity conflicts.

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8   Barry Grant, *Film Genre. From iconography to ideology*, (London: Wallflower Press, 2007), 32.

Within the framework of this inquiry into the portrayal of identity conflicts in contemporary productions, I consider six films, each representing and addressing a different form of conflict. I have structured the inquiry in such a manner that the reader can first get a rough idea of the broader contexts and the methodological framework before delving into film analyses, which form the core of this inquiry. This work has been divided into three broad parts, each part containing chapters and subchapters. In the **first part**, I outline and explain the main framework; in the **second part**, I focus on the film analyses and in the **third part**, I provide a comprehensive summary of the results of the film analyses as well as present some conclusions resulting from this inquiry.
The first part contains three chapters.

The **first chapter** focuses on understanding the nature of my research as well as the necessity of my research considering the existent scholarship on this topic. Here, I will also engage with the idea behind looking at a protagonist as a site of political, social and religious conflicts alongside the narrative of the film while also highlighting the unique nature of my research.

In the **second chapter**, I formulate the primary research questions that guide this inquiry. The primary research questions serve a dual function of providing a central theme on which this research will focus while also allowing me to focus on some core aspects of understanding the complex correlation between a protagonist, a film and their relation to external factors and triggers. It is important to understand here that within the scope of a research project like this, considering the broad nature of the chosen topics like nationalism, gender, religion etc., though a variety of questions and aspects presented themselves, it was a conscious choice to focus on finding answers to the primary questions which lead to a better understanding of a concept like identity conflicts.

In the **third chapter**, I introduce my research plan. This research plan constitutes an overview of the various methodological approaches that in my understanding were the most suitable in order to reach the goals I have

set out by positing the research questions. The chapter also focuses on the different thematic backgrounds, which, while interacting with individuals and protagonists, give rise to a variety of identity conflicts. After having laid out the theoretical approach and the contextual background, I have also briefly introduced the films I have chosen here for the purpose of film analysis. There are six case studies in total, which are representative of a very large repertoire of films which also address similar issues.

The second part contains two chapters, each chapter with three sub-chapters each.

The **fourth chapter** focuses on the film analyses of the six chosen films. Each individual film analysis is conducted according to the blueprint laid out in the third chapter and attempts at answering some of the primary research questions towards the end of each sub-section.
The third part consists of two chapters.

In the **fifth chapter**, I consolidate the findings of the film analyses. I have consciously stayed away from presenting some findings which were only true for one film since those findings have already been addressed at the end of each sub-section in the earlier chapter.

In the **sixth and the final chapter**, I return to the primary research questions and through findings connected to those questions, taking the six case-studies into consideration, draw some conclusions.

1. The protagonist as a site for political, social and religious conflicts

In this chapter, I intend to look at the protagonist as a site for manifestation of a series of political, social and religious conflicts. Primarily, I intend to focus on the protagonist, putting him/her ahead of the plot. The reason that I chose to focus more on the conflicts a protagonist experiences than the broader plot of the film is that a lot of work has already been done by several scholars addressing different aspects of Bollywood. Works by veteran scholars like Wimala Dissanayake, K. Moti Gokulsing and Ashish Rajadhyaksha focus primarily on providing an overview of Indian cinema – particularly Bollywood and varied theoretical approaches to study Indian cinema. While some contemporary scholars like Tejaswini Ganti focussed more on aspects of production and the gentrification of Bollywood, as well as on providing an overview of the evolution of Bollywood cinema, other recent work by scholars like Neelam Sidhar Wright and Ashvin Devasundaram examines the emergence of the post-modern Indie film. The work done by scholars like Ashis Nandy approaches Bollywood film from a different perspective – with the roots of the approach in social sciences, while works of Ira Bhaskar focus primarily on depiction of trauma and gender in Bollywood productions. Most of the scholarship available on contemporary Indian cinema is either based on the topics that the films delve into – the political film, the social film, the religious film, the gender film, the diaspora film, the construction of a nation or on specific elements, aspects of the film production, ranging from pre-production to post-production, and reception of the films. Though the deliberations

in the first category considered the importance of a protagonist, the primary focus was on the broader thematic contexts that he/she was a part of. Their primary focus was on the politics of religion, politics of gender, politics of diaspora, giving voice to the subaltern and the discriminated without allowing much space to look at the protagonist, as a person, without looking at his/her journey in the sense of a Hero's journey. In these scholarly works, the narrative usually has a preference over the protagonist, the investigations are arranged rather hierarchically where the topic it represents is of paramount importance and the protagonist serves as an outlet, a representative and an agent for all that is happening around him/her. The protagonist as a person, who himself/herself undergoes tremendous transformations over the course of a film has rarely been looked at as a site where the political, social and the religious conflicts manifest themselves. Considering the multiple academic approaches in the field of film studies, as listed by Warren Buckland and then adapted to the Bollywood context by Gokulsing and Dissanayake[9], my research falls under the category of *Film in relation to society.*

In consistence with the cultural and the linguistic diversity that India has, Indian cinema is also a very diverse, multi-faceted industry[10] mirroring not only the linguistic, cultural, societal and religious diversity but also boasting multitude of genres. The Indian film industry, along with the Hindi Film industry, popularly known as Bollywood, is one of the biggest film industries in the world, along with Hollywood, China etc. in terms of productions. It boasts a whopping 1000+ productions every year[11]. The term Bollywood is a word play arising from merging the two words: *Bombay*

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9   K. Moti Gokulsing and Wimal Dissanayake, *From Aan to Lagaan. A guide to the study of Indian cinema*, (Stoke on Trent/ Sterling: Trentham Books, 2012), 40.

10   *Indiens Kinokulturen. Geschichte, Dramaturgie, Ästhetik*, ed. Susanne Marschall and Rada Bieberstein, (Marburg: Schüren Verlag, 2014).

11   Diana Crane, *Cultural globalization and the dominance of the American film industry: cultural policies, national film industries, and transnational film* under https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Global-film-market-number-of-films-produced-by-country-national-market-shares-and_tbl2_263287009

– which was and continues to be at the heart of this industry and Hollywood. While interrogating the correlation between Bollywood and Hollywood, Rajinder Dudrah mentions that:

> […] Bollywood is more popularly described in relation to, and against, the hegemony of Hollywood. […] The naming and the popular usage of the Mumbai film industry as 'Bollywood' not only reveals on a literal level an obvious reworking of the appellation of the cinema of Hollywood, but, on a more significant level, that Bollywood is able to serve alternative cultural and social representations away from dominant white ethnocentric audio-visual possibilities.[12]

It is very important to understand this distinct function that Bollywood serves since the films produced in Bollywood cater to the tastes and preferences of a typically Indian audience. Because of this very Indian nature of the films, noticeable through the induction of local folklore and folk traditions, local dress-codes, etc. – not as a means of cultural appropriation but as a reflection of the common man's reality. These films provide the audience a unique form of art which is familiar and known, but an art form nonetheless, that transcends the boundaries of space and time by sometimes placing the narrative in spaces which are inaccessible to the common man. To cite an example, an individual familiar with the marriage customs and traditions in northern India may never get to be part of a wedding celebration that is extravagant in nature because of lack of resources. When he/she watches a film like *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* (1994), it evokes a mixed reaction from him/her because on the one hand, the narrative presents a distinctly familiar context to him/her, while on the other, allows him/her to be a part of this extravagant celebration as a viewer. Dudrah

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12   Rajinder Kumar Dudrah, *Bollywood. Sociology goes to the movies*, (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2006), 34-35.

goes on to reveal six genres of Bollywood films: Devotional Films, Historical Films, Social Films (sometimes called as topicals), Muslim Social Films, Masala Films and the Romantic Genre[13]. These genres, in spite of key characteristics that define them, are not very rigid and more often than not, it is the case that a given film, going by its characteristics, can be placed at an intersection between multiple genres. Additionally, there is also the meta concept of Parallel Cinema[14] which exists not only at the cross sections of the above-mentioned genres but in certain cases, it exists as a stand-alone genre as well. Films that fall under this category are influenced by neo-realism, have freed themselves of the popular narrative forms including a song-and-dance sequence and focus critically on social issues. The fairly new category of the Indies Films, which I will elaborate on at a later point, can also be considered here since they are a hybrid form of cinema which is situated in a space somewhere between the classical genres and Parallel Cinema.

Of all the categories – genres that have just been described – the ones that are relevant for the scope of this thesis are Masala Films, Social Films, Indies Films and Parallel Cinema. The films that have been chosen here fall either under one of the categories or are at an intersection between them. All the chosen films, even those that may be considered as Masala Films

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13   Ibid., 175-180.

14   "*Parallel Cinema* is a term designated to certain types of films produced in India that stray away from the conventions of popular mainstream cinema. Although it accommodates minor film movements within, Parallel Cinema is not a film movement in itself and has no theoretical framework standardizing it. [...] Parallel Cinema in India has assumed various forms through the years, starting from the Neorealism-influenced films of Nehruvian India, through the more politically radical films of the Seventies and the liberal humanist films that are called independent cinema.[...] One of the major features of the films classified under Parallel Cinema is their fixation on social critique, so much so that some filmmakers have called "complaint box cinema". Many of these films are first and foremost screeds against feudalism, corruption, nepotism, patriarchy and religious intolerance. More radical, politically-engaged ones deal with modernization and class warfare and regularly lean towards the left of centre." "Parallel Cinema", The Hindu, accessed February 17, 2020 under https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/chennai/chen-columns/parallel-cinema/article3412051.ece.

(like *Swades, Rang De Basanti, Kai Po Che*), for the presence of a song-and-dance sequence, a predictable romance between characters and a star-studded casting, differ from the typical Masala film in one key aspect: they address socially critical issues. It was also necessary for the scope of this research to choose movies which have a strong protagonist – a character with defined ideals, world views in order to trace the changes in his/her identity, his/her evolution systematically. The films chosen here fulfil this parameter.

Before we turn our attention to some recent academic work on the portrayal of the Hero and him/her being representative of a variety of identity conflicts in contemporary Bollywood productions, it would be important to briefly consider how the figure of the Hero has undergone a change, keeping in tune with local socio-political contexts but also as a result of Hollywood influences. I have presented here a timeline of this evolution, along with a diagrammatic representation highlighting the key aspects, how the figure of the Hero evolved over the years, what were some of the key traits that this figure possessed.

If we follow this timeline, we realise that not only did the narratives of the film evolve in terms of the topics that they handled but also in terms of the figure of the Hero that has evolved. In its infant phase (covering both the silent and the early talkies films), the Hero in the early films was a historical/mythical figure, usually possessing some supernatural powers and participating in a variety of stunts. This era, starting with *Raja Harischandra* (1913) went on till the mid-1940s, also coinciding with the Partition and Independence of India. The narratives were aimed at providing an authentic rendering of cultural identity, predominantly influenced by Hindu mythology. The figure of the Hero, in tandem with the narratives, was a historical/mythical figure and would usually possess some supernatural powers while participating in a variety of stunts. Though there were some exceptions like *Achut Kanya* (1936), which raised critical questions

about caste, existing social hierarchies, majority of the films produced during this time frame stuck to the genre of the Historical and Mythological, as films produced in colonial India were subject to strict censorship[15].
The mid 1940s was an eventful time – India gained independence and the country was partitioned into India and Pakistan. This very tumultuous time brought in what is now considered as the golden age of Indian cinema, which went on up until the mid-1960s. This phase saw the character of the Hero (primarily a male figure) becoming more curious, inquisitive, critical and experimenting with his social conditions. At the same time, in spite of the trauma of Partition, India had attained independence from Great Britain and there was a palpable optimism in the air, combined with a sustained political chaos in India, which was a result of the beginnings of the Cold War and India's decisive step to stay non-aligned[16]. The chaos was also partly a result of a series of questions that the Indian society was struggling with at that point of time like the question of national identity and the role of religion in that discourse, since the partition of India was based on the two-nation theory, the question of caste identity considering the aspirations of the marginalised *Dalits* and the rigid caste system within the folds of Hinduism, and socio-economic issues like abject poverty. These issues were taken up by a lot of film producers and directors of that time and led to the production of some of the most notable socio-political films made in the history of Indian cinema – in the stream of commercial cinema as well Parallel Cinema. Films like *Awaara* (1951), *Do Beegha Zameen* (1953), *Shree 420* (1955), *Mother India* (1957), *Pyaasa* (1957), *Kagaaz ke Phool* (1959) are considered as some of the most popular Bollywood productions of this time. This period also offered a very conducive environment for Parallel Cinema to develop and saw the rise of directors like Chetan Anand, Satyajit

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15 Priya Jaikumar, *Cinema at the End of the Empire. A Politics of Transition in Britain and India*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

16 Non-aligned Movement is an international group of countries that came together in 1961 in their resolve to not be officially aligned to any of the power bloc countries. India's first prime minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru was one of the founders of this organisation.

Ray, and Shyam Benegal. Chetan Anand's *Neecha Nagar* (1946) and Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali* (1955), representing the neo-realist tradition in cinema, are two important films that signalled the beginning of Parallel Cinema in India. This 'new Indian cinema' was "clearly connected to a concern with aesthetics, to a seriousness of intent, and to a representation of social issues with a drive towards an understanding of reality in all its complexities, contradictions and ambiguities"[17]. These films had elements of social realism and became an important representation of contemporary Indian society. In the words of Bhaskar, these films, representative of an aesthetic and cultural movement, are characteristic through their "rejection of the values, forms, performance modes and style of mainstream, commercial cinema that privileged entertainment values"[18]. The character of the Hero during this phase is the Common Man – in the context of commercial mainstream Bollywood cinema as well as the Parallel Cinema. Though most of the narratives were lacking a "goal-oriented protagonist"[19], the social milieus and the plots of the films stayed very close to reality but most importantly, the protagonist, very often, was a very realistic representation of the Common Man. Characters like Apu from Ray's *Pather Panchali* or a character like Raj from *Shree 420* or Radha from *Mother India* – all of them were representative of the struggles of a common man in those days ranging from poverty, gender and caste issues. This era came to an end between the late 1960s – early 1970s and also saw the establishment of cinema as a commercial venture. I have consciously left out the entire genre of War Films – films like *Haqeeqat* (1964) – during this interrogation, the reasons for which I will clarify at a later point.

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17   Ira Bhaskar, "The Indian Wave" in *Routledge Handbook of Indian Cinemas*, ed. K Moti Gokulsing and Wimala Dissanayake, (Oxon/ New York: Routledge, 2013), 19.
18   Ibid., 20.
19   Claus Tieber, "Writing the Angry Young Man", Talk at *7th Annual Conference Screenwriting Research Network*, Filmuniversität Konrad Wolf Babelsberg, Potsdam 17.-19.10.2014 under https://www.researchgate.net/publication/281116060_Writing_the_Angry_Young_Man_Salim-Javed's_screenplays_for_Amitabh_Bachchan.
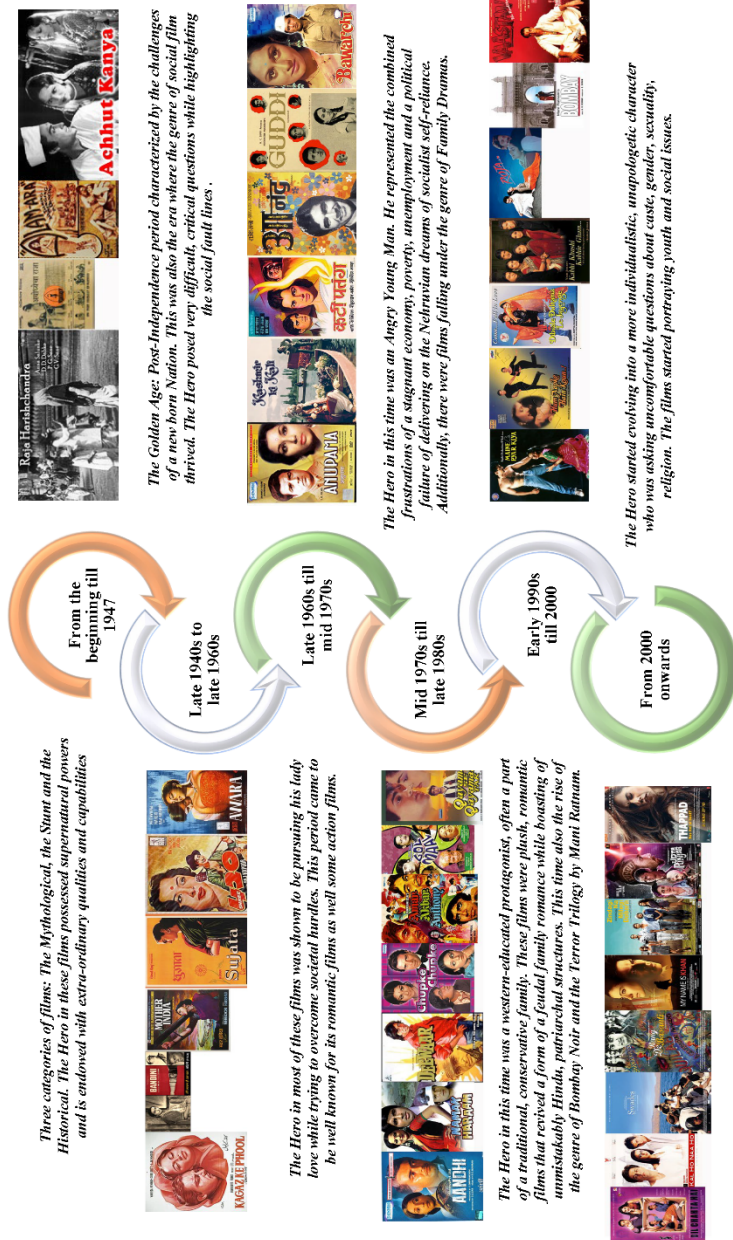
IMG. 1_Evolution of a Hero

Three categories of films: The Mythological, the Stunt and the Historical. The Hero in these films possessed supernatural powers and is endowed with extra-ordinary qualities and capabilities

From the beginning till 1947

The Golden Age: Post-Independence period characterized by the challenges of a new born Nation. This was also the era where the genre of social film thrived. The Hero posed very difficult, critical questions while highlighting the social fault lines .

Late 1940s to late 1960s

The Hero in most of these films was shown to be pursuing his lady love while trying to overcome societal hurdles. This period came to be well known for its romantic films as well some action films.

Late 1960s till mid 1970s

The Hero in this time was an Angry Young Man. He represented the combined frustrations of a stagnant economy, poverty, unemployment and a political failure of delivering on the Nehruvian dreams of socialist self-reliance. Additionally, there were films falling under the genre of Family Dramas.

Mid 1970s till late 1980s

The Hero in this time was a western-educated protagonist, often a part of a traditional, conservative family. These films were plush, romantic films that revived a form of a feudal family romance while boasting of unmistakably Hindu, patriarchal structures. This time also the rise of the genre of Bombay Noir and the Terror Trilogy by Mani Ratnam.

Early 1990s till 2000

The Hero started evolving into a more individualistic, unapologetic character who was asking uncomfortable questions about caste, gender, sexuality, religion. The films started portraying youth and social issues.

From 2000 onwards

The release of the films *Zanjeer* in 1973, *Deewaar* and *Sholay* in 1975 ushered in the era of the Hero in the role of an *angry young man*. Koushik Banerjea establishes the connection between the contemporary socio-political developments of the time with the emergence of this variety of figure in films. He comments,

> By the time *Deewar* appeared in Indian cinemas, any imputed spring-time after liberation from colonial rule was well and truly over. War with Pakistan, industrial unrest, widespread corruption and the imminent declaration of 'National Emergency' by Indira Gandhi would put an end to that. Political repression against individuals and organisations who had fallen out of favour with the ruling Congress government was routine. […] Yet somehow it is still the genre which he (Amitabh Bachchan) popularised that signals the end of the civic ideal of post-independence India and ushers in a new era of brutality, pitting the lone hero against the established forces of corruption.[20]

Combined frustrations of a stagnant economy, poverty, unemployment and a political failure of delivering on the Nehruvian dreams of socialist self-reliance contributed to a rise of a general sense of discontent amongst the people. The films produced during this time, staying true to their role of providing a mirroring of social conditions, underwent some significant structural changes. The changes were noticeable in terms of the clarity of purpose and about the sense of injustice the protagonist had was an important aspect of it. Claus Tieber, an Austrian film scholar, commented the emergence of an Angry Young man, essentially personified by Amitabh

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20   Koushik Banerjea, "'Fight Club' – Aesthetics, Hybridisation and the construction of Rogue. Masculinities in Sholay and Deewar" in *Bollyworld: Popular Indian Cinema thorough a Transnational Lens*, ed. Raminder Kaur and Ajay Sinha, (California/ London: Sage Publications, 2005), 167-169.

Bachchan while also looking at the primary audience of these films. According to him, the protagonist in these films came about to have a defined goal set within the narrative.

> Bachchan's 'angry young man' was a successful mixture of gangster-film, social critique and personal charisma. Most of the characters Bachchan played were proletarians: coolies, mine workers and so on. Although public morals forbade that the Bachchan character wins at the end, he was the perfect active agent of the plot. His actions were propelling the narration forward; he was the driving force. The arrival of the active agent in Hindi cinema happens in the shape of a proletarian hero, instead of a bourgeois protagonist. […] The Bachchan films of the 1970s were clearly aimed at a male urban proletarian audience, but they also reached other classes. People who believed in Indian independence were frustrated when the government got itself involved in corruption scandals and their former hopes faded away. In this situation – especially before the background of the Emergency from 1975 to 1977 – an active protagonist on the screen could fulfil at least a few hopes and dreams of this kind of audience, while political activities like strikes or rallies were forbidden during the Emergency.[21]

With notable exceptions of critical films like *Aandhi* (1975) which looked at the realities of politics in India through the eyes of a woman, the films in this period, from the end of Emergency up until the late 1980s, can be categorised into several genres ranging from Masala films, Romance to Action. Films like *Chupke Chupke* (1975), *Gol Maal* (1979), *Khubsoorat* (1980),

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21 Claus Tieber, "Writing the Angry Young Man", Talk at *7th Annual Conference Screenwriting Research Network*, Filmuniversität Konrad Wolf Babelsberg, Potsdam 17.-19.10.2014 under https://www.researchgate.net/publication/281116060_Writing_the_Angry_Young_Man_Salim-Javed's_screenplays_for_Amitabh_Bachchan.

Disco Dancer (1982) and *Qayamat se Qayamat tak* (1988) fell under the category of family-drama. These were Masala films with elements of romance, comedy and action in them. The character of the protagonist, yet again, started to seem to be a character without a goal while being subservient to the narrative.

The release of *Maine Pyaar Kiya* in 1989 saw the arrival of the family oriented, romantic musicals as India geared up to usher in one of the most defining moments in its modern history – the liberalization of the Indian economy. The liberalization of the Indian economy not only opened up the economy but also brought in new socio-political, cultural influences [22]. These films were the big-budget, plush, romantic films that revived a form of a feudal family romance while boasting of unmistakably Hindu, patriarchal structures[23]. Films like *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* (1994), *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge* (1995), *Dil to Pagal Hai* (1997), *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998), *Hum Saath Saath Hain* (1999), *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham* (2001) are all super hit blockbuster films that fit into this narrative. They are representative of the rapid changes that the Indian society was undergoing. On the one hand, we can see the presence of either a Western-educated protagonist or a protagonist living in the West, while on the other, the narratives also make it a point to highlight the importance of a traditional, conservative family (mostly Hindu) which upheld traditional family setups with defined roles for women and men in the family. Figures like that of Anjali in *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* which require her to turn from a basketball player into a saree-clad coy protagonist with long-hair in order to be considered worthy of holding an appeal to a male protagonist are representative of the rapid societal changes at that time. In this film, on the one hand we have a woman protagonist who went against the popular representations of a young Indian woman, who played basketball, wore sweatshirts and a pair of jeans,

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22 Renu Saran, *History of Indian Cinema*, (New Delhi: Diamond Pocket Books, 2017), 55-57.

23 Rachel Dwyer and Divia Patel, *Cinema India: the visual culture of Hindi Film*, (London: Reaktion Books, 2002), 22.

while on the other we have another woman protagonist, who, in spite of wearing a mini skirt and her upbringing in London, feels the necessity of reciting a *bhajan* (a religious song) in order to prove her Indian credentials, boasting of a good upbringing. The protagonist or the Hero from the films during this phase is often an upper-caste, affluent, North Indian male, who is caught between his exposure to Western influences on his personality and his traditional upbringing, his connections to his family. Films like *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995) or *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham* (2001) look at the lives of the Indian diasporas abroad, while addressing their attempts at holding on to their *Own* culture, upholding Indian traditions, the desire to return *Home* while also portraying the modernisation conflicts in the diasporic Indian society. The Hero in this time frame is the consumable hero – a Hero without a history or memory of the past, standing out because of his conformist attitude, not getting enraged by social inequalities[24]. The films of this period 'appear to reflect the globalisation of cultures and the creation of a new Indian identity'[25]. The period also witnessed some of the bloodiest times in the history of India post Partition and these events found their way into films like the Terrorism Trilogy directed by Mani Ratnam - *Roja* (1992), *Bombay* (1995) and *Dil Se* (1998). The emergence of *Mumbai Noir*[26] as a genre that exclusively focuses on the Mumbai underworld is also a phenomenon associated with this time. Films like *Parinda* (1989), *Satya* (1998), *Chaandni Bar* (2001) and *Vaastav* (2001) fall under this category. Though thematically far from the family-oriented romantic musicals, the protagonists in these cases, especially the category of Mani

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24   Sudhanva Deshpande, "The Consumable Hero of Globalised India" in *Bollyworld: Popular Indian Cinema thorough a Transnational Lens*, ed. Raminder Kaur and Ajay Sinha, (California/ London: Sage Publications, 2005), 202.

25   Geetanjali Gangoli, "Sexuality, Sensuality and Belonging: Representations of the 'Anglo-Indian' and the 'Western' Woman in Hindi Cinema" in *Bollyworld: Popular Indian Cinema thorough a Transnational Lens*, ed. Raminder Kaur and Ajay Sinha, (California/ London: Sage Publications, 2005), 157.

26   Arjun Appadurai, "The cinematic soteriology of Bollywood" in *Media and Utopia: History, imagination and technology*, ed. Arvind Rajagopal and Anupama Rao, (Oxon / New York: Routledge, 2016), 22.

Ratnam films, are also struggling with changing social structures, an increasing disruptive fear of the *Other* (Muslims, Kashmir, Pakistan etc). In my understanding this era marks the beginning of the portrayal of identity evolutions and emerging identity conflicts which question existing, allotted social identities while slowly moving towards showcasing a protagonist's struggle to break free of them.

Dil Chahta Hai or *DCH* (2001), a coming-of-age-film, changed Bollywood in more ways than one. Firstly, this coming-of-age film focussed on topics like a relationship between a young, single man and an older, divorced woman with alcohol issues, while attempting to normalise conversations around this topic. On the flip side, the narrative of the film unapologetically showcases a lifestyle of an affluent, young Indian youth which was and continues to be accessible to only a few. Other films that followed in the coming years like *Kal Ho Na Ho* (2003), *Rang De Basanti* or *RDB* (2006), *Om Shanti Om* (2007), *Rock On* (2008), *Zindagi na Milegi Dobara* (2011), *Rock On 2* (2016) fall under the same banner of being films about the youth, about their dreams and ideas about romance. However, a striking difference could be noticed in the treatment of the topics. *DCH* and *RDB*, which can both be considered as trendsetting coming-of-age films, focussed on two different layers of the society while featuring youth protagonists. While *DCH* is representative of an elite, well-educated, affluent youth who seems to be disconnected from their socio-political realities, the protagonists of *RDB* are largely representative of a well-educated, middle-class youth; they represent the struggles of a middle-class youth while tackling corruption, populism etc. Films like *Swades* (2004), *My Name is Khan* (2010) along with the likes of *RDB* point to the emergence of a hybrid genre that combined the Masala Film and the Social Film. In the second decade of the new millennium, some new trends emerged. Recent films like *Udta Punjab* (2016), *Newton* (2017), *Article 15* (2019), *Thappad* (2020) fall more under the category of Parallel Cinema for their realistic portrayal of social issues. But the fact that they are made with stellar actors from mainstream commercial Bollywood as opposed to a common man portraying

the common man in the earlier times, grants these films a different quality – especially in terms of the mass appeal it holds. These films are cross-pollinated products of Masala Film, Social Film and Parallel Cinema, consisting of inherent elements of realism. The Hero here is playing the role of a critic who is well-educated and questions existent practises and power equations. Films falling under the genre of Romantic films have been consistently present over all the aforementioned time frames and have not been mentioned in depth because of their irrelevance for this inquiry.

Some other significant trends are the return of the Historical Hero, Biopics of sports personalities like *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag* (2013)*, Mary Kom* (2014)*, Dangal* (2016) as well as the emergence of a political film. Films like *Bajirao Mastani* (2015), *Padmaavat* (2018), *Manikarnika* (2019), *Panipat* (2019), *Tanhaji* (2020) are representative of the return of the Historical Hero though some critics may argue that the filmmakers have taken their liberty with the historical material in terms of accuracy while adapting those stories to the screen. This trend can also be viewed in the context of the current political climate in India and an insistence on highlighting a glorified Hindu past in the face of Mughal and British invasion. The trend of a political film is being furthered either by films like *PM Narendra Modi* (2019) or *The Accidental Prime Minister* (2019) and *Thackerey* (2019), that are seen to be endorsing a particular political agenda, or by films like *Article 15* and *Newton* which have started discussions about the politics of caste and nationhood. Another trend that has also re-emerged in this context is the appearance of a Nationalist Hero – a protagonist who personifies the nationalistic aspirations of the society and the polity. In the earlier years one could refer to the veteran actor Manoj Kumar as the Nationalist Hero. In the contemporary context, it would have to be Akshay Kumar with his consistent repertoire of films that either endorse some of the government policies and programs like *Toilet. Ek Prem Katha* (2017) or films like *Namastey London* (2007), *Mission Mangal* (2019)*, Kesari* (2019) that play on a combined rhetoric of patriotism and nationalism.

It is necessary to highlight the fact that I have consciously chosen to exclude the nationalist, patriotic Hero in a war film context during this inquiry as the purpose of my inquiry is to look at the evolution the figure of the Hero has undergone over the years in the light of changing socio-political conditions. Though the nationalist, patriotic Hero is increasingly trying to make his/her presence felt well beyond the War Films, the traits that define this Hero in the context of the war film haven't changed much. Even today, he largely continues to be a male (with notable exceptions of films like *Raazi*), an Officer in one of the wings of the Armed Forces or Intelligence agencies, usually on a border posting, willing to lay down his life for protecting the sovereignty of India. He is usually shown to be staunch follower of the orders he receives without questioning their legitimacy and necessity. Without meaning to belittle the real-life contributions of the Armed Forces in the history and stability of India post-independence, I decided to leave out the genre of War Films for the simple reason that they overtly simplify the demarcation between the Good and the Bad, the *Us* and *Them* – the good *Us* being India (mostly Hindus) while the bad *Them*, in most cases, being Muslims and Pakistan.

A lot of recent academic work on Bollywood focuses on a particular genre of film or a particular historical event and tries to look at films with that lens. A prioritisation of doing away with these specific ways of looking at a film and instead looking at the individual representations through the figure of the protagonist and interrogating the interconnectedness of issues like gender, nationalism, modernisation, and their impact on the identity of a protagonist, who is representative of the society, is an innovative approach which hasn't been explored widely. When we turn our attention to identities, we also realise that a substantial amount of scholarship in recent years about contemporary Bollywood films has primarily focussed on the existence of identities like a national identity, an ethno-cultural identity, or even a political identity. In this context, a few important aspects are that this research assumes any variant of identity as a pre-supposition i.e.

it designates particular identities to particular protagonists placed in particular contexts. Secondly, the research in a lot of cases, through its assumption of identity as a pre-existing, defined concept, looks at the identity of a protagonist as a singular, even static, entity. Through pre-supposition, it also leaves out the interrogation into the evolution of an identity structure, the never-ending process of becoming, which itself is pluralistic in nature and is largely dependent on the consistently evolving, breaking and adding of new aspects and perspectives to the identity structure of a protagonist. A deconstruction of the existing approaches to mainstream Bollywood films that primarily focus on the topical discourses surrounding a particular issue like nationalism or gender in Bollywood is necessary in my eyes in order to consider films as mediated products reflecting complex conflicts that an individual undergoes in today's world and age of exposure to multiple cultural influences and entanglements. Looking at the protagonist as a primary object and using the contexts he/she is set in as means to construct his/her identity can be an important approach as it allows us to establish direct connections between those contexts and the process of evolution of his/her identity. This way, we cannot possibly ascribe a singular, static identity to the protagonist but allow ourselves to look at the protagonist as representative of a society, which is in the process of making and breaking cultural linkages. By adopting this approach, we can trace the evolution of a protagonist like Lakshman Pandey from *Rang De Basanti* (2006). He is considered to be a right-wing nationalist, who over a period of time exposes various aspects of his personality and beliefs, which lead him to be labelled as a right-wing nationalist, while also allowing the viewers a chance to follow his journey of change. He gets visibly disappointed by the leadership of the political party he is a member of and discovers that the people he considers to be too Westernized (including a Westerner herself) and ignorant to Indian culture and history, who may be naïve and ignorant, are, in reality, willing to stand up to the government, which is being grossly unjust to its own citizens. It is necessary to unravel this whole process of discovery because it allows us to discover how an individual responds to

the socio-political, cultural events around him, how his thought process evolves as a result of personal experiences and how this complex process together has a profound impact on how he sees himself, on the values he believes he stands for. A Lakshman Pandey, who stood for populist right wing nationalism, realizes eventually that the most important value he stands for, is in reality a just treatment of citizens, of safeguarding their rights.

In his exemplary paper titled *Who Needs Identity?* Stuart Hall talks about a 'veritable discursive explosion in recent years around the concept of identity'[27]. This discursive explosion has confined itself to theoretical deliberations and has been largely neglected when it came to interrogating the identity of a protagonist in the light of the increasingly fluid borders – in every sense of the term. While analysing the philosophical origins of the term identity, he focuses on the manner in which identities are constructed.

> Precisely because identities are constructed within, not outside, discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies. Moreover, they emerge within the play of specific modalities of power, and thus are more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion, than they are the sign of an identical, naturally-constituted unity - an 'identity' in its traditional meaning (that is, an all-inclusive sameness, seamless, without internal differentiation). Above all, and directly contrary to the form in which they are constantly invoked, identities are constructed through, not outside, difference. This entails the radically disturbing recognition that it is only through the relation to the Other, the relation to what it is not, to precisely what it lacks, to what has been called its constitutive outside that the 'positive'

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27   Stuart Hall, "Who Needs Identity?" in *Questions of cultural identity.* ed. Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay, (London/ Thousand Oaks/ New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1996), 1.

meaning of any term - and thus its 'identity' - can be constructed. Throughout their careers, identities can function as points of identification and attachment only because of their capacity to exclude, to leave out, to render 'outside', abjected. Every identity has at its 'margin', an excess, something more. The unity, the internal homogeneity, which the term identity treats as foundational is not a natural, but a constructed form of closure, every identity naming as its necessary, even if silenced and unspoken other, that which it 'lacks'.[28]

When we consider this approach to understanding how identities are constructed, it becomes almost imperative to understand the position of the protagonist and his/her reference points which offer him/her the chance to explore how his/her own identity is formed, of considering the factors that have been 'excluded' in order to give the *Other* a face. In simpler terms, looking at the evolution of a protagonist's identity in a film allows us to understand and analyse the film in an innovative manner, since it allows us to consider in detail how the figure of a protagonist, representative not only of the various contexts he/she represents but also of real people, responds to the changing contexts around him/her. The analysis of his/her evolution offers an insight into how the unravelling narrative of any film, focusing on a broader topic, impacts the fate of a protagonist and how his/her responses to the situations, representing those topics, in turn alter the (dis)course of the issue at hand. Since the focus of this analysis would be on the protagonist, Campbell's model of *Hero's journey* proved to be the most suitable lens to look at the protagonist. The choice of post-modernism as a philosophical approach for this kind of inquiry was natural because of its focus on an exhaustive search for identity. A strong internal need to know more about one's identity is characteristic of the post-modern pro-

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28   Ibid., 4-5.

cess in my understanding and the experience of internal and external conflicts a necessity (to achieve this goal of satisfying a need) of the postmodern subject of the *Hero*.

There have been some deliberations about the concept of identity in modern Bollywood and the choice of post-modern approach to address it. Neelam Sidhar Wright raises a very interesting aspect while justifying her choice of postmodernism to look at remakes of Bollywood films. In her opinion,

> As a mode of film practice, it allows texts to inscribe and subvert prevailing conventions and question ideology, subjectivity and historical knowledge, allowing us to 'reconsider the operations by which we both create and give meaning to our culture through representation'. […] Postmodern films facilitate an act of looking from both sides of the screen and will (mis)represent identity in a way that exposes it as something to be understood as decentred and complex rather than whole and fixed. Postmodernism also increases the tension between, and closeness of, the political and the aesthetic, paradoxically creating texts that are at once culturally resistant and yet seem politically barren.[29]

The films chosen here are post-modern films in the manner in which Wright understands the term, though they differ in one key aspect – the film-texts considered here, which arise out of a closeness between the political and the aesthetic, are certainly not politically barren. She also goes on to highlight the lack of scholarly attention that has been paid (barring few notable exceptions) to post-millennial films and draws attention to a new generation of Bollywood films that are moving away from certain established modes of representation[30]. Though my research doesn't focus on

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29   Neelam Sidhar Wright, *Bollywood and Postmodernism. Popular Indian cinema in the 21st century.* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 9.

30   Ibid., 10.

re-makes of films (considering that a film adaptation of a book is not a remake), her observations about a film being a post-modern product is particularly true about a number of new generation Bollywood films with an essential focus on disenchantment with existent social hierarchies concerning religion, caste and gender. These films allow a space to deliberate on identity as a decentred, complex construction rather than looking at it as an allotted, fixed and whole entity. Wright is also quick to point to the dearth of a formalist study of contemporary Bollywood films that focuses on the visual film language. She also highlights the importance of looking at films beyond the social-science and history-based scholarship on Indian cinema and the need to engage with the medium of film as an art form in its own right[31]. Though the focus of my research is on the analyses of the variety of conflicts that impact the modern-day Indian society and their embodiments through protagonists in films, I have tried to strike a balance between looking at the social-science based scholarship and the visual film language of the film by combining several various methodological approaches that look at these multiple layers of the film-text. Research on contemporary Bollywood cinema has focussed on some of the primary areas and approaches like nationalism, diasporic representation and film viewing, postcolonialism and cultural identity. But as Wright correctly points out, Bollywood has discovered its potential to mirror the cultural hybrid as seen and experienced in the society, thus also contributing to a bridging of the gap between the two philosophical concepts of *Erfahrung* (experience) and *Erlebnis* (lived experience)[32], by assuming the role of a medium that enables the viewer to be a part of the lived experience of the protagonist and reflect on it subjectively. In other words, by unravelling the identity conflicts and alterations that a protagonist goes through within the scope of a film's narrative, my approach of closely looking at the different

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31   Ibid., 24-25.
32   Francis Fukuyama, *Identity: The demand for dignity and the politics of resentment*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), 109.

steps in a Hero's journey, connecting those steps to external influences allows the viewer to bridge the gap between the film's narrative being a protagonists' lived experience and the viewer 'only' observing this experience, to establishing connections between the protagonists' lived experience and the viewers' own lived experience, thus making a critical consideration of his own identity evolution possible. An individual from outside Mumbai, but living in Mumbai who was a witness to the demolition of the Babri Mosque and the ensuing riots in Mumbai, when watching a film like *Bombay* (1995), is able to relate to the fear, the anxiety, probably even hatred for the *Other* while also critically thinking of his own responses to the situations at that given point of time. The protagonist becomes the common man, the common man becomes the protagonist.

Ashvin Devasaundaram writes about the growth and development of a new *Hybrid* and independent cinema, the new Indian 'Indies'[33], while also looking at their unique portrayal of contemporary Indian socio-political structures. Though his focus is primarily on this new genre of independent Indian films, a lot of observations he makes about the existent socio-political structures and Bollywood's inability or limited ability to do justice to those topics are relevant in the context of this research since these exact reasons, along with a few others were the starting point of this research. The observation about Bollywood's neglect towards micro-narratives – about minority and alternative narratives motivated me to look for representations of these narratives in recent times, while also finding a different access point to the Bollywood productions in order to unravel the underlying alternative narratives. While considering this aspect, we also need to be aware of a major shift in the Indian film industry that led to the rise of the Indies Films. Devasundaram addresses this phenomenon by addressing the "new Indies film as a hybrid film form emerging from a 'third space'",

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33   Ashvin Immanuel Devasundaram, *India's new independent cinema: Rise of the hybrid*, (New York/ London: Routledge, 2016), 1.

while "effectively dismantling the longstanding Bollywood/ Satyajit Ray binary"[34]. So, a film like *Swades* (2004), which primarily is a film about the search for *Home* and return to motherland by giving up a life of comfort, intertwined with the emergence of a romantic relationship, also, in fact, portrays clashing worldviews and ideals. When looked at from the lens of a cultural and identity conflict, one realises that this underlying narrative focuses on a mutual rejection of worldviews and ideals, while eventually also leading the characters to accept and respect these world views and critically revisit their own perceptions. Though the film may not be a minority or alternative narrative, it is, in reality, a departure from the classical romance, ubiquitous song-and-dance sequence Bollywood narrative and is situated in the 'third space'. Examples like *Parched* are, contrary to films like *Swades,* micro-narratives from an alternative viewpoint which is rarely presented.

Since the beginnings of Indian cinema, there have been phases where directors and producers have increasingly and repeatedly dared to make quality films focusing on uncomfortable topics – be it in the golden age of Bollywood or then in the recent past, especially the time after 1990s. Films like *Bombay* (1995), *Black Friday* (2007)*, Fiza* (2000) which focus on the riots in Bombay in 1993 in the aftermath of the destruction of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya, films like *Amu* (2005)*, Mr. and Mrs. Iyer* (2002)*, Kai Po Che* (2013) which deal with the violence propagated on the fault lines of religion, films like *No One Killed Jessica* (2014)*, Pink* (2016)*, Parched* (2015) and *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (2016) addressing violence against women, exploring sexuality on screen and portraying strong women characters – these and so many other films have managed to deal with these sensitive issues in a mature way and present it to the audience in a compelling way. After observing the current state of research at an intersection of culture and cultural conflicts, identity and identity conflicts and how mainstream Indian cinema deals with it, it is evidently clear that in spite of a number

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34   Ibid., 7.

of academic works that have dedicated themselves to looking at a series of issues like religion, caste system, gender and narratives surrounding the colonial past and resurgent nationalism in the Indian society and its portrayal in Indian cinema, there seems to be one topic that hasn't been addressed enough as yet: identity conflicts arising from the complex fabric of the Indian society which are visible in the characters of a film interwoven with complex cultural concepts like that of interculturality, multiculturality and transculturality. It seemed to me that a conscious, comprehensive engagement with the protagonist and his/her identity structures, the process of evolution of his/her identity and the identity conflicts he/she experiences as explored within the framework of mainstream Bollywood films is missing. What I intend to do in my explorations of this topic is to change the focus of the gaze from the standpoint of primarily focusing on the narrative while considering the protagonist as a secondary element in it to a new point of view that considers the protagonist and the narrative to be equally important, as two elements that evolve in tandem with each other. I can say that my research has an element of innovation by combining the evolution of the different figures with the narrative while placing the figure in foreground, and then looking at this evolution within the theoretical framework I have developed for this thesis. Though this attempt only scratches the surface, its aforesaid innovation aspect and its connection to a broader cultural discourse and its contemporary cinematic manifestations, makes this inquiry particularly interesting.

As India underwent a major political shift and moved towards a Hindu right since the late 1980s, Bollywood and other cinematic cultures tried to get a grasp of this changing dynamics of the society and tried to explore different angles of it – especially in the aftermath of the demolition of the Babri Mosque in 1992 and the ensuing riots that followed. But of late, especially since May 2014, the Indian society as a whole, is undergoing a number of significant changes. With the election of the *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP) to power in 2014, riding on a development and anti-corruption agenda and then in 2019, riding on a more nationalistic, jingoistic agenda,

the political spectrum has not only undergone a major shift by moving towards the right, it has also contributed to ensuring a complete suppression and discrediting of any form of opposition – political and social. Conveniently enough, the political forces have also managed to further blur the lines between the already difficult concepts of nationalism and patriotism while giving rise to new ideas about 'proving' one's nationalism, which in real terms is increasingly becoming equivalent to consenting to anything and everything the government professes. Against the background of this disheartening situation, it is also interesting to see the emergence of a politically conscious young middle-class, which currently represents both sides of the political spectrum. This current tumultuous, dynamic juncture of time has also been consistently mirrored in cinema. On the one end of the spectrum, we see the presence of films like *Uri: The surgical strike* (2019) and *Raazi* (2018) that have narratives focusing on patriotism which is a highly influential factor, films like *Toilet: Ek Prem Katha* (2017) that appear to be attempts at endorsing one of the pet projects of the central government *Swacch Bharat Abhiyaan* (Clean India Mission) or *Mission Mangal* that narrates the story of the Mars Mission of the Indian Space Agency. We also see biopics like *PM Narendra Modi* (2019) or *The Accidental Prime Minister* (2019) that focus on glorifying or discrediting a political figure, a political ideology. On the other end of the spectrum, we see films like *Secret Superstar* (2017), *Article 15* (2019), *Gully Boy* (2019) that capture the pulse of the youth that is increasingly and consistently asking critical questions, disturbing and challenging existing power equations and the hegemony of specific classes or groups of people.

2. Research questions and hypothesis

The portrayal of a diversity of cultures is not new to Indian cinema. Cultural diversity, including the conflicts arising out of it and their impact on the fabric of the Indian society has always been one of the most central topics addressed by Bollywood. What has been missing in the academic discourse is an engagement with this issue while looking at how these different understandings of culture and the resulting cultural conflicts manifest themselves through the evolutions and transformations an individual goes through – identity conflicts, if you may. The point of intersection of these complex entities – the identity structure of the protagonist – is an extremely interesting and relevant point to investigate since it will help us in understanding a lot of current conflicts – not only in the Indian context but also at a broader global level. With this in mind, I would like to launch an inquiry into this field within the parameters of my thesis and look at the answers for the following questions:

- How do Bollywood films portray identity and cultural conflicts along the lines of nationalism, gender, modernisation, religion and caste?

A close look at the corpus of topics that Bollywood deals with reveals the astounding diversity of the topics addressed. Bollywood has undergone a thematic shift in the central topics it deals with over the years. A lot of the topics that are addressed in the mainstream Hindi film industry go well beyond the clichéd Song-and-Dance romantic film. This kind of films try to give socio-political, cultural conflict(s) a platform, a space to discuss its origins and broader context and its implications on the Indian society and by extension, the Indian diaspora situated elsewhere. What is interesting is

that these conflicts – be it conflicts dealing with the problematics of caste, religion, gender, nationalism or modernisation of the Indian society – are the canvas on which the narrative is situated. The protagonists of these narratives impersonate those conflicts and thus embody the cultural conflicts, providing a context to the narrative. It is important to note that the protagonists are not only a part of the narrative, but they also embody the conflicts, thus leading to an alteration of their identities. Similar to how a protagonist is the personification of the cultural conflicts, a protagonist also embodies the clashes between the various identities which shape his/her identity. Some of these identities are inherently present in the protagonist by virtue of birth in a particular family, upbringing, etc. But then there are also identities which the protagonist acquires over a period of time – some of them emerge from his/her interactions with the surroundings, while others are forced upon him/her by the society/community. It would also be wrong to assume that the protagonist is a part of *a* community/ society. Through his/her biographical details and interests, he/she may simultaneously be a part of multiple communities. His/her interactions with them, combined with his/her own world view and predispositions, lead to a complex process of creating new world views and thinking patterns, which, in turn, become decisive, important parts of who the protagonist becomes as a person. The process of alteration of their identities in turn gives rise to an identity conflict. This identity conflict can then be looked upon in the broader context of the narrative: be it an identity conflict in the context of caste issues, religion, gender, nationalism or modernisation conflicts in the Indian society. For instance, in a film like *RDB*, the narrative is embedded in diverse discourses on nationalism and patriotism. The protagonists, living in today's India providing a face to the broader context of the Indian Independence struggle as well as a more contemporary issue of general discontent and dissatisfaction among the citizens – more so among the youth of the country – with the modern Indian state. In both these time frames, the central conflicts – namely the Indian independence struggle in the past and a general societal discontent

in the present – are both strongly influenced and shaped by inter-religious differences and conflicts. These cultural conflicts are embodied by the protagonists in the framework of the film, resulting into a series of identity transformations that the protagonists undergo. In order to understand the broader context of this nature of conflict, it is important to first understand the identity conflicts of the protagonists. The identity conflicts portrayed in a film are usually a subset of a much larger cultural discourse and cultural conflicts that arise out of different ideas of culture and their incompatibility with each other. The central question here would hence be looked at a cross-section of the broader conflict (nationalism, for instance) and the identity conflict as is experienced by the protagonist/s in the film. This approach would not only help in establishing the broader context of the conflict, but also to look at the nature of the conflict in a very systematic way – starting from the general context of the conflict, narrowing it down to the very subjective, personal experiences of the protagonists as shown in the film.

- How are cultural phenomena like interculturality, multiculturality and transculturality portrayed in Bollywood?

A lot of films in Bollywood address the topic of the co-existence of multiple cultures within the Indian context. This cultural diversity often finds its way into the films that are made and leads to a very differentiated understanding of cultural phenomena like interculturality, multiculturality and transculturality etc. While looking at these interesting cultural phenomena in India, one must understand that it is impossible to look at India through the prism of singular cultural entities. One of the first terms that comes to mind while thinking of India is the German term *Kulturnation*. Though the term *Kulturnation* as well as the term *Kultur* are deeply rooted in the German history and philosophy, it has applications well beyond the German and even the European context. German historian Friedrich Meinecke, at the

turn of the 20th century, had attempted differentiating the terms *Staatsnation* and *Kulturnation*[35]. In his view,

> […] a Staatsnation is mainly based on a political history and a constitution recognized by its members, a Kulturnation is based on accepted and shared cultural and religious traditions and goods—such as a common language. Therefore, a Staatsnation can comprise population groups that differ from each other with respect to their performances and perceptions of cultural values and aims. The moment of a decision and expression of will is essential for the nation-building of a Staatsnation.[36]

The term *Kulturnation* is a term which inherently considers cultural similarities as a building block for a nation and became a strong political concept, especially after the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the beginning of the 20th century. It is a term vehemently disowned by the National Socialists since it would validate the claims of 'anyone' who could speak German, understand German issues and could be considered to be German[37]. With this definition in mind, the Indian state as we know it today, is in fact, a *Staatsnation* or a Nation state, brought together in its current form of a singular political entity while in reality, it is a collective of various *Kulturnationen*, which can be identified based on the language and the cultural heritage. One *Kulturnation*, well within the *Staatsnation* may or may not have many similarities with another *Kulturnation*, but it will nonetheless continue to be bound by the political framework of a *Staatsnation*. Just being a part

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35   Friedrich Meinecke, *Weltbürgertum und Nationalstaat. Studien zur Genesis des deutschen Nationalstaates*, (München/Berlin: Oldenbourg Verlag, 1908).

36   Arndt Kremer, "Transition or Myth? The Idea of a Language defined *Kulturnation* in Germany" in *New German Review. A journal of Germanic studies* (California: California Digital Library, 2016), 55, under https://escholarship.org/content/qt38h3c5hs/qt38h3c5hs.pdf.

37   Ibid.

of the same political framework does not amount to cultural similarities. As Shashi Tharoor aptly puts it,

> The "Indian" comes in such varieties that a woman who is fair-skinned, sari-wearing and Italian speaking, as Sonia Gandhi is, is not more foreign to my grandmother in Kerala than one who is "wheatisch-complexioned", wears a *salwar kameez* and speaks Urdu. Our nation absorbs both these types of people; both are equally "foreign" to some of us, equally Indian to us all.[38]

So how are these various *Kulturnationen* portrayed in mainstream Hindi cinema? Is there a particular cinematographic strategy adopted by the filmmaker to clearly demarcate different cultures and their manifestations in day-to-day life? How does cinema portray the coexistence of different cultures, the clashes and the process of a dialogue between them, the resistance and the resilience that these cultural entities show when it comes to accepting and incorporating new cultural influences? What methods are put to use to make these varied aspects noticeable and visible? Do the cultural contexts in which the protagonists are placed continue to be stable or are they dynamic? Is it only the protagonists that are undergoing a noticeable transformation or is it also the cultural context that undergoes a transformation? Do the protagonists and the cultural context have a dialectic relationship, each in turn influencing the understanding of the other? What is the co-relation between the changing understandings of culture and evolving identity structures? These are some of the questions that will form an important part of the inquiry while looking at the cinematic treatment of interculturality, multiculturality and transculturality.

- Do existent, allotted social identities of a protagonist – like caste affiliations, location in a rural/urban milieu, religion, sexuality etc.

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38   Shashi Tharoor, *The Elephant, the Tiger and the Cellphone*, (New York: Arcade publishing, 2007), 17.

play an important role in defining the openness of a protagonist towards 'other' cultures?

When one speaks of India, it cannot be possibly in singular terms. As mentioned above, we are talking about a number of *Kulturnationen* within the geographical boundaries of the political construct of India. An individual can be a part of multiple *Kulturnationen* at the same time. Even then, in the eyes of the society, this individual is allotted some identities which helps in categorising him/her into certain socio-political constructs like urban Muslim, rural Hindu woman, etc. Do these individuals perceive themselves in the same manner as the society perceives them? Or do they choose to look at their own identities in a different light? For instance, does an individual being labelled as an urban Muslim man see himself representing these categories or would he rather identify himself with being an urban homosexual man, who also happens to be a Muslim? Does his allotted social identity play an important role in his perception of the *Other*? It would be very interesting to consider the kind of friction that exists at this interstice and interrogate how this conflict plays out in the framework of a film. For example, does the location of the social identity of a protagonist in a poor, conservative setting necessarily mean that the protagonist is conservative and averse to the idea of accepting new cultural influences? Does a protagonist in an urban setting have a predisposition to being more open towards new cultures? These questions will decisively influence the film analysis and the character analysis of the figures being portrayed in the films and effectively also have a bearing on the answers of the other questions being posed here.

- Does the portrayal of these diverse cultural concepts give rise to a particular identity concept? Is there a stereotype of Indian identity that can be deduced from Bollywood? What character traits does this 'ideal' Indian have?

After having looked at the different understandings and portrayals of culture in Bollywood, the next logical question would be to find out if there

is a particular identity complex that arises as a result of these cultural concepts. Going further, the most important question in this regard would be to see if there is a stereotypical Indian identity that is being defined by these films? How does a conflict between *Kulturnation* and the *Staatsnation* play out in films? How do the protagonists overcome their differences arising from their belonging to a particular *Kulturnation* and what does it mean for them to be Indian – belonging to a more abstract, yet very politically concrete idea of India? If so, what are the traits that one can associate with this *Being Indian*? In a film like *Swades* (2004) for instance, the main protagonist Mohan, is of Indian origin – born and raised in India, later on moves to the United States of America. His presence there and the exposure that he has while living there, has induced a change in his thought process, in the way he perceives and understands the world. Does this change in his thinking pattern, in the way he processes and reacts to situations make him any less Indian? What is it that could make one say (even within the framework of the film) that he isn't an Indian anymore? This line of inquiry will be very decisive in defining the outcome of this research since the idea of the protagonist 'being an Indian' is central to most of the selected films, without any of the films defining what it means.

- Is there a particular genre of "Cinema of Identity Conflict" in the mainstream Hindi cinema (also referred to as Bollywood)?

Bollywood films can be largely classified into categories like Masala Films, social drama, Muslim social, Romance, etc. They not only address the contemporary social contexts in the Indian society, but also blend those narratives with topics that have a mass appeal, which is usually romance. Even after being mixed with romance, these narratives are still addressing a conflict in the background. What is interesting though, is to find if there is a particular kind of genre, within the folds of Bollywood, that dedicates more space to an identity conflict than focusing purely on the narrative. Is the film primarily interrogating the major issue that is at the core of the narrative in the film and treating the protagonist as a mere personification

of the problem? Or is it able to focus on the individual journey, the evolution of the identity of a protagonist(s), while also looking at the broader context and then connecting them with each other? Comparing it with one of the primary methodological tools I intend to implement in this thesis, one could look at both the aforementioned variants with two variable models of portraying an identity – hierarchical or rhizomatic. While the first variant focuses on putting the broader thematic context in focus, followed by putting the onus of representation on a protagonist, the second variant allows the protagonists' journey and evolution to be placed at par with the developments in a narrative and establishes connections between the two, by framing the narrative in terms of an interaction between the protagonist and his surroundings and contexts. If this indeed can be treated as a genre – a genre of identity conflict cinema does exist, what are the parameters that function as indicators that help us identify and distinguish a film belonging to this genre? As is predictable and would be the case in any film, any kind of conflict would have different levels at which it operates and manifests itself. How do those different levels evolve and how do they operate within the framework of the film? Do these different conflict levels make a linear narrative structure a pre-requisite or do they work well when given the space and the freedom to be a non-linear narrative as well? All these questions form a subset of the overarching question is "Is there a particular genre of Cinema of Identity Conflicts in Bollywood?". As a continuation of this inquiry, one might also ask if there exists a possibility of assigning some of the already existing categories to the broader concept of identity conflict cinema.

3. Research Design

3.1   Methodology: research layout

The films that I have selected for the purpose of this thesis were made between 2000 and 2019 – a very turbulent 20 years in the history of modern India. This was a time frame during which time the economic and cultural impact of globalization on the Indian society, the impact of the various socio-political changes which came around at the same time started to become increasingly tangible and present. In terms of the history of Indian cinema, the time frame post 1990 can be defined as the time of 'New Bollywood'[39], linked to the economic liberalisation that took place in India in 1990. With this move, the government not only paved the way for economic reforms, but also exposed the Indian society to a series of Western cultural influences – ushered in primarily through the opening of the entertainment and cable TV sector. Till that point, it was only a very small social elite in a largely conservative Indian society that had the means and access to Western lifestyle, education and philosophy. This cultural exposure to a different set of values and lifestyles set in a motion an unprecedented process of cultural evolution, combined together with the economic consequences (prosperity as well as poverty), in the Indian society.

The films that I have selected here focus on these developments through the perspective of protagonists who were being exposed to these 'new' cultural influences. The films problematise a series of cultural conflicts arising from contradictory views and positions. While it may be important to look at the narrative of the film and the protagonists' journey

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39   Meheli Sen, *Haunting Bollywood. Gender, Genre and the Supernatural in Hindi commercial cinema* (Texas: University of Texas Press, 2017), 189.

throughout the film, it is equally important to understand the broader context of the conflict in which the narrative of the film is embedded in. In order to achieve a comprehensive understanding and analysis of the films chosen, I have developed the following methodology which is a mixture of a series of theories in the field of cultural, literary and film studies.

First and foremost, I would be like to explain my approach for the treatment of a Film as a Text. Methodologically speaking, I would be referring to Christian Metz, a literary scholar who is also considered to be one of the most important figures in the field of *Filmsemiotik*. He attempts to understand and establish the relation between film and semiotics which he presented in his essay *Le cinéma: langue ou langage?*[40] in 1964. A film is necessarily a large collection of individual images put together in a particular sequence. It is the sequence of the images that is extremely important since it gives the narrative some meaning, it makes it possible to express emotions and convey messages. Metz's approach looks at a film in the light of semiotics and considers the film as a text – as a logically organised and structured mesh of a range of contexts to convey meanings and messages to the audience. The audience, in turn, is in a position to decode these messages – partly due to the duly established socio-cultural and political contexts within the framework of the film, and partly due to their own familiarity and understanding of the issue being addressed in it. I return to my initial observations:

> "Cinematographic language" is first of all the literalness of a plot. Artistic effects, even when they are substantially inseparable from the semiotic act by which the film tells us its story, nevertheless

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[40]   Christian Metz, "Le Cinéma: Langue ou langage" in *Communications 4 (1)*, (1964), 52-90, under https://doi.org/10.3406/comm.1964.1028.

constitute another level of signification, which from the methodo-
logical point of view must come "later."[41]

Metz's understanding of film semiotics focuses on the textual structure of
the film but is far from being the only possible approach. In the context
of the present work, this approach is chosen for heuristic reasons, although
it is evidently clear that a film is a multi-layered artistic expression and ad-
ditionally has different levels of cinematic design that go well beyond the
text concept because the actual text of the film (i.e. the linguistic level, the
plot, etc.) is embedded in the visual and acoustic representation levels. The
focus on the linguistic-semiotic analysis of the text locates the present dis-
sertation also methodically between literature and film studies. For the nec-
essary image analysis over the course of the chosen films, Erwin Panofsky's
three-step model for the understanding of iconology[42] comes to the rescue
to enable an understanding and interpretation of meaning in visual repre-
sentation. The three step-model continues to be of relevance even today
and can be used here in order to analyse the visual representations of the
variety of conflicts that the chosen films here represent. He suggests the
following three steps to be considered:

- *Vor-ikonographische Beschreibung* or the Formal Analysis: In this phase,
  it is a description of the surface and the form of the image in ques-
  tion. It is a description of what we see, the expressional connota-
  tions arising from one's own practical experience and familiarity
  with objects and events.
- *Die ikonographische Beschreibung* or the Iconographic analysis: This
  phase involves a deeper understanding of the actions and facts pre-
  sented in the first level. It pre-requisites a knowledge of literary

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41 Christian Metz, *Film Language. A semiotics of the Cinema* (Chicago: University of
   Chicago Press, 1974), 72.
42 Erwin Panofsky, *Ikonographie und Ikonologie. Bildinterpretation nach dem Dreistu-
   fenmodell*. (Köln: Dumont, 2006), 57.

sources and familiarity with topics and ideas being projected in the image.

- *Die ikonologische Interpretation* or the Iconological interpretation: In this third and final phase of interpretation, the interpreter is required to have a synthetic intuition coupled with a 'worldview'. In other words, this level allows the interpreter to identify things and contexts that the creator of the image may not have consciously thought about. It allows the interpreter to connect the world shown in the image and the world known to the interpreter to reveal an underlying complex of polyphonic messages that the image is conveying.

The film-text that I look at is made up of different overlapping textures, each with its own system of signs and symbols while providing a broad context in which the image is situated. During the phase of the film analysis, however, it is the Iconological interpretation that I have particularly focussed on while the first two phases serve the purpose of offering a background to understand and base my arguments on. As a film-text, I tend to look at the film at hand through the eyes of Knut Hickethier, referring to the collection of signs that belong together through structural, contextual coherence and continuity, thus giving a film its meaning[43]. At this stage, it is important to understand that we have the possibility to approach the *Text* (in broader sense of the word – *Text* as a carrier of a message) differently in order to complete the process of successful transmission of a 'message'. This process takes place in the context of a hermeneutical approach towards 'understanding of the message', not in the sense of a transcenden-

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43 *Das Besondere des filmischen Textes liegt gerade darin, dass er Bedeutungen nicht nur jeweils auf der Ebene des gesprochenen Textes, des Abgebildeten, der Struktur der Bilder und ihrer Verbindung (Montage) entstehen lässt, sondern dass diese Bedeutungen auch im Spiel der einzelnen Ausdrucks- und Mitteilungsebenen miteinander entstehen. Die einzelnen Zeichenebenen voneinander zu isolieren und getrennt zu betrachten, ist beim Film wenig ergiebig: Entscheidend ist immer ihr Zusammenspiel.* in Knut Hickethier, *Film- und Fernsehanalyse*, (Stuttgart/Weimar: J. B. Metzler Verlag, 2012), 25.

tal concept, but with regard to a constellation of different potential under-standings and its results. In this context, it should be noted that the term *Text* goes beyond the literary boundaries and rather describes structures that are seen as bearers of content and contexts. It not only enables the analysis of the literary texts, but also the *Texts* in the form of films for instance.

After establishing the primary approach towards a film (film as a text), it was important to find a methodological tool that offered a recognisable access point to the film. Though there are a series of methodological frameworks that exist in this field of research, I decided to choose a frame-work coming primarily from the field of literary studies. The concept of *Textures*[44] as proposed by Christoph Reinfandt seemed to befit my purpose and line of research. It offers a very clearly defined, differentiated process of approaching a text, delving deeper into it, taking it apart layer by layer, each layer having a unique texture because of the series of intermedial and intertextual references in it. The texture of a text consists of several com-plex topics and contexts, let's assume that they are represented by threads and this creates a complex fabric. The individual threads are noticeable in different places in an existing text and their traces that can be seen through-out the text lend the text its texture.

The superficial layer, which is immediately noticeable when one ap-proaches the text (or a film in this context) is the broader context of the film, along with the issues that weigh into giving the topic a nuanced por-trayal. The other layer is a more unique one. It factors in the understanding of the subject by author and how he/she looks at the particular sequence of events. The author here – me – is a mere medium analysing the story, giving the narrative portrayed in the film through the lens of a protagonist, a platform. When using the term texture, other approaches that cover the fields of cultural discussion, the dichotomy between alien and self as well

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44   Christoph Reinfandt: "'Texture' as a Key Term in Literary and Cultural Studies" in *Text or Context: Reflections on Literary and Cultural Criticism*, ed. Rüdiger Kunow and Stephan Mussil, (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2013), 7-21.

as the problem of identity are also considered. The application of herme-
neutics is seen in the context of this work as a process related to an epis-
temological flow, because the analysis of the films is not about gaining a
specific, sharply defined, definitive knowledge, but about dealing with ap-
proaches by different authors or filmmakers and the analysis of his/her
depictions of a conflict. So, the ultimate goal is not the knowledge (the
result of the cognitive process), but the analysis of the cognitive process.
Though I have decided to focus primarily on the concept of textures for
the purpose of this thesis, Hans-Georg Gadamer's conception of historical
hermeneutics as a theory of interpretation and the concept of *Hori-
zontverschmelzung* on the one hand and *Wirkungsästhetik* by Wolfgang Iser [45]
on the other hand influence the present investigation largely. Gadamer's
approach fits in with the first phase of texture development, for, according
to Reinfandt's approach, societal conditions and hermeneutic traits play a
very important role in the formation of texture.

In the context of the analysis of literary works, the interpretation of
hermeneutics by Hans-Georg Gadamer is given special consideration. He
uses the notion of *Horizontverschmelzung* which explains the relationship be-
tween the interpreter and the text and the process of gaining knowledge.
Gadamer perceives language in the way Humboldt and Herder saw it - as
"world view" and uses it to literarily reconstruct his already observed ob-
ject. The interpreter tries to understand the meaning of the text, based on
the questions of the author and the answers that the text encoded by him/
her contains. In the course of this process, two horizons are approaching
each other: on the one hand, the horizon of the author, who is largely
defined by the three leitmotifs *Intention*, *Caution* and *Anticipation* (*Vorhabe,
Vorsicht* and *Vorgriff*) when conveying certain literary objects; on the other
hand, the horizon of the interpreter, which is characterized by his/her
prior knowledge or prejudices. The debate on the concept and the process

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45   *Methoden der Literatur– und Kulturwissenschaftlichen Textanalyse: Ansätze, Grundla-
gen – Modellanalysen*, ed. Vera Nünning and Ansgar Nünning (Stuttgart/Weimar: J.
B. Metzlar Verlag, 2010), 36.

of understanding underlying the hermeneutics has not lost its relevance, since this work particularly involves the understanding of foreign cultures or selected images of conflicts in the Indian context and their analysis. According to Schleiermacher's hermeneutical approach, there are two horizons that deal with a double movement in the process of understanding – namely the formation of a hypothesis by the interpreter and its eventual correction on the basis of the text. Despite the chronological sequence of this process, the two stages are anchored temporally in the present. Gadamer's interpretation, however, is particularly pertinent to this work because of the idea of *Horizontverschmelzung*, because this term represents the interplay between two horizons merging - the horizon of tradition and heritage, and the horizon of the interpreter.

What is more important is the fact that within the methodological framework itself, it also offers me – as a viewer and a researcher – space to look at the biographical factors that influence my understanding of the film based on my reference points and my world-views in the context of the chosen conflicts, as well as my subjective experiences with those conflicts. So, while my objectivity concerning the understanding of the events in the film may lie outside the framework of the primary understanding of the film, my subjective understanding of the Film Text will flow into the film analysis. This offers the interpretation and understanding of the Film Text a unique quality.

Similar to the model of a *Rhizome*, these approaches move forward depending on the situation and context and then take on a leading role. In principle, it should be noted that there cannot be the one form of literary or film analysis. Depending on the question, theory and method vary in the two disciplines of literature and film studies. Finally – and here Hans Georg Gadamer's understanding of the temporal relation of interpretation is ground-breaking – every work of art is located in a historical context through its time of origin and at the same time refers to the cultural-historical context of the respective recipient. This temporal transformation of the meaning of a work is captured in the theory of interpretation, hermeneutics, in the hermeneutic circle. This means that the interpretation

process can never be completed, even if hermeneutics defines the object of interpretation, i.e. text, film or image, as a finished work.

There are five steps in hermeneutic film analysis.

- An 'initial understanding' of the film; Clarification of the intelligible and the incomprehensible.
- The awareness of one's own context (analysing entity).
- Structure of the product and its film aesthetic design; meaning potential.
- Other factors - origin, production and reception.
- Creating a context - film and off-film components are related to each other. [46]
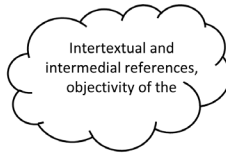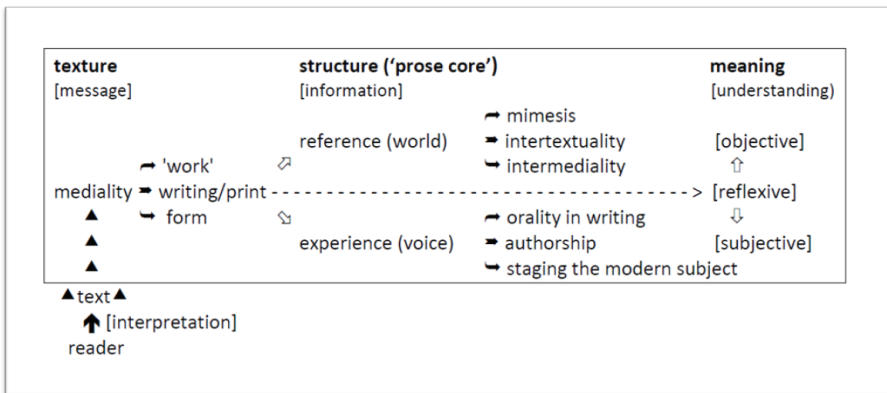
IMG. 2_Deciphering Textures[47]

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46   Knut Hickethier, *Film- und Fernsehanalyse*, (Stuttgart/Weimar: J. B. Metzler Verlag, 2012), 34.

47   Ref. Christoph Reinfandt: "'Texture' as a Key Term in Literary and Cultural Studies" inText or Context:Reflections on Literary and Cultural Criticism, ed. Rüdiger Kunow and Stephan Mussil, (Würzburg:Königshausen & Neumann, 2013), 17.

It should be noted here that though these steps have been put down in a particular order, they only serve as guidelines and may not necessarily represent the order in which the film analysis takes place. These steps are put into sequence for the sake of methodological clarity, but flow into each other during the process of concrete interpretation and are repeated over the course of the analysis.

The central research question of this thesis deals with the investigation of transculturality and its correlation with the process of evolution of identities. It is about identity complexes – the assigned, predetermined identities such as the caste, religion, gender, combined with previous knowledge, their (protagonists') own experiences as well as the newly accumulated, added identities – and their influence on the perception of the protagonists. This perception refers to an ambiguous process – on the one hand it concerns the perception of a foreign culture by the protagonists, on the other, the positioning of one's own identity as alien in the existing milieu, and the conflicts arising as a result of this juxtaposition. It should be noted that terms such as identity, culture, the own and the foreign are always constructions and reconstructions that are constantly in motion due to a continuous process of social negotiations.

In this thesis, the phenomenon of transculturality will be looked at the level of the protagonists or heroes – who are personifying the cultural contexts they have been placed in. In one of his key works, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*[48], the American religious scholar Joseph Campbell has extensively explored the notion of a Hero in the context of mythology and has derived the dramaturgical model of the heroic journey from the analysis of a multitude of myths and tales from different cultures. The Hero's Journey is basically an archetypal structure called monomyth, characterized by a typical sequence of situations and figures. The fact that a Hero, in the context of the story he/she are placed in, experiences the same stages, affirms the fact that a monomyth of the Hero's journey is a transcultural,

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48   Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Novato: Joseph Campbell Foundation, 2008).

common good and can be understood by many in their own respective contexts. The stages of the Hero's journey can be detected in a large number of scripts and were explained by Christopher Vogler, amongst others, as guidelines to successful scriptwriting. Vogler, especially, looked at the stages defined by Campbell in the context of filmmaking and broke down the journey to 12 stages. Before moving on to the different stages in the life of a Hero, it is important to briefly mention who qualifies as being a Hero.

> The hero, therefore, is the man or woman who has been able to battle past his personal and historical limitations to the generally valid, normally human forms. Such a one's visions, ideas, and inspirations come pristine from the primary springs of human life and thought. Hence they are eloquent, not of the present, disintegrating society and psyche, but of the unquenched source through which society is reborn. [49]

The variations of heroes are numerous and expandable. The leading figure is an independent, idiosyncratic and strong figure who often violates social and cultural circumstances and tries to find his/her own way. Compared to the other characters of a film, the character of the Hero undergoes the greatest change and defends this process of development against social criticism. The hero characters studied here are Daljit Singh, Karan, Sukhi, Sonia, Aslam and Lakshman from the film *RDB,* Omkar, Govind and Ishaan in the film *KPC*, Mohan Bhargava from the film *Swades*, Newton from the film *Newton*, Rani, Gulab, Lajjo and Bijli in *Parched* and Ayaan Ranjan in the film *Article 15*. Though the definition speaks of the Hero in a singular form, it can be observed in more cases than one that a group of characters take over the role of a Hero depending on how the narrative evolves and are placed at the heart of the narrative. This kind of moving

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49   Ibid., 14-15.

back and forth in the context of the narrative – not just in terms of the evolution of identity concept of the figures but also in terms of how the non-hierarchical, non-linear structure of a group figure allows the figures to collectively assume the central role, is in tandem with the idea of a *Rhizome,* which I will refer to extensively during this interrogation. I have elaborated the concept of an *Ensemblefigur* and *Figurenmosaik* at a later stage. It is absolutely necessary to look at the journeys of each of these protagonists – not only because they are important for the development of the narrative but also because their personal evolution on the lines of identity conflicts is of high relevance to this inquiry and to the outcome of this thesis.

For a better comparison of the different models that outline the *Hero's journey*, I have arranged the stages of the heroic journey as proposed by Campbell and Vogler side by side.

Table 1.   The Hero's journey

	The Hero with a Thousand Faces (Joseph Campbell)	*Hero's Journey* [50] (Christopher Vogler)
1	The call to adventure	Ordinary world
2	Refusal of the call	Call to adventure
3	Supernatural Aid	Refusal of the call
4	The crossing of the first threshold	Meeting the mentor
5	The belly of the whale	Crossing the threshold
6	Road of Trials	Tests, Allies, Enemies
7	Meeting with the goddess	Approach
8	Woman as the temptress	Ordeal, death and rebirth
9	Atonement of the father	Reward, seizing the sword
10	Apotheosis	The road back

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50   Christopher Vogler, *The writer's journey*, (Michigan: Michael Wiese Productions, 2007).

11	The ultimate boon	Resurrection
12	Refusal of the Return	Return with the Elixir
13	The magic flight	
14	Rescue from without	
15	The crossing of the return threshold	
16	Master of the two worlds	
17	Freedom to live	

While defining these stages in the life of a Hero, Vogler also looks at the Hero's journey at two different but interconnected levels: one journey is with reference to the world the protagonist(s) finds himself/herself in, the other one is an inner journey – a voyage of personal evolution. While deliberating on the nature of these two journeys, one could also wonder about the need vs. the want aspect of it – the Hero's journey, largely dependent on the external factors that necessitate a response from him/her – it is a need of the hour. On the other hand, his/her personal evolution during this process, response to the external situation originates from what he/she wants combining an inner journey of what he/she wants with his/her apparent journey of what he/she needs to do. If we look at the trajectories that have been laid down by Vogler for both the journeys, we can easily see how strongly interconnected and interdependent both the journeys are for the development of the narrative. The dialectic between the personal journey and evolution of the protagonist and the evolution of the setup and the milieu he/she is based in is a process that is undergoing a constant alteration. What remains to be seen is how these points of changes are portrayed in the chosen films, what are the pointers and indicators of these changes and how the protagonists experience them. In the following table, I have attempted to outline in detail not just the two phases in the Hero's journey but also provide the interpretation and the intermediary steps connecting the Hero's inner journey to the Hero's journey in the context of the narrative.
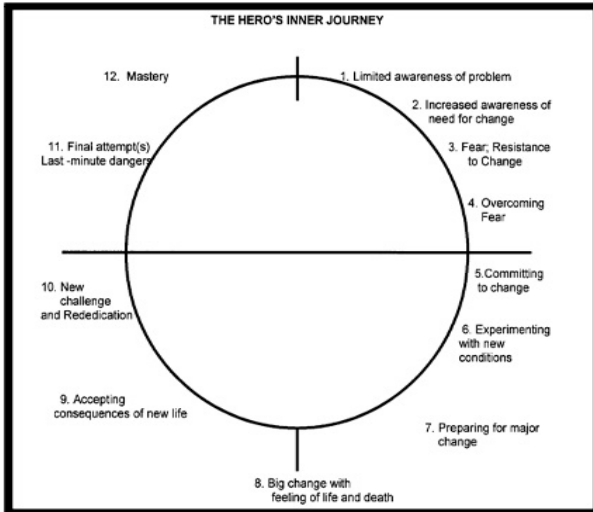
IMG. 3_Hero's Inner Journey[51]
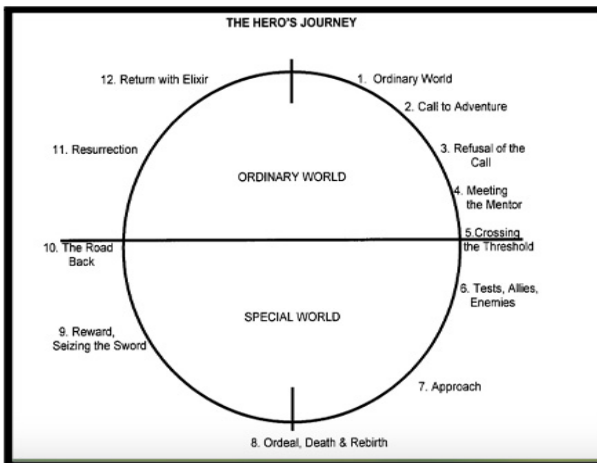
IMG. 4_Hero's Journey[52]

51   Janda, Kathryn & Topouzi, Marina. (2013). Closing the loop: using hero stories and
      learning stories to remake energy policy.
52   Janda, Kathryn & Topouzi, Marina. (2013). Closing the loop: using hero stories and
      learning stories to remake energy policy.

Table 2. The Hero's inner journey vs. The Hero's journey

	The Hero's inner journey	Intermediary stage	The Hero's journey
1	Limited awareness of the problem	Limited awareness of the problem: in a lot of cases ignorance leads to a very limited or almost non-existent understanding of the issue at hand by the protagonist. This leads to a perception of normalcy in the world around him/her.	Ordinary world
		An incident/event takes place that triggers the curiosity of the protagonist and leads him/her to a point where he actively wants to understand the problem at hand and sometimes even aspire to bring about a change.	
2	Increased awareness, need for change	An increased awareness about the issue at hand, perhaps now even impacting his/her personal life compels the protagonist to set out on an adventure defying societal and cultural norms.	Call to adventure
		Because the adventure involves defying the dominant narrative and existing socio-cultural 'laws', a sense of fear creeps in	

		into the mind of the protago-nist.	
3	Fear/resistance to change	As a result of the fear or peer pressure, the protago-nist seems to give in and refute the need for change.	Refusal of the call
		After his/her refusal to deal with the problem and once he/she gains some distance, there is usually a process of ret-rospection taking place that re-kindles the aspiration in the protagonist to overcome the fear and face the problem heads-on.	
4	Overcoming fear	Once having overcome the fear, the search and the successful meeting with a mentor takes place.	Meeting the men-tor
		Meeting the mentor brings about a noticeable change in the protagonist's world view giving him/her a nuanced under-standing of the problem(s) he/she is facing and making him/her aware of the changes that need to be made.	
5	Committing to change	The protagonist, some-times under the tutelage of a mentor, has committed to bringing about a change. This requires him/her to cross over into	Crossing the threshold

		another world – from the world of familiarity and passiveness to a more dynamic and active world.	
		For the protagonist, crossing the threshold means being uprooted from his/her familiar conditions and having to come to terms with the new setup, new socio-cultural milieu he/she has been placed into.	
6	Experimenting with the new conditions	Experimenting with new conditions not only means having to face a new set of challenges at an emotional level, it also means having to identify one's allies, friends and enemies on this journey.	Tests/Allies/Enemies
		Having settled down in the new conditions, the protagonist has an inkling of the complex problems coming his/her way through a series of indicators available in his/her surroundings. That he/she is even aware of these indicators has to do with the more in-depth understanding of the topic that the protagonist has developed over the course of the narrative.	

7	Preparing for major change	In this phase, the protagonist seems to be preparing himself/herself and the people around him/her for a major change that is looming on the horizon.	Approach
		The approach that the protagonist adopts while trying to address the problem is a decisive aspect in the narrative, since the approach sets the tone of the climax of the film.	
8	Big change with feeling of life and death	The approach that paves the way for the climax, though innovative and unique in some ways, also has an unsettling effect on the protagonist and his/her immediate social circle giving them a feeling of being in a life-and-death situation. This kind of an ordeal or a difficult situation is what is happening in the real-time world around him/her while he/she is struggling with an inner fear.	Ordeal, Death and Rebirth
		The Ordeal, usually characterized by Death and Rebirth of one of the central characters in	

		the narrative, leads to a moment of realization for the protagonist wherein he/she accepts the consequences of the approach he/she has chosen, of the choices he/she has made so far.	
9	Accepting consequences of new life	Once having accepted the consequences of the new life that he/she has chosen for himself/herself, it appears easier for the protagonist to dedicate his/her energies to the conflict at hand.	Reward, seizing the sword
		Seizing the sword here also means starting to prepare for the bigger conflict at hand by starting to address the smaller problems connected with the conflict.	
10	New challenge and rededication	The new challenges – associated with the bigger conflict – become clearer as the conflict looms on the horizon. This requires complete dedication of his/her energies in order to resolve the conflict once and for all.	The road back
		This is the penultimate stage before the final conflict.	

11	Final at-tempt/last mi-nute dangers	While at an individual level, the protagonist is aware that this is his/her final chance of securing a victory in the conflict, he/she is also dealing with some unforeseen dangers.	Resurrection
		Resurrection is the climax of the film: victory in the conflict. This doesn't necessarily mean a 'Happily-ever-after' scenario. How the victory manifests it-self varies from narrative to narrative.	
12	Mastery	This stage is the final stage in the Hero's journey – he/she has finally man-aged to resolve the conflict – not only at a personal level but also in the broader context of the narrative.	Return with Elixir

Though traditionally the figure of a Hero is understood as a singular entity, that in its pervasiveness and presence over the course of the entire film offers the audience an insight into the issues that the film tackles, it is also important to factor in a new trend, more prevalent since the late 1980s,

which allowed the rise of a decentralised narrative and a cluster of characters to appear as a figure[53]. In other words, the singularity of the terminology Hero became diversified, now allowing character constellations to appear as the Hero, with the central role being taken over by multiple characters in a non-linear manner. There is no strict chronological order as to who assumes this role, when and for how long.

Margrit Tröhler, a film studies scholar from Zürich, wrote about the variety of *Gruppenfiguren* (group as figures) that appear in a film: namely *Gruppenfigur*, *Figurenensemble* and *Figurenmosaik* in her book *Offene Welten ohne Helden*[54]. These three variants are dependent on the structure of the narrative at hand and how the characters are placed in this narrative, their dynamics with each other. Though the three concepts are very similar to each other and have a lot of overlaps, the three have their distinct markers which make the distinction noticeable even to a viewer, according to Tröhler[55]. Of particular interest, considering the films chosen here, are the concepts of *Figurenensemble* and its continuation, an *Ensemblefilm* as well as the concept of *Figurenmosaik* and its extension *Mosaikfilm*. The most relevant difference between these two variants, as published in an essay by Tröhler in 2006, can be described as:

Table 3. Ensemblefilm vs. Mosaikfilm

Ensemblefilm	*Mosaikfilm*
Ensemble films often bring their protagonists together in a central location and through their encoun-	The narrative dynamics in mosaic films is not fundamentally different (from the Ensemblefilm).

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53 Margrit Tröhler, "Plurale Figurenkonstellationen: Die offene Logik der wahrnehmbaren Möglichkeiten" in *Montage /av, Zeitschrift für Theorie und Geschichte audiovisueller Kommunikation, Figur und Perspektive (1)*, (Marburg: Schüren Verlag, 2006), 95.

54 Margrit Tröhler, *Offene Welten ohne Helden. Plurale Figurenkonstellationen im Film*, (Marburg: Schüren Verlag, 2007).

55 Ibid., 18.

ters and the confrontation of heterogeneous situations create a microcosm (which is sometimes already pre-structured through the configuration of families, groups of friends or pairs). This profiled arrangement suggests fictional coherence in its spatial-temporal reduction, but the non-simultaneity of the simultaneous shapes the microcosm as a polyphonic space in which coincidences and incidents and the often-conflicting interactions of the figures gradually heat up the mood[56].	However, it is based on an expanded and more diversified microcosm from the outset. The figures are usually distributed in small groups, in pairs or as individuals in a city landscape and their paths gradually link to form a complex network of relationships. The narrative meanders through a labyrinth of stories - it occasionally brings the characters, along with their stories together to converge at a central point, but remains more eccentric in its arrangement[57].

Considering this primary yet subtle difference between the structure of the two kinds of films, the films chosen here prove to be a mix of all the models – ranging from films like *Swades, Newton* or *Article 15* which boast of a

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56 *Ensemblefilme führen ihre Protagonisten oft an einem zentralen Ort zusammen und lassen durch deren Begegnungen und durch die Konfrontationen der heterogenen Situationen einen Mikrokosmos entstehen (der manchmal durch die Konfiguration von Familien, Freundesgruppen oder -paaren bereits vorstrukturiert ist). Diese profilmische Anlage legt in ihrer raum-zeitlichen Reduktion eine fiktionale Kohärenz nahe, doch die Ungleichzeitigkeit des Gleichzeitigen gestaltet den Mikrokosmos als einen polyphonen Raum, in dem sich durch Zufälle und Zwischenfälle und die oft konfliktreiche Interaktionen der Figuren die Stimmung nach und nach aufheizt.* in Margrit Tröhler, "Plurale Figurenkonstellationen" in *Montage /av, Zeitschrift für Theorie und Geschichte audiovisueller Kommunikation, Figur und Perspektive (1)*, (Marburg: Schüren Verlag, 2006), 101.

57 *Die Erzähldynamik in den Mosaikfilmen unterscheidet sich nicht grundlegend. Ihr liegt jedoch ein von vornherein erweiterter und stärker aufgefächerter Mikrokosmos zu Grunde. Die Figuren sind in kleinen Gruppen, in Paaren oder als Einzelne meist in einer Stadtlandschaft verteilt und ihre Wege verknüpfen sich nach und nach zu einem komplexen Beziehungsnetz. die Narration schlängelt sich durch ein Labyrinth von Geschichten - sie führt zwar die Figuren gelegentlich an einem zentralen Ort zusammen, bleibt aber in ihrer Anlage stärker azentrisch"* in Ibid., 102.

singular Hero to films like *KPC* or *Parched* which bear the markings of being an *Ensemblefilm*. *RDB* proves to be an interesting mixture of 2 *Ensemblefilms*, coming together to become a *Mosaikfilm*. Both the *Ensemblefilms*, each a subnarrative in its own right, are interwoven in a non-linear and eccentric manner, leading to the emergence of a *Mosaikfilm*. The eccentric nature of the narrative and the way it depends on a number of figures at different junctures to lead the way, allows us to compare it with the concept of a *Rhizome*[58].

While the Hero's journey as a concept aids in the process of film analysis, we also need to understand the factors that contribute to the Hero being portrayed the way he/she is, the factors that contribute in designing his/her wishes and aspirations, his/her strengths and flaws in order to understand their responses to the situations in any given narrative. It is of paramount importance to remember that at all stages in any film (with the notable exception of biographical films), all of the characters portrayed are fictional characters, though more than often, the characters are mirror images of people rooted in real life. For instance, in *Article 15* while some of the characters are products of imagination of the filmmaker, the script writer though, draws his inspiration for the creation of these fictional figures from his real-life experiences and the surroundings.

Jens Eder, in his book *Die Figur im Film*[59] introduces us to an array of approaches that are important while considering any figure, from an analytical point of view. Furthermore, he goes on to suggest a model to understand the evolution of a Character and its analysis in a film.

This schematic diagram representing the various factors that contribute to the way a character evolves has been an important factor in understanding the protagonists, the backgrounds from which they emerge and the backgrounds of their responses to the situations that the films represent. Since

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58   Margrit Tröhler, *Offene Welten ohne Helden. Plurale Figurenkonstellationen im Film*, (Marburg: Schüren Verlag, 2007), 391.

59   Jens Eder, *Die Figur im Film. Grundlagen der Figurenanalyse*, (Marburg: Schüren Verlag, 2006).

I don't focus on the production or the reception as much as I focus on the content and film-analysis in this work, I have paid more attention to the phase of *Artefakt* as depicted in this diagram. I have worked more on the end-product, the final manifestations of the three earlier processes of character-development, while acutely making sure that I am not overlooking the broader contextual backgrounds. For instance, in a film like *RDB*, I have considered the real-life inspirations for the filmmaker while analysing the situations in the narrative and the characters. In the case of a film like *Article 15*, which is rooted in very complex, real-life, socio-political milieus, I had to first inform myself about the broader thematic terrain in which the filmmaker was basing the narrative and the figures in the film.
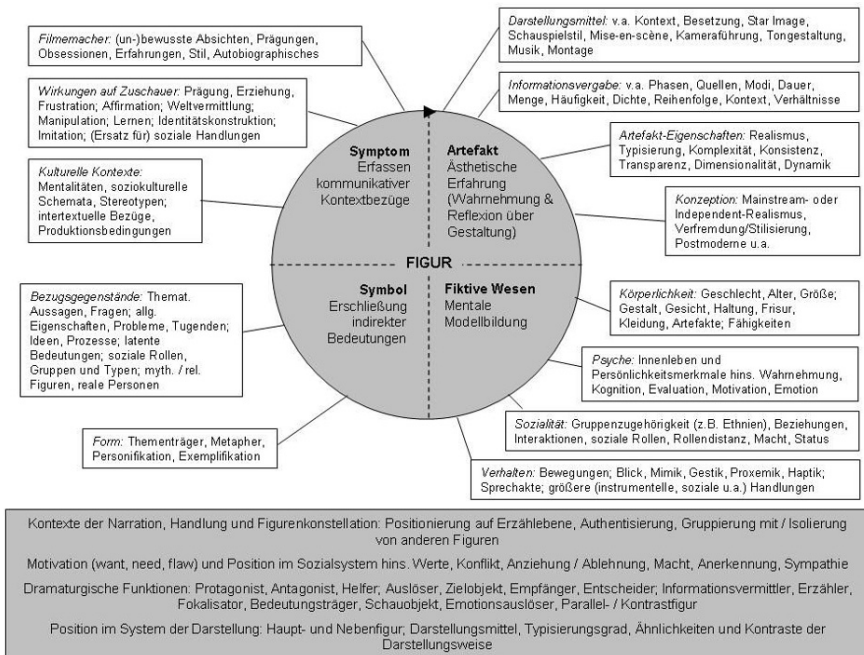
IMG. 5_ Character Analysis[60]

60   Jens Eder, *Die Figur im Film. Grundlagen der Figurenanalyse,* (Marburg: Schüren Verlag, 2006). 711.

Eder also describes in-depth how a classical dramaturgical approach to the development of a character in a mainstream film focuses on three key factors: the *Want,* the *Need* and the *Key Flaw.* A *Want* is usually a concrete, external goal while a *Need* is usually a real, inner desire. A *Key Flaw* is usually a weak point in a character, often arising from the history of the character[61]. Focusing on the aspects of *Want* and *Need,* Linda Seger builds up on this line of argument by bringing in two further terms of *Motivation* and *Goal* in a Hero's life[62]. One could also describe this as a *Need* vs. *Want* journey – a *Want* being a strong force behind the Motivation, the *Need* being the bigger Goal of the narrative. While discussing an optimum approach to develop a character, she discusses in depth how a Motivation and a Goal are key aspects of a character and should be well thought of for the character to work.

> As a result of his or her motivation, a protagonist is heading somewhere. There is something that the character wants. Just as motivation pushes a character forward in a specific direction, a goal pulls a character toward a climax. The protagonist's goal is an essential part of drama. Without a clear goal for its main character, a story will wander and become hopelessly confused. The protagonist's goal is achieved at the story's climax. But not just any goal will do. To function well, a goal requires three elements. 1) Great risk. Something important must be at stake. The audience must be convinced that a great deal will be lost if the main character does not gain the goal. We need to clearly understand the goal and understand that achieving it is essential for the character's well-being, and perhaps for the future life of our planet. If we don't believe in the necessity of the protagonist's goal, we won't be able to root for that character. 2) Direct conflict. A strong protagonist's goal should di-

61   Ibid., 720.
62   Linda Seger, *Making a good script great*, (Los Angeles: Silman-James Press, 2010).

rectly conflict with the antagonist's goal. This conflict sets the context for your entire story and strengthens the main character, because that person now has an opponent who will see to it that the protagonist's goal is not easily attained. 3) Character transformation. The goal should be sufficiently demanding and difficult to achieve that the protagonist must undergo changes while striving to attain it. In some way the protagonist will be transformed and will gain extra personality dimensions in the process. This character may discover courage or resourcefulness or determination. Achieving the goal without some kind of character change cannot be possible.[63]

Looking at the three elements Seger considers important in the evolution of a character, we can easily find correlations between these elements and the phases in which they manifest themselves mentioned in a Hero's journey. For instance, the first element she mentions of taking a great risk is in tandem with the phase 'New Challenge and Rededication', since only at this stage are the bigger conflict and the broader contexts revealed to the audience. Most importantly, the third element mentioned here, that of a character transformation in order to achieve the goal, is directly co-related to the identity evolution of the Hero that occurs over the course of the film. Combined with the Hero's journey, the emergence of a concrete *Want* at the beginning of the film and the eventual revelation of a bigger *Need,* are central to the film analysis. They play an important part in understanding the evolution of the central figure as well as to the revealing of the bigger conflict in the narrative. I will often refer to *Need* and *Want* while looking at the individual characters' journeys.

As mentioned, the primary focus of this thesis is to look at changing perceptions of culture and cultural conflicts manifesting themselves through identity and identity conflicts in films. So, while looking at the

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63   Ibid., Position 3298 – 3311, Kindle.

Hero's inner journey, it is extremely important to approach the evolution of the Hero's figure in an academic manner and within the context of the narrative – with a specific focus on the evolution of his/her understanding of culture and cultural conflicts, of his/her own identity and the resulting identity conflicts. To make this seemingly difficult exercise productive and in order to achieve tangible results, I decided to consider a select few but very comprehensive concepts that can be applied to the selected films. Considering the vast scholarship in the field of cultural studies, one of the biggest and basic questions that poses itself was which/whose concept of culture would be suitable to proceed with this line of inquiry. This question wasn't an easy one to answer since many suitable concepts and approaches could be applicable here. What was needed here was a concept that made the understanding of culture tangible – easy to visualize and interesting to follow its evolution. The concept of culture, as Johann Gottfried Herder understood it and the theory of *Transculturality* developed on these lines by Wolfgang Welsch seemed to be a perfect fit for the chosen approach of inquiry. Herder imagined a culture to be a homogenous, closed sphere – more like an autonomous island.

> The concept is characterized by three elements: by social homogenization, ethnic consolidation and intercultural delimitation. Firstly, every culture is supposed to mould the whole life of the people concerned and of its individuals, making every act and every object an unmistakable instance of precisely *this* culture. The concept is unificatory. Secondly, culture is always to be the "*culture of a folk*", representing, as Herder said, "the flower" of a folk's existence. The concept is folk-bound. Thirdly, a decided *delimitation* towards the outside ensues: Every culture is, as the culture of one folk, to be

distinguished and to remain separated from other folks' cultures. The concept is separatory.[64]

So, assuming that the cultures are like spheres, how would one explain the phenomenon of Multiculturality, Interculturality and Transculturality? To give a brief overview of what these concepts mean and entail, Welsch differentiates between these three concepts on the following lines:

Table 4. Cultural concepts

Interculturality	Multiculturality	Transculturality
The concept of interculturality reacts to the fact that a conception of cultures as spheres necessarily leads to intercultural conflicts. Cultures constituted as spheres or islands can, according with the logic of this conception, do nothing other than collide with one another. Their "circles of happiness" must, as Herder said, "clash" (Herder, 1967a: 46); cultures of this kind	The concept of multiculturality is surprisingly similar to the concept of interculturality. It takes up the problems which different cultures have living together *within one society*. But therewith the concept basically remains in the duct of the traditional understanding of culture; it proceeds from the existence of clearly distinguished, in themselves homogenous cultures - the only difference now being that these differences	The concept of transculturality aims for a multi-meshed and inclusive, not separatist and exclusive understanding of culture. It intends a culture and society whose pragmatic feats exist not in delimitation, but in the ability to link and undergo transition. In meeting with other lifeforms there are always not only divergences but opportunities to link up, and these can be developed and extended so

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64   Wolfgang Welsch, "Transculturality – the puzzling form of cultures today" in *Spaces of Culture: City, Nation, World*, ed. Mike Featherstone and Scott Lash, (London: Sage Publications, 1999), 194.

must ignore, defame or combat one another. The conception of interculturality seeks ways in which such cultures could nevertheless get on with, understand and recognize one another. [65]	exist within one and the same state community. The concept seeks opportunities for tolerance and understanding, and for avoidance or handling of conflict.[66]	that a common lifeform is fashioned which includes even reserves which hadn't earlier seemed capable of being linked in. Conceptions of culture are not just descriptive concepts, but operative concepts. Our understanding of culture is an *active factor* in our cultural life.[67]

To make these ideas tangible and usable in the context of the film analysis, I tried superimposing these three definitions with a model developed by Carmen Ulrich, who has worked extensively on the portrayal of India in German literature. Ulrich used this model for differentiating between varied understandings of culture in her book *Sinn und Sinnlichkeit des Reisens[68]*. In her book, she tries to differentiate between authors and hence also their perceptions of India based on their understanding of the term 'culture'.

Table 5. Understandings of culture

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65   Ibid., 196.
66   Ibid., 196.
67   Ibid., 197.
68   Carmen Ulrich, *Sinn und Sinnlichkeit des Reisens. Indien(be)schreibungen von Hubert Fichte, Günter Grass und Josef Winkler*, (München: Iudicium Verlag, 2004).

Closed understanding of culture: a dualistic concept of *Own* and *Other*	=>	Culture: an essential existential entity, winning back of 'original' roots, untranslatable cultures
Open understanding of culture: a dialectic relation between the *Own* and the *Other*	=>	Culture: a result of a joint development, negotiating 'national' identities, possibilities of cultural translation
Extensive understanding of culture: liquid, flowing identities	=>	Culture: Bursting of complexes of signs, polyphony

The result of superimposing Welschs' ideas on Ulrich's model and cross-referencing it is very interesting: one could compare the different cultural concepts and different understandings of culture in the following way:

Table 6. Cultural concepts and understandings of culture

Interculturality	=>	Closed understanding of culture
Multiculturality	=>	Open understanding of culture
Transculturality	=>	Extensive understanding of culture

Similar to Carmen Ulrich, I intend to look at and differentiate between the journeys the main protagonists in the selected films set out on, to trace the evolution of their identities and the changes in their understandings of culture, their changing perceptions of *Own* and *Other*. In other words, this model can be used to understand their journey from looking at their *own* society, their *own* culture, their *own* people in a very concrete, demarcated way to a point where the boundaries between *own* and *foreign* become fluid.

Though this model would facilitate the understanding of the various stages in the Hero's journey, a theoretical framework is necessary to understand the actual journey – to be more specific, the identity alterations, some old facets in the protagonists' personality falling off, some new facets getting added. According to my understanding, neither does this process of an identity creation end nor does it have a linear, logical structure and method in which it shows itself. The concept of *Rhizome*[69] as envisioned by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari fits the description. According to them,

> The rhizome is constantly changing, making new connections, breaking old ones, always in the process of becoming. What is rhizomatic is the process, not the static fixed state. […] Thus the rhizome, as a model for thinking about identity, is a process of making and breaking connections, each of which will change the nature of the rhizome. Rhizomatic thought is immanent and anti-hierarchical.[70]

This approach to look at an identity complex as an entity that grows organically – sometimes with the knowledge of the protagonists, but sometimes without his/her knowledge as well – allows me to look at the evolution of identity of the individual protagonists in the context of their sociocultural milieu, the situations they find themselves in, the external factors that play a significant influential role in shaping and altering their thought processes and reactions. The *Rhizome* isn't only a model that works well for looking at the development and evolution of identity but also in a broader context of evolution of the term 'culture'. Similar to the understanding of a rhizome, culture can also be understood as an entity which is constantly

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69   Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Rhizom*, (Berlin: Merve, 1977).
70   Keith Alan Sprouse, "Chaos and Rhizome: Introduction to a Caribbean Poetics" in *A History of Literature in the Caribbean: Volume 3: Cross cultural studies*, ed. A James Arnold (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1997), 83.

changing, making new connections, breaking old ones, always in the process of becoming.

While it is important to look into the evolving identity structures, the additions and the breakages and the constant changes in one's identity, it is also necessary to be aware of the (re)emergence of groups of people, who defy the concept of culture as a dynamic entity and insist on, in spite of their greater contact, connectivity with and exposure to diverse groups, upholding their rigid idea of their identity. While referring to the veritable discursive explosion around the concept of identity, Olivia Sheringham warns of this danger.

> This identity explosion reflected responses to challenges arising from accelerated processes of globalisation, heightened levels of international mobility, and a growing awareness of possibilities for forms of solidarity and resistance that transcend nationality or class-based allegiances. The identity epidemic has been, however, fraught with contradictions. On the one hand, there has been increasing acknowledgement that fixed identities are no longer (or never were) relevant and there is a need to acknowledge the hybrid, fluid and multi-directional nature of individual and collective identities. On the other hand, the greater contact and connectivity between diverse groups has led to a re-emergence of assertions of fixed identities and delineated markers of difference.[71]

The manifestations of the assertions of fixed identities have become increasingly interesting, especially in current times through the advent of new media. Groups insisting on upholding a particular variant of a fixed identity increasingly find resonance in the online space, confirming their beliefs and

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71   Olivia Sheringham, "Creolization, diaspora and carnival: living with diversity in the past and present" in *Diasporas reimagined. Spaces Practises and Belonging*, ed. Nando Sigona, Alan Gamlen, Giulia Liberatore and Hélène Neveu Kringelbach, (Oxford Diasporas Programme: Oxford, 2015), 88.

motivating them to continue to deny a respectful dialogue with the *Other*. For example, earlier, a person living in rural Germany, wary of Muslim immigrants, would have, in all probability, considered his rejection of them multiple times before asserting his thoughts in a public space – primarily because he wouldn't want to be singled out in an otherwise welcoming (to Muslim immigrants) village. Though not completely comfortable with this thought, he would still have left some channels of communication with the *Other* open. Today, all he needs to do is look for like-minded people in the online space who support his worldview and strengthen his belief of being right by letting him know that there are other people out there who share a similar worldview, helping and strengthening his rejection of the *Other*.

It is also important to note that while conceptualizing the research layout for this project, of the multiple ways that I could have structured my analysis around, I consciously chose to conduct the film analysis with a focus on dramaturgical as well as critical context analysis elements, the inspiration for this being my grounding in Literary studies. Considering the questions that I want to address, I believe that the decision to employ these elements will be particularly fruitful and help me discover diverse layers of each of the chosen films and understand the symbiotic relationship between society and cinema. Another reason for this was also the fact that film studies as a discipline, has its origins in literary studies. Many filmtheorists like Knut Hickethier, have a background in literary studies and their approach to reading the film as a text appealed to me the most.

The use of Joseph Campbell's and Christoph Vogler's Hero's journey as a blueprint to understand the various stages of evolution of the *Hero* on screen, Christoph Reinfandt's theory of *Textures* and the model he designed about how to approach a (filmic) text, in this case, the filmic text as well as the application of theories like Rhizome by Deleuze and Guattari will aid in deciphering the interwoven nature of these contexts in a film and are complimentary to understand this complex process of evolution. The heavy reliance on post-modernist approach, often considered as a political

offshoot of poststructuralism, has proven to be important and fruitful, especially considering the focus on dynamics of identity.

Having said that, it is important to not lose sight of the image – a visual tool that actually brings all these contexts to life. To strike a balance between focusing on the Film as a Text and understanding the Film at an image level, towards the end of every film analysis, I have presented a brief sequence analysis from the respective film. This analysis focuses on a key moment of transformation in the film to display the strong interconnectedness between text and image and to explore how a Film, through the medium of an image, can also be read as a text.

The analysis of the chosen films is particularly interesting for me because of my personal biographical details. As the renowned cultural theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak would put it, by 'accident of birth'[72], I have been placed in a societal context – an Indian woman born to Brahmin parents – that may not enable me to look at the narrative, and the problems in the film it sets out to address, in an objective manner. On the other hand, through the virtue of chance in my own personal biography, almost continuing in the tradition of the *Rhizome*, is the evolution of my own identity through my exposure to Western education and critical thought, Western society and their values and the possibility of gaining distance from my own 'reality' in India. This aspect of my identity structure allows me the luxury of distance and objectivity while looking at the current happenings in India. I would even go to the extent of saying that during the film analysis, yet again continuing in the tradition of the *Rhizome*, my Indian identity – especially the one which supposedly places me at a higher level in the societal scheme of things, shifts into the background. At the same time, because of my exposure to a Western education and critical thought which entails a critical and objective questioning, my 'western educated woman' identity moves into the forefront influencing my analysis and interrogation

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72   Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1988), 76.

of the narrative in question. This doesn't necessarily imply that the knowledge I already possess through the 'accident of birth' wouldn't influence or impact my understanding of the issue at hand. This knowledge, in fact, would help me to categorise or understand the finer aspects of the problem of hand. As far as my allotted caste and religious identity is concerned, the other aspect of my identity – that of being an open-minded citizen, of being a minority myself while living in a *different* society – would, in fact, keep this casteist perspective in check and not allow it to play *the* most important role while understanding the complicated nature of any given kind of conflict. Similarly, in an ideal situation, several 'identities' in any given identity complex work in a symbiotic relationship with each other and try to balance the person. The existence of a rhizomatic identity in my own case makes the film analysis particularly interesting and enriching for me.

Consolidating the series of theoretical approaches that I intend to use within the framework of this thesis, the blueprint for the film analysis can be laid down as:
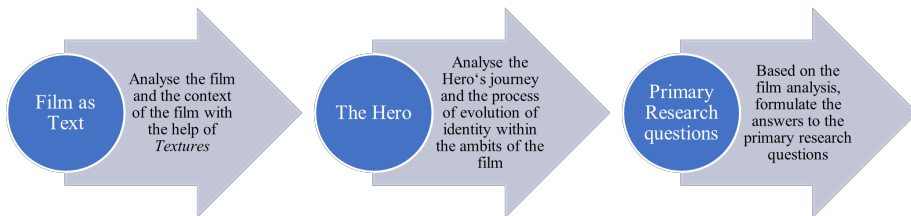
IMG. 6_ Film analysis

This course of inquiry will be followed for the analysis of the films in question and the conclusions of each individual analysis would be consolidated and looked at in a wider context towards the end in order to get a deeper understanding of the central questions of this research project.

3.2   Research categories and coordinates

As has been mentioned above, identity and identity conflicts at the level of the protagonist and the culture and cultural conflicts in the broader context of the narrative in the film form the crux of this investigation. Since this is a very broad field of research, I decided to look concretely at popular productions from Bollywood as well as hybrid productions and focus on films that portray identity conflicts at the cross section of one of the following phenomena – some of which are very specific to the Indian subcontinent.

In the framework of this thesis, I will look at five broad conflicts that define the character of the Indian society today and look at those conflicts at the cross section of identity conflicts personified by the protagonists who give a face and a context to these conflicts. Of course, the core focus will be on the selected films and their protagonists that represent these conflicts.

- Nationalism
- Religion
- Caste
- Gender
- Globalisation and Modernisation

To understand the very complex nature of these individual conflicts, one needs to first understand the background of each of these conflicts and the important historical junctions that are relevant to each individual topic. This step is unavoidable since all these conflicts that I intend to look at are embedded in the evolution and development of the modern Indian State,

the politics of identity, caste, religion, gender and cultural supremacy. One also needs to understand that in India, it is an impossible task to look at each of these societal conflicts in a singular, isolated way since all of them are intrinsically connected. There is no one unified homogenous concept of Indian culture – the idea of an Indian culture is a sum of its parts. It is an addition of numerous cultural, religious practises – themselves very heterogenous in nature – that contributes to a corpus that is vast, very diverse and yet somehow, fitting well into the cacophony that is India. Heterogeneity is inherent to any idea of India, narratives based in an Indian context and it thus works well with the idea of textures which emulates the idea of diverse, complex thematic strands contributing to the uniqueness of a narrative.

The charm of an Indian reality, in spite of its complexity, is its self-contradictory nature. When one extreme holds true, the other extreme is equally valid and true. As is the case with an ambivalent term like *Reality*, there are numerous perceptions of one and the same thing. In an especially diverse and large context like India, it is quite a challenge to shape *an Indian Reality*, leave aside *The Indian Reality*. V. S. Naipaul, the renowned Nobel-winning author, looked at the Indian reality as a lost home through the eyes of his ancestors. India to him was familiar, and yet so unfamiliar. His description of what he felt when approaching the topic of Indian reality, which coincidentally, is also a perfect description to describe the nature of the issues that define the multiple Indian realities. It offers a visual for a theoretical framework that could otherwise be too complex to understand. Naipaul, who was of Indian origins, but hadn't been to India till he turned 30, had never been confronted with the conflict of multiple Indian realities, as seen and experienced by different people in different places. He took on the challenge of deciphering India for himself and to begin to understand the nature of the conflicts that defined these Indian realities – including his own. In his first book from the Indian trilogy *An Area of Darkness*, he says:

An oblong of stiff new cloth lay before me, and I had the knowledge that if only out of this I could cut a smaller oblong of specific measurements, a specific section of this cloth, then the cloth would begin to unravel of itself, and the unravelling would spread from the cloth to the table to the house to all matter, until the whole trick was undone. Those were the words that were with me as I flattened the cloth and studied it for the clues which I knew existed, which I desired above everything else to find, but which I knew I never would.[73]

In this text snippet, one can easily see a multitude of important aspects being addressed – firstly, his comparison of the Indian context with a stiff oblong cloth catches the reader's imagination. Assuming that India were to be this oblong stiff cloth that one needs to understand and unravel, one would have to start by looking at a smaller specific section of this cloth. That is when the individual strands of this piece of cloth would start to unravel themselves – the individual strands being the various topics, conflicts, issues, identities that define this piece of fabric which is India and give it a unique texture which cannot be replicated on another canvas. Another issue that he refers to is the nature and the complexity of the issues that constitute this piece of cloth i.e. the context that defines India. While considering the reasons and factors that lead to turbulence and complexity in this cloth, another observation of his from a later book seems apt.

The turbulence in India this time hasn't come from foreign invasion or conquest; it has been generated from within. India cannot respond in her old way, by a further retreat into archaism. Her borrowed institutions have worked like borrowed institutions; but archaic India can provide no substitutes for press, parliament, and courts. The crisis of India is not only political or economic. The

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73   V. S. Naipaul, *An Area of Darkness: His Discovery of India*, (New York: Vintage books, 2002), Position 4040, Kindle.

larger crisis is of a wounded old civilization that has at last become aware of its inadequacies and is without the intellectual means to move ahead.[74]

Though this observation of Naipaul refers to an India in the 20th century, most of his observations continue to hold true for India even today – India seems to be suspended in a perpetual state of conflict with elements from within its own social setup. This prolonged state of being in conflict isn't necessarily a bad thing since these conflicts are challenging the long existent hierarchic societal order, the strongly patriarchal structure of the Indian society, the power equation between genders, castes and religions. The manifestation of these conflicts is more visible now: like women claiming public spaces while defying an orthodox, rigid patriarchal societal order, lower castes challenging the social hierarchy and becoming aware, aspirational and vocal about their position in the society, consistent protests against a repressive, populist government. These conflicts are increasingly becoming evident and noticeable in various walks of life. Popular mass media like literature, art, theatre and cinema, which often tackle issues of the day, have provided medium and platform for artists to portray their understanding of the problem and their perspective on it.

Since the unabated rise of an exclusivist Hindu nationalism over the past few years in India is one of the key topics finding its way into various narrations of nationhood, caste and religion in the Indian subcontinent, it is necessary to look at, however briefly at this stage, the evolution of the two most dominant religions in India: Hinduism and Islam, at the history of the Partition of India in 1947 and also at the way secularism, as a defining principle, is enshrined in the Indian constitution, in order to understand the underlying nature of this conflict.

Hindu is a derivative of the term *Sindhu*, a name of the river Indus and was originally a term coined to describe people living beyond the Indus.

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74 V. S. Naipaul, *India: A Wounded Civilization*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), Position 176, Kindle.

This nomenclature seemed to be without a religious connotation, at least at the estimated time of its origins[75]. Some of the earliest records of the term *Hindu* being used in a religious context were made around the 11th century by Persian travellers and later in the records of the Delhi sultanate. The term was used to describe the Non-Muslim population, hence still continuing to be ambiguous as even at that point of time, Indian society was a diverse one because of the presence of Buddhism, Jainism, Zoroastrianism and even Christianity. So, the ambiguity – if *Hindu* is a term to describe a religious community or simply a community living in a particular region – still prevailed. Even in the contexts where *Hindu* is used in the context of a religious community, the usage was still vague since it is a challenge to define and describe Hinduism in an absolute, singular way. Hinduism was, and in my personal opinion even today is, more a way of life than a religion, in the classical sense of the term. The evolution of Hinduism from being a way of life to being reinvented as a religious denomination in the European sense, in other words, the move from *Dharma*[76] to religion, happened with the arrival of the British colonisers. To be a Hindu, one doesn't need to fulfil a certain criterion – one can be a Hindu for their entire lives without ever having set foot inside a temple. Rituals maybe a part of it but aren't an absolute obligation that needs to be met. In his book *Why I am a Hindu*[77], Shashi Tharoor attempts to differentiate between Hinduism and some other religions around the world:

> 'Hinduism' is thus the name that foreigners first applied to what they saw as the indigenous religion of India. It embraces an eclectic range of doctrines and practices, from pantheism to agnosticism and from faith in reincarnation to belief in the caste system. But

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75 Gavin Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

76 Lesslie Newbigin, "Foreword" in *Dharma, India and the World Order*, Chaturvedi Badrinath, (Bonn/Edinburgh: Pahl-Rugenstein and Saint Andrew Press, 1993), xi.

77 Shashi Tharoor, *Why I am a Hindu*, (New Delhi: Aleph Book Company, 2018), Kindle.

none of these constitutes an obligatory credo for a Hindu: there are none. We have no compulsory dogmas. This is, of course, rather unusual. A Catholic is a Catholic because he believes Jesus was the Son of God who sacrificed himself for Man; a Catholic believes in the Immaculate Conception and the Virgin Birth, offers confession, genuflects in church and is guided by the Pope and a celibate priesthood. A Muslim must believe that there is no God but Allah and that Muhammad is His Prophet. A Jew cherishes his Torah or Pentateuch and his Talmud; a Parsi worships at a Fire Temple; a Sikh honours the teachings of the Guru Granth Sahib above all else. There is no Hindu equivalent to any of these beliefs. There are simply no binding requirements to being a Hindu. Not even a belief in God.[78]

People practising this fairly ambivalent belief system came to be known as Hindus and their way of life, *Hinduism*. Though *Hinduism* continues to be largely influenced by the hierarchical caste system, in terms of religion, it leaves an individual ample space to interpret and practise religion the way he/she deems to be fit. In reality, however, the socio-cultural norms continue to dictate the day-to-day lives of communities and societies falling within the folds of Hinduism. It needs to be noted that *Hindutva,* which is often used as an interchangeable term with *Hinduism*, on the other hand, is an exclusive, fairly monolithic, political ideology that took roots in the early 20th century during the Indian independence movement. The *Hindutva* philosophy has its bearing on the current political situation in India and has played an important role in defining the idea of nationalism in the Indian society -especially in the past few decades. This aspect will be addressed in another chapter.

Coming back to the evolution of religions, Christianity came to India as early as the 4th Century AD – way before the Portuguese and British

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78   Ibid., Position 153.

sailors. It is widely believed that Thomas the Apostle arrived in the state of Kerala and spread the message of Christianity in that region: predominantly in today's states of Tamil Nadu and Kerala. Islam, on the other hand came to India with the Arab sailors landing on the western coast of India. Both these religions, at a later point of time in history, were practised and popularised by the invaders and rulers of India: the Mughal and the Persian invaders from Central Asia and the Portuguese, British, French sailors. Though both these religions came to India with merchants and invaders, they eventually became an important part of the Indian society. Forceful conversions were carried out in some parts – either by the rulers or missionaries. To be fair to both these religions, one cannot overlook the fact that in principle at least, they preached a classless and equal society. This characteristic appealed to a lot of people, who when categorised according to the prevalent caste system, would either belong to the lowest castes or were outcasts. These religions offered them a possibility to escape the evils of the caste system, leading to voluntary conversions in many cases.

For the purpose of this thesis though, I would like to focus mainly on the animosity between the Hindus and the Muslims in modern India i.e. India just around the time of the partition in 1947, continuing up until now. This timeframe is the most relevant while looking at the framework of this investigation for many reasons: the differentiation between *Us* and *Them* around the time of the partition of India not only became very concrete, it also brought along a lot of contempt and hatred focussed towards the Muslim minority. The events leading up to the Partition and the Partition itself set the tone of not only the diplomatic relations of the two new nations created: India and Pakistan, but most importantly, also the relations between the Muslims and Hindus in the entire subcontinent.

In post-partition India, there still continues to be a big Muslim community which had not shifted to Pakistan and accounts for about 9.8% of

the total Indian population[79]. Though in sheer numbers this is a big figure, they became a minority community in the new Indian state and keeping in line with this, were accorded the status of a minority community post-Partition. The Congress leadership under Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of independent India and the drafting committee of the Constituent Assembly of India, who were responsible for drafting the Indian constitution, maintained that India would be different than Pakistan and would uphold its secular nature. The term 'secular' was, however, added in the Preamble to the Indian constitution in 1976 with the 42nd Amendment after years of deliberations. In my opinion, the secular nature of the Indian state was necessary, particularly to Nehru, at the time of the Partition and while drafting the Constitution of India, to safeguard the rights and lives of the Muslims and other religious minorities, who had chosen to stay on in India. The nature of secularism that was to be practised in the new Indian state was, however, long debated.

Nehru and Ambedkar were strongly committed to the ideal of secularism. "It is an ideal to be aimed at and every one of us whether we are Hindus or Muslims, Sikhs or Christians, whatever we are, none of us can say in his heart of hearts that he has no prejudice and no taint of communalism in his mind or heart," said Nehru. Yet when it came to including 'secular', both were wary of its usage.

Being aware of the development of the Constituent Assembly debates and of the way in which the Constitution was being shaped, they knew fully well that secularism, in the truest meaning of the term, as it was meant to be understood at its place of origin, could not be applied in the Indian context. They understood that "since 'Enlightenment Secularism', with its core principle of separation, founded on the Protestant conception of religion as essentially a

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79   "India's religion by numbers" in The Hindu, accessed on November 14, 2018 under https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/religious-communities-census-2011-what-the-numbers-say/article7582284.ece.

private concern with which states had no legitimate business, was never going to work in a country where rulers and religious publics had been interacting from time immemorial, it was better not to use the term at all, than to use it fraudulently," wrote Ian Copland. In order to follow secularism in its truest form, the State would be disallowed from making any kind of religious interventions, which included the reservation system, protection of the Muslim personal law and the directive principle to protect cows, all of which the Constitution went ahead with. [80]

As one can see, the Indian variant of secularism is one of its kind. It is similar to the European concept of secularism on two counts: Freedom of Religion and Equality in the eyes of the law irrespective of the religious affiliation of the individual. The one count, the most decisive one, on which it is of different nature is the point of strict separation of the Church and State, as understood in Western democracies. In the Indian context, secularism means that the State has the constitutional responsibility to treat all religions equally. Since at the time of the inception of the Indian constitution, the lawmakers had their reservations about this one point and were reluctant to distance themselves from the 'Enlightenment Secularism' and plead for an Indian variant of it, they left it unto the people of India to interpret the secular nature of the constitution without actually using the word and practise it in their daily lives.

For the larger part of the 1950s, 60s the coexistence of the Hindu majority with its religious minority counterparts was largely peaceful and harmonious, even though it would be too tall a claim to make, that all was well, that all communities were being treated equally and coexisted peacefully. The 1970s was the beginning of a very tumultuous time in the history of

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80   "Secularism – why Nehru dropped and Indira inserted the S-Word in the Constitution" in The Indian Express, accessed on November 14, 2018 under https ://indianexpress.com/article/research/anant-kumar-hegde-secularism-constitution-india-bjp-jawaharlal-nehru-indira-gandhi-5001085/.

modern India – starting with the Emergency in 1975[81]. The 1980s were characterised by secessionist movement in the North-Western state of Punjab – yet again based on the concept of a religious nation *Khalistan*[82] for the Sikhs, followed by the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1984. For the majority of time after Independence, with brief interludes, the Congress party led by Jawaharlal Nehru and later by Indira Gandhi were at the helm of power. Her son, Rajiv Gandhi took over the party leadership following her assassination in 1984. He inherited a largely unstable country – with secessionist movements raising their heads in Punjab, Kashmir and the north-eastern states in India. Additionally, his term in office was burdened by the Bhopal disaster[83] and a particularly nasty example of executive interference in the rulings passed by the judiciary. In the year 1985, the Supreme Court of India, in a historic and progressive judgement, ruled in the favour of a Muslim divorcee Shah Bano and maintained that her husband should pay her alimony. This progressive ruling was unacceptable to the conservative sections of the Muslim society and they appealed to Rajiv Gandhi to intervene. Rajiv Gandhi's government intervened and passed a new bill in the Parliament in 1986, thus nullifying the Supreme Court verdict. This interference was widely perceived as an appeasement of the Muslim electorate, even to the extent that the brand of secularism that the Congress practised came to be referred to as *Pseudo-Secularism*[84] by

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81   Indira Gandhi declared Emergency in India on June 25, 1975 and it went on till March 23, 1977.

82   The *Khalistan* movement is a Sikh separatist movement which dedicates itself to the creation of a Homeland for the Sikhs (Land of the *Khalsa*).

83   The Bhopal disaster or Bhopal gas tragedy was a chemical accident on the night of 2–3 December 1984 at the Union Carbide India Limited (UCIL) pesticide plant in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, India. Considered the world's worst industrial disaster, over 500,000 people in the small towns around the plant were exposed to the highly toxic gas methyl isocyanate (MIC). Estimates vary on the death toll, with the official number of immediate deaths being 2,259 and 574,366 people injured.

84   Chetan Bhatt, "Democracy and Hindu Nationalism" in *Religion, Democracy and Democratization,* ed. John Anderson, (Oxon/ New York: Routledge, 2006), 134.

the Hindu Nationalists and became largely popular. In their understanding, it meant a favourable treatment of the Muslim community.

Simultaneously, another problem was brewing in the North Indian city of Ayodhya, which according to the Hindu mythology, is considered to be the birthplace of the revered God, *Ram*. The Babri Mosque in Ayodhya was at the centre of a dispute between the Hindus and the Muslims. The dispute over the site stems from the contention that there used to be a temple on this site which was destroyed by the invading Mughal troops. After years of skirmishes over who can lay a claim on the disputed site, in December 1949 the Government of India declared the mosque as a disputed site and locked the gates to the courtyard. In 1984, while secessionist movements were rearing their heads across India, some even based on religious grounds (Kashmir, Punjab), the *Vishwa Hindu Parishad* (VHP)[85] started a campaign to garner support for achieving access for Hindus to the contested site in Ayodhya and some other places across India, which according to them, bore a historical significance in Hinduism. They planned chariot processions across the lengths of the country as a part of this campaign. The Rajiv Gandhi government, which was in power at that time, allowed the gates of this disputed site to be opened and just before the elections in 1989, allowed leaders of the Hindu community to perform a *Shilanyas* ceremony (foundation stone laying) here. This was seen largely as an effort on the Gandhi Government's part to appease the highly disenchanted Hindu voters.

In this extremely uncertain climate, the next round of national elections was conducted in the year 1989. A series of regional parties joined hands with the BJP in order to gain votes based on the Anti-Congress sentiment in the country and eventually came to power under the leadership of Vishwanath Pratap Singh. Singh was a liberal politician and after assum-

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85   VHP stands for *Vishwa Hindu Parishad* and is an organisation close to the RSS which aims at bringing together the Indian, particularly Hindu diaspora across the world. It was established in 1964.

ing power, he intended to bring about social-reforms in the country – especially ones concerning the marginalised lower castes. He decided to implement the suggestions of the Mandal commission[86] which was appointed by the Government of India in 1979 with a mandate to 'identify the socially backward classes in India' and suggest measures to address the situation of these 'backward castes'. The findings of this report suggested introducing a 27% reservation for members of these castes in the public sector. When Singh expressed his intent to introduce this measure, it was met with widespread violence and protests all across the country – especially by the members of the higher castes who considered this to be sheer injustice.

The BJP, the political party which represented the political ambitions and interests of the Hindu Nationalist Organisation *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS) captured this emotion of dissatisfaction with the Congress and the incumbent government – especially amongst the higher castes and announced a *Ram Rath Yatra* (a chariot journey for *Ram,* a mythological figure from the epic *Ramayana*) from the western Indian town of Somnath to the North Indian town of Ayodhya. Both these towns have historical and political significance for the BJP and the RSS because of the massive destruction undertaken in both these cities by invading Moghul Kings and thus fit especially well in the anti-Muslim, populist, nationalist and exclusive narrative of the BJP. They intended to right the wrong: namely rebuild the *Ram* Temple at the disputed site in Ayodhya, where now stood a mosque since centuries. Through the intervention of the Central Government, this process was temporarily halted, though it led to the fall of the Government since they were ruling in cooperation with the BJP. The BJP and RSS, however, continued their struggle to vilify the Muslim community, to portray

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86   The Mandal Commission was instituted by the Government of India under Prime Minister Morarji Desai in 1979 to identify the socially or educationally backward classes of India – known as OBC in the official nomenclature. The commission used eleven parameters to identify these castes and suggested a reservation of 27% for castes belonging to this class in government and public-sector undertakings, thus increasing the total reservation for Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST) and OBC (Other Backward Classes) to 49%. This reservation system continues today.

them in negative light and most importantly, to rebuild the *Ram* Temple in Ayodhya. Though the *Yatra* started off as scheduled, it led to a civic unrest in different parts of the country, finally leading to the arrest of the BJP leader Lal Krishna Advani. The BJP, the VHP and the RSS continued their struggle and on December 6, 1992, in the presence of senior leadership of the BJP and the RSS, thousands of *Karsevaks*[87] performed a ritual at the contented site, which eventually led to incitement of the present mob and the destruction of the Babri Mosque on the same day.

The irresponsible behaviour of the successive governments in the time post-Independence (in this case predominantly the Congress-led governments) and the lack of political stability, increasing dissatisfaction about *pseudo-secularism*, especially amongst the conservative voters, the instatement of the Mandal Commission for social reforms and the success of the *Ram Rath Yatra*, eventually followed by the destruction of the Babri Mosque, paved the way for a very conducive atmosphere for the growth and strengthening of Hindu Nationalism and established the BJP as a serious political party. This chain of events also widened the gap between the upper castes and the lower castes and created a permanent rift between the Hindu and Muslim communities in India, which continues to shape the public discourse on both these issues even today.

The year 1990 also marked a major change in the history of modern India. Because of dwindling foreign reserves and the bad state of the Indian economy, the Central Government decided to liberalise the Indian economy and opened itself to Foreign investment. This change in policy not only earmarked a new era in the Indian economy, but it also set in motion wheels of cultural change in the Indian society. An exposure to Western culture and philosophy, a brush with Western ideals like gender equality, an attempt to achieve a classless and a casteless society, liberal value systems and a more critical, rational approach towards tradition are

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87   A *Karsevak* is someone who offers his services for a religious cause for free. It originates from Sanskrit *kar* meaning hand, *seva* meaning service.

some of the issues that this cultural change entailed and the Indian society, in my personal opinion, continues to struggle with this.

Looking back at how the Indian Nation state has evolved over the past decades, it seems that the primary issues that the lawmakers had consciously tried to address, back in the 1940s while drafting the Indian Constitution, continue to be problematic. At the time of drafting the constitution, despite a strong opposition from a conservative society and politicians to issues like abolishment of the caste system, the secular nature of the Indian state, gender equality etc., the lawmakers ensured that they were legally enshrined and protected in the Constitution. Looking at the current state of things, it sometimes appears to me that whatever small progressive steps the society had managed to take as a collective entity to address these problems, seem to be getting undone at a rapid pace in an increasingly polarised society. The conservative undercurrents in the Indian society that had been dormant for a while, especially since the onset of liberalisation and globalisation, increasing urbanisation and rapid economic growth, seem to be getting stronger in an increasingly populistic political atmosphere. To believe that the Indian society had been at its modern best till about 4 to 5 years ago would be a long shot, but there was some space within the society for dissent, for the oppressed to condemn and question the government of the day. With the landslide victory of the BJP in 2014, which was further consolidated in 2019, this seems to have changed. The space for dissent in the civil society is shrinking, voices are being silenced and all this is getting magnified and more visible because of social media. There is an increased awareness about these issues amongst the population. I wouldn't go to the extent of saying that all of this deterioration is the doing of the BJP and the incumbent government; what I can certainly say is that by failing to take action against the perpetrators and condemnation from the highest offices in the country, by failing to bring them to the courts, by failing to curb the hooligans in the political spectrum who get away with what they do basing it on 'upholding of Hindu Heritage' and 'upholding of Indian tradition', by passing discriminatory and controversial

laws like the *Citizenship Amendment Act 2019*[88] – the government has set dangerous precedents. The relevance of these developments is not to be undermined, some of which will become clearer over the course of the film analyses in the following chapters.

Though this brief outlining of history of India post-Independence seems purely political, the complexities of politics and its implications on issues like religion are evident; but issues like gender, caste and societal conflicts based on modernisation of a society, etc. are equally and inherently connected to the political developments. These complex topics were continuously evolving on the side lines of political events and went on to influence the discourses on these topics in modern India as we know it today. Caste, for instance, became an important tool to mobilise voters for political parties, especially since the findings of the Mandal commission. The rejection of the measures suggested by the Mandal commission by a large section of the society, the protests that followed the announcement about implementing the findings of the commission, a series of recent

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88   The *Citizenship (Amendment) Act 2019* is an amendment of the *Citizenship Act of 1955* and was passed by the Indian Parliament on December 11, 2019. The official press release states "Bill seeks to grant Indian Citizenship to persons belonging to Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi and Christian communities on ground of religious persecution in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh" who entered India before December 31, 2014. While defending the Amendment in the Parliament, the Government stated that it has left out Muslims because the Muslims in the Indian subcontinent do not require protection on the grounds of religious persecution since Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh are all Islamic countries. The Amendment becomes controversial in the light of an earlier Amendment of the original *Citizenship Act of 1955* that was aimed at checking illegal migration in the North-Eastern Indian state of Assam which borders with Bangladesh. This amendment created a National Register of Citizens (NRC) for Assam. Those who are unable to provide documentation to support their claim on citizenship (which can often be a case in India, particularly among the poor and the vulnerable communities) will be sent to a detention centre. According to critics of the *Citizenship (Amendment) Act 2019*, if the government now decides to implement the NRC across India – and not just in Assam – then CAA will ensure that everyone BUT Muslims who are designated as non-Indians under the provisions of the NRC will be eligible for Indian citizenship. This becomes a problem since the Act clearly leaves out Muslim individuals who can also be victims of persecution.

events pointing towards the return (or reappearance) of the cruelty practised against members of the lower castes etc. and most importantly, the attempts by political parties to politicise these events for the sake of power rather than find solutions to it, point towards the fact how deeply interconnected caste and politics are. Similarly, gender equality is as politically sensitive a topic in India as caste and religion – especially considering the strongly patriarchal societal setup in most parts of India (Kerala, some tribes in Northeastern India are exceptions). Issues surrounding equality for women in various spheres of life continue to be highly problematic even in a moderately modernised Indian society. Issues like self-determination when it comes to the choice of life partner, the concept of consent during a sexual intercourse or physical and sexual abuse of women primarily because of their gender, clubbed with their societal standing based on their caste/religious affiliation are some of the major aspects related to this issue and they cannot possibly be interrogated in a secluded manner. It is, after all, all about the politics of the body and the concept of ownership of a female body, intertwined with ideas about supremacy (cultural, caste, religious) that dictate the evolution of this discourse.

With this brief introduction to the socio-cultural events in the history of post-Independence India (especially around the turn of the century), it is also quite evident, that no one conflict, especially in India, can be looked at in an isolated way. There is an interconnectedness between different identities used as tools for discrimination – caste and gender, religion and gender, religion and nationalism, caste and modernisation, a mix of religion, nationalism and modernisation (based on who is considered to be a citizen of a country and is accordingly granted access to basic facilities like education). Conservative, exclusive religious biases influence the gender discourse, resist the opening up of a society and the modernisation process, equality amongst the genders; religious conservatism and exclusivity, notions of religious superiority push and further the process of religious fanaticism and a religious nationalism of sorts; loyalty to 'tradition' and trying

to stay true to one's 'roots', upholding 'cultural purity' in an otherwise progressive society and, thus, resisting the modernisation of the self. The interconnectedness of these conflicts and the mutual influence they have over each other is too large to be overlooked.

But to make things simpler and tangible, I have divided the conflicts that I am looking at into two categories. In my view, identity conflicts are visible at two levels – the first level is the societal level and the other is a personal level. A conflict that stems from a difference in religion is bound to be experienced more at an individual level, while the identity conflicts that stem from a different and varied understanding of (religious) nationalism and patriotism, of who belongs and who doesn't is more noticeable at a societal level – not only in India but also in developed countries like the United States, Germany, United Kingdom, etc. Similarly, identity conflicts experienced by individuals in a society outside of India in a globalised world are more individual and unique in nature, identity conflicts resulting from a resistance to the modernisation of a society are evident at a societal level. An identity conflict based on grounds of gender might be the at the forefront in a particular film, but intersectional patterns of discrimination like the caste, religion of the protagonist etc. fuel into the already problematic gender-based discrimination discourse. They play important roles in pre-defining the context in which an individual is situated. All the conflicts that I have identified and intend to look at within the framework of this thesis cannot be looked at in an isolated way. The purpose of segregation is to understand their nature. One must bear in mind the interconnectedness of each of these conflicts, their origins, their evolution and the contexts in which they exist. The rhizomatic nature of each of these conflicts also need to be considered. The nature and the intensity of any conflict is constantly changing in tandem with the prevalent socio-political settings. The inherent core problem may be the same, but the nuances that influence the discourse change with time. One may believe that one can easily point to the origins of a conflict, but, in my opinion, that is an impossible task. One can identify some events that may have contributed to intensifying the

conflict, but the nature of each of these conflicts is such that it can never be possible to identify concrete reasons – simply because these conflicts stem from a propagation of a *perceived* idea of difference. Be it caste, religion, various nationalisms or genders – that they exist cannot be denied. But when the focus solely lies on the differences, completely overlooking any possible commonalities, that is the fertile ground where conflict originates.

3.2.1   Nationalism

Nationalism, patriotism, colonialism, nation-state are very problematic and ambivalent terms – especially when one looks at them in the context of a very diverse country like India. India, the way we know it today, is a product of European colonialism. Without the European colonisers, it would have been merely a large number of smaller principalities and kingdoms, or even independent states. Besides the geographical borders of the Himalayas in the North and the seas on the east, west and the south, some similarities in the cultural practises, there were very few commonalities amongst the people in the subcontinent that could have enabled the creation and existence of a united India. The creation of a pan-Indian space was something that arose out of efforts to optimise and facilitate administrative efficiency under the British Rule. What constituted this pan-Indian space? It was a mixture of the so-called princely states[89] and provinces[90] which were under

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89   A princely state was a feudatory, vassal state with a nominal ruler in subsidiary alliance with the British. They were not under the direct rule of the British crown. At the time of independence, there were 584 princely states in India and covered roughly over 40% of the Indian subcontinent. At the time of independence, the heads of these princely states had three options: stay independent or join the newly created nation of India or Pakistan. 565 princely states signed the instrument of accession to the Indian union.

90   At the time of independence, there were 12 provinces and presidencies that fell under the direct rule of the British crown. As a result of the impending partition, these provinces and presidencies had to be reorganised.

partial or total rule of the British and stretched over what is today India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

The colonial history, which facilitated and required the creation of an *Other*, giving the *Other* a face – which in that case was the British/Portuguese/French – and a general lack of commonality on other fronts, helped create an idea of India, an abstract but a strong political identity with a common oppressor. While ideas of nationalism and patriotism were extremely problematic, especially in the context of the world wars (and hence the European discourse on these ideas was different), India and a lot of other colonies, which went on to attain independence from the colonisers after the end of the second world war, had a very different understanding of these concepts.

> In India, philosophically, there emerged two schools under the impact of colonial encounter: one section of the elite became an intrinsic part of Western liberalism, which was best reflected in the speech of Keshab Chandra Sen, when he declared in 1870 in London that your philosophy is ours, 'we are one in thought', 'we are also intellectually united'. The other section longed for a change in tune keeping in mind the civilisational ethos of India termed as "democratic nationalism" in contradiction to her becoming the "intellectual province of Europe", as Aurobindo had commented in *Bande Mataram* in 1908. It espoused regeneration from within the womb of Indian history in contradiction to the change brought about by the impact of ideological importation under the tutelage of imperialism. Both sections, however, were the part of new elite and their philosophy formed the two different streams of liberalism that facilitated the development of nationalism. While the ideology of the former had a low anti-British content owing to the historical conditions of their development, the latter was stridently anti-British. The former was against the British rule, the latter was

against the very "continuance of British control whether that control was used well or ill, justly or unjustly".[91]

Looking at the history of the Indian independence struggle, it is quite evident that the latter form of nationalism, i.e. democratic nationalism, became the preferred form. Democratic nationalism, which was against the idea of British control in any form, could be further divided. To understand the various notions of nationalism, especially in the Indian context, it was necessary to look at a political discourse that is balanced and addresses the issue of the evolution of nationalism in India, combining it with the colonial past and the Partition of India. According to Vikas Pathak there were four kinds of nationalism discourses that were prevalent in the time leading up to independence of India and some elements of it continued to dominate the political and public discourse in India even after Independence, well up to the mid-1970s[92]. These dominant discourses of nationalism existing in the Indian subcontinent could be classified as: secular nationalism, composite cultural nationalism, religious nationalism and the depressed classes nationalism.

The first idea of nationalism that existed was that of a citizen-based, secular nationalism. This model, which was largely influenced by the ideals of the French revolution and the European Enlightenment, considered the state and an individual citizen as the two main stakeholders. Religion, caste and class were to be a private affair, not influencing the relationship between these two stakeholders. This form of nationalism, which promoted the idea of secularism as seen in the European context (*Enlightenment secularism*), was a bit Utopic in the Indian context, considering the amount of influence caste and religion had on the day-to-day lives of its citizens.

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91 Himanshu Roy, "Western Secularism and Colonial legacy in India" in *The Economic and Political Weekly of India*, (New Delhi, 2006), 160.
92 Vikas Pathak, *Contesting Nationalisms: Hinduism, Secularism and Untouchability in colonial Punjab 1880-1930*, (Delhi: Primus Books, 2018).

There was a small number of influential people, amongst the wealthy, Western-educated elites who believed in this form of nationalism.

The second form of nationalism that existed was that of a composite cultural nationalism. At the centre of this idea was the fact that the pan-Indian space, which was now being referred to as British India, is a diverse country, constituted of different communities. All these communities have been in existence for centuries, with their own sets of traditions, beliefs, value systems and culture. While their diverse nature, differences are legitimate, the cultural production through their co-existence that was (and continues to be) a reality of India, has largely been composite and syncretic in nature. Rather than looking at these communities based on their differences and focusing on the potential of conflict with one another, they should be looked at as communities with similarities and having the potential of co-existing in harmony with one another. Once the community relations are harmonised, we create an Indian nation which is a sum total of all these communities. This form of nationalism understood secularism in a way which eventually came to be practised in India: by legitimising the relationship between the State and each community and granting the State the responsibility of protecting and safeguarding the rights of the minority communities. This was the most dominant nationalism discourse popular in India at the time of independence and continued to be popular well until the mid-1970s.

The third kind of nationalism that was equally popular was religious nationalism. It was the idea of a creation of a state based on religion. This idea couldn't possibly be applied to the pan-Indian region before independence since the majority-minority equations shifted from province to province, which continues to be a reality in India even today. This idea though, of a nation-state based on religion, was also very popular among the masses and found support among all the religious communities. The idea of Muslim nationalism, primarily supported and politicised by the All India Muslim League, started gaining momentum in the aftermath of the provincial elections held in 1937, because contrary to the claims of the Muslim

League of being representative of the Muslim population, they failed to gain any significant vote share. The call gained a lot of momentum post the provincial elections in 1937 and eventually led to the creation of Pakistan in 1947. This new state which claimed to be the home of the Indian Muslims, was carved out of East Bengal and West Punjab where Muslims were a majority. So, when we look at the current Indian context of religious nationalism, we are necessarily considering Hindu nationalism or *Hindutva*, not to be confused with Hinduism as a religion. Another central aspect of religious nationalism is that Hindu Nationalists consider the Muslims as invaders, outsiders who came to India from Central Asia. This aspect specifically manifests itself when it comes to defining who an Indian is. I will return to this issue in the next section where we look at identity conflicts in the context of religion.

The fourth kind of nationalism is a Depressed Classes/ Dalit Nationalism, the roots of which lie in the British rule. The British rulers, themselves largely free of any bias emerging from the caste of the colonised subject, put the lower castes at the same pedestal as their other colonised subjects thus facilitating the creation of an equal society in their (British) eyes in a very bizarre manner. The Dalits were treated as invisible, impure people by the native upper classes and any kind of interaction between these two classes was not desirable, whereas there existed only one kind of relationship between the British and the Indians, regardless of their caste – that of the coloniser and the colonised. With the advent of scholarship on India, especially by Indologists like Max Mueller and Sir William Jones, the theory of linguistic similarities between Sanskrit and European languages like German started gaining ground. This also led to a theory that speakers of the Indo-European languages, the Aryans migrating eastwards and westwards from the Caucasus, invaded India around the 15th century BC and conquered the local populations. Along with them came their language Sanskrit. It further went on to say that people who spoke the pre-Sanskrit languages, the Dravidian languages like Tamil were, in fact, the original inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent. With the advent of the

Aryans, they came to be treated as the conquered people and classified as Dalits. This theory was particularly supported by the colonial powers to diffuse the central logic of religious and composite cultural nationalism which made the British/ French/ Portuguese the invaders, the outsiders. Because by the virtue of this theory, it would put a sizeable number of the Hindu population, especially the upper castes which held a monopoly over Sanskrit, in the category of the invaders and granting them the same status as that of the European invaders. Some scholars like Jyotiba Phule, Chattrapati Shahu Maharaj, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, E. V. Ramasamy aka Periyar coming from the lower castes, who had the chance of education, latched on to this idea. A Non-Brahmin movement started gaining ground around 1920, primarily in the form of the regional *Adi* (original) movements. These movements focussed on asserting the rights of the native inhabitants (Tribals, lower castes etc.) as the original inhabitants of the country and hence rejecting the idea of a caste and class-based society, which put them at the lowest rung of the ladder. They appealed to the British census authorities saying they didn't want to be considered as Hindus and this was implemented since 1931. This created a pan-Indian space for an alternative discourse which was a strong contender of the all the other kinds of nationalisms – especially the religious and the composite cultural nationalisms since it considered the class-based Hindu society and the Muslims, both, as invaders and hence, refused to see themselves as a part of the religious and composite cultural nationalism discourse. They insisted on the authenticity and uniqueness of their culture and strived to carve a space for a Dalit Nationalism in the main discourse.

In my understanding, in the newly born nation state of India post-partition in 1947, however, only two forms of nationalisms survived over time – the composite cultural nationalism and religious nationalism.

Every form of nationalism needs to have a defined idea, an idea about the kind of people that they represent. The main question that arises now is this: in this pan-Indian space, who are the people considered to be con-

stituting the Nation? Is it the individual citizens or is it the diverse communities? Is it the different religious communities that constitute this nation, making the superiority of one particular religion over others a necessity or is it the historically downtrodden, neglected sections of the society who are claiming their space in the nationalism discourse? The answer to this question is an extremely interesting one and helps shed some light on the socio-political developments in India in recent times. The idea of who constitutes the Indian nation has largely fluctuated since its inception between the idea of composite cultural nationalism and religious nationalism. The former was one of the core principles on which the Indian constitution is based, the latter has gained appeal amongst the masses over the years – especially since the late 1980s. Hence, when we talk about identity conflicts portrayed in Indian cinema that deal with nationalism and those dealing with religion, it can sometimes get difficult to differentiate one from the another because the boundaries between the nature of the two conflicts have increasingly blurred. It is sometimes difficult to differentiate if the film is addressing the idea of a composite cultural nationalism and looking at religious communities – all at par – as components of this composite society or is the film addressing the idea of that brand of nationalism which requires or prescribes the religious superiority of one over the other. There are a series of films which deal with both kinds of nationalism – either in an individual way or in a way where both the ideas of nationalism are being dealt with.

Another important idea relevant to this work is that of patriotism and is situated in the colonial history of India. Patriotism and nationalism are two ambivalent terms which have sometimes also been used in an interchangeable manner. The historian S. Irfan Habib addresses the fine lines of distinction between these two concepts and differentiates between them:

> While patriotism means affection for one's country and willingness
> to defend it, nationalism is a more extreme, unforgiving form of

allegiance to one's country. The main shortcoming of nationalism lies in the fact that it can blind people. Love for one's country is imperative and necessary, but if this love becomes more important than constitutional values or democratic ideals, it is misplaced.[93]

Though I personally am ambivalent about the aspect of an exclusive love for one's country being imperative, I certainly find this point of differentiation as an acceptable tool in order to identify trends not only in Bollywood productions but these days, also in real life situations. A number of films, including the ones that portray a war between India and Pakistan, appeal to the patriotic Indian while often also confusing this patriotism with nationalism. Equally prevalent in the Indian society is the understanding of being an anti-national the moment one disagrees with the opinions and policies of the government of the day. Any kind of dissent, critical questioning of hegemonic systems of power – in whichever form – can quickly be interpreted as anti-national while justifying unconstitutional (or questionable, at the least) use of violence as a necessary step to suppress the voices of the anti-nationals, who by Habib's definition still qualify as patriots. The most recent example of this is the violence between supporting and opposing forces of the incumbent government that happened in New Delhi in February 2020 in the wake of protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act. Thankfully, there have been some films made in the recent years like *Newton* (2018) or *Article 15* (2019) that look at this fine difference between patriotism and nationalism, look at the societal dissent, pose critical questions and investigate the systematic political manoeuvres that attempt to place an individual above the law in a very differentiated, nuanced manner.

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93   S. Irfan Habib, "Introduction" in *Indian Nationalism. Essential Writings.* ed. S. Irfan Habib, (New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 2017), 9.

3.2.2   Religion

The emergence of religious nationalism in India during the colonial rule of the British, citing cultural differences between the majority Hindu population and the minority Muslim population and the perception of them being two independent Nations in the sense of a *Kulturnation*, led to the Partition of India. Two nation-states were born out of the Partition –the Dominion of Pakistan on August 14, 1947 and Dominion of India on August 15, 1947. Though the vision of the founders of Pakistan at that time was that Pakistan would become a secular Islamic state[94], the background for the origin of the state was cited as religious difference and incompatibility. Jinnah cited that Hinduism and Islam as faiths are very different in their nature, thus making a peaceful coexistence difficult. In fact, he used the term *Nation* to describe the Muslims of India[95].

While the Muslim League started gaining popularity for its idea of a state based on Islamic principles in late 1930s, the idea of a Hindu Nationalism had been around for a while. This political ideology serving as the basis of a demand for the creation of a Hindu Nation is referred to as *Hindutva*. V. D. Savarkar, the creator of this political ideology, was very much aware of the difference between *Hinduism* and *Hindutva*. Central to his thoughts was the idea of the unification of the Holy-land and the Fatherland – effectively excluding Christians, Jews, Muslims.

> That is why in the case of some of our Mohammedan or Christian countrymen, who had originally been forcibly converted to a non-Hindu religion and who consequently have inherited along with Hindus, a common Fatherland and a greater part of the wealth of the common culture – language, law, customs, folklore and history

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94   *Sayings of Quaid-i-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah*, ed. Rizwan Ahmed, (Karachi: Pakistan Movement Center, 1986), 69.
95   Roderick Matthews, *Jinnah vs. Gandhi*, (Gurgaon: Hachette India Local, 2012), 31.

– are not and cannot be recognized as Hindus. For though Hindusthan to them is Fatherland as to any other Hindu, yet it is not to them a Holyland too. Their Holyland is far off in Arabia or Palestine. Their mythology and Godmen, ideas and heroes are not the children of this soil. Consequently their names and their outlook smack of a foreign origin. Their love is divided. Nay, if some of them be really believing what they profess to do, then there can be no choice – they must, to a man, set their Holyland above their Fatherland in love and allegiance. That is but natural. We are not condemning nor are we lamenting. We are simply telling facts as they stand. [96]

This idea of an exclusive claim by the Hindus (including Jains, Buddhists, Sikhs) on India meant leaving out the Muslims, Christians and other religious minorities like the Jews and Parsis. This fundamental mistrust – especially against the Muslims and Christians – became central to the political ideology of *Hindutva* political outfits like the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS), *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP), *Vishwa Hindu Parishad* (VHP). However, in the time leading up to Independence and even after Independence, in spite of the trauma of the Partition of India, due to the political stronghold of Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, other public figures who had been exposed to Western philosophy, a Western understanding of secularism and the Indian National Congress party in general, the voices propagating *Hindutva* were largely subsided. With a series of events like the Mandal commission, mobilisation and appeasement of Muslim voters by the Rajiv Gandhi government in the 1980s, there was a large sense of vulnerability and insecurity amongst the majority Hindu population in India. This atmosphere played out well for the rise of the *Hindutva* ideology and helped the rise of the BJP, ultimately culminating in the destruction of the Babri Mosque in 1992. The destruction of the mosque was justified by the

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96   V. D. Savarkar, *Hindutva* (Mumbai: Veer Savarkar Prakashan, 1969), 113.

Hindutva leaders stating that the Muslim invaders coming in from Central Asia had destroyed the *Ram* Temple at the disputed site and it was only right to destroy the mosque to make way for a temple, in its rightful place. Riots between Hindus and Muslims, the bomb attacks that followed in the wake of the destruction of the mosque[97] changed the character and nature of the Indian society in an irreparable manner and even led to a further alienation between the two religious communities. The riots in Godhra in the year 2002[98] only added to this alienation. While these events, which occurred inside India, contributed to an alienation between the communities, sponsored attacks by Pakistan (Pakistan denies this vehemently, investigations point towards either an active state role or informal support) on the Indian Parliament in 2001[99], on 26/11 in Mumbai[100] drove the wedge further since Muslims in India are more than often associated with Pakistan. With evidence of Pakistan's role in these attacks and also to a certain extent in the bombings in Mumbai in 1992, a large part of the Indian population started questioning the loyalty and patriotism of the Muslim minority towards the Indian state. Since I have extensively referred to this conflict based on religious lines at earlier stages, especially while talking about the different kinds of nationalism, I will not delve into further details here. What is important to understand is that the nature of the conflict between the majority Hindu population and the minorities (predominantly Muslim) and the power equation has changed extensively since 1992 –

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97   12 bomb blasts took place in Mumbai (then Bombay) on March 12, 1993 and were considered to be an act of revenge against Hindus. The blasts were planned and executed by Dawood Ibrahim and his accomplices as a response to the destruction of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya and the following riots all across the country.

98   The riots that took place as a retaliation against the burning of the coach S6 of the Sabarmati Express outside Godhra station in Gujarat on February 27, 2002.

99   On December 13, 2001, the Indian parliament was attacked in New Delhi by 5 terrorists with strong ties to the terror outfits *Lashkar-e-Taiba* and *Jaish-e-Mohammad*

100   On November 26, 2008, 10 terrorists carried out 12 coordinated attacks in Mumbai, some of the seizes lasting for 4 days. The official number of casualties during these attacks were 174 and more than 300 were wounded.

whereas in the beginning of it was more at an individual level, based more on matters of difference of faith, with the rise of religious nationalism, it increasingly became a tool of singling out the Muslim minorities. Though there are other religious minorities in India, the Muslim minority, which is sizeable in sheer numbers, continues to be perceived as the dangerous *Other*. Additionally, through political events all around the world, especially in the post 9/11 world, this perception and cultivation of Islamophobia has only gained momentum – not just in India but also around the world.

Some films have addressed this topic at different levels. The way an individual conflict arising out of matters surrounding difference of faith eventually evolving into a broader political context and demarcating *Us* and *Them*, *Majority* and *Minority* has been portrayed in films like *Bombay* (1995) or *Mr. and Mrs. Iyer* (2002). There have also been other examples of films like *Jodhaa Akbar* (2008) which looked at the historical contexts of an inter-religious relationship, while films like *Gadar. Ek Prem Katha* (2001), *Veer Zaara* (2004) focussed on an inter-faith love story between an Indian and a Pakistani protagonist, while inherently addressing the religious identity, the partition aspect of it. It is necessary to note here that the time frame during which these films were made, was largely characterised by successful peace talks between the India and Pakistan. The production of these films during this time which portrayed a peaceful coexistence in an inter-religious relationship cannot be considered to be a mere coincidence and can be interpreted as a response to the changing political climate during those times. Films from more recent times, like *My Name is Khan* (2010) started interconnecting multiple conflicts like Indian diaspora, their predispositions and prejudices against members of the Muslim community, coinciding with an increasing Islamophobia worldwide, while mythological/historical films like *Padmaavat* (2018), *Kesari* (2019) or *Tanhaji* (2020) showed an increasing propensity to present a Muslim figure as the vicious invader or even twisting historical facts into presenting a Hindu protagonist in a predictably Muslim appearance (Kohl lined, dressed in black, different manner of tying

the turban etc.) because it would make him look more believable and vicious[101]. In my perception though, the manner of storytelling has undergone a tremendous change from *Bombay* in 1995 to *Kai Po Che* in 2013. While *Bombay* focussed on an inter-faith love story on the canvas of a rioting city, *Kai Po Che* focussed on the canvas of a rioting society, while interweaving the story of three friends and their protégée into the picture. There is no background and foreground in the latter. This subtle change, bringing out the paranoia and impulsiveness in the Indian society to retaliate in extremely violent ways in a volatile societal setup, is what makes the inquiry into this conflict very interesting.

3.2.3 Caste

Caste and class have been an extremely powerful tool that have been around in India for centuries. It is widely believed that the *Chaturvarna*[102] system, as prescribed in the old Sanskrit text *Manusmriti*[103], forms the basis of this system. Though it has been disputed by several scholars of Indology like David Buxbaum[104] and Donald David[105]. While they don't question the validity of the scripture and the premise that it served as a theoretical framework for practises observed in the Hindu society around South East

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101 *Tanhaji* is a film that boasts of being based on the life story of Tanaji Malusare, the chieftain of the Maratha Ruler Chattrapati Shivaji Maharaj. While historical records point at the attacker being a one Uday Bhan Singh Rathod, a Rajput general in the Moghul Army, the filmmakers have curiously dropped any mention to his Rajput lineage instead choosing to portray him as a look-alike of Muslim invader figures.

102 *Chaturvarna* translated literally means 4 classes.

103 *Manusmriti* is an old legal text in Sanskrit and was translated in the year 1794 by Sir William Jones in order to make the text accessible to the British. This translation formed the basis of the Hindu Law used by the British in legal matters of the local population during their time in India and continues to exist in large parts even today.

104 David Buxbaum, *Family Law and Customary Law in Asia: A Contemporary Legal Perspective*, (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1968), 204.

105 Donald Davis, *The Spirit of Hindu Law*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 14.

Asia in the ancient times, they have their doubts if *Manusmriti* was actually administered as a legal text and used in the administrative and judicial context. The text primarily became known, important and also to a certain extent legitimised through the multiple translations of the text done by British and German scholars. The translations, especially the one by Sir William Jones[106], were to serve as a basis for the creation of a law system for the non-Muslim population in the Indian subcontinent since the British followed the principle of using locally prevalent laws while ruling, in order to avoid interference with the local systems and thus keeping resistance from the local population and the kings and chieftains under control. This not only granted the *Manusmriti* a standing as a legitimate source to understand the non-Muslim society, referred to as *Hindus* by the British, but it furthermore strengthened the position and ensured the dominance of the castes belonging to the upper class in the Indian society.

According to a leading scholar in the field of Indian studies, Patrick Olivelle, the *Manusmriti* isn't the work of a single author and has evolved over generations. The version of the *Manusmriti* as we know it today, though, seems to be a compilation of these series of verses – probably by *Bhrigu*[107]. According to *Manusmriti*, a society can be divided into five categories – the *Brahmins* (the learned, priestly caste), the *Kshatriyas* (the royalty, warrior caste), the *Vaishyas* (the traders and merchant caste, also includes farmers) and the *Shudras* (labourers and service providers).

For the protection of this whole creation, that One of dazzling brilliance assigned separate activities for those born from the mouth, arms, thighs, and feet. To Brahmins, he assigned reciting

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106   William Jones, *Institutes of Hindu law or The Ordinances of Menu, according to the gloss of Cullúca: comprising the Indian system of duties, religious and civil*, (London: Routledge, 2000).

107   Patrick Olivelle and Suman Olivelle, *Manu's Code of Law: A Critical Edition and Translation of the Manava-Dharmaśastra*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 7.

and teaching the Veda, offering and officiating at sacrifices, and receiving and giving gifts. To the Ksatriya, he allotted protecting the subjects, giving gifts, offering sacrifices, reciting the Veda, and avoiding attachment to sensory objects; and to the Vaisya, looking after animals, giving gifts, offering sacrifices, reciting the Veda, trade, moneylending, and agriculture. A single activity did the Lord allot to the Sudra, however: the ungrudging service of those very social classes.[108]

The fifth category is that of the Untouchables or the *Dalits*. They usually practiced professions considered impure and degrading by members of the other communities like manual scavenging, working in tanneries etc. – professions that one inherited by the virtue of birth in a particular family, belonging to a particular class. The communities belonging to the first 4 categories are considered to be a part of a hierarchical society – the *Savarna* communities, communities belonging to the last category are not considered to be a part of this hierarchical society, thus making them outcasts or *Avarna*. This class is usually referred to as the *Dalits* or the Untouchables[109].

Before we delve into the details and the broader context of this type of conflict, it is absolutely necessary, however briefly, to understand the fine distinction between *Varna* and *Jati* here. In English, there isn't a comparable term to explain the finer differentiation between these terms. The term caste originates from the Portuguese term *casta* and means race, lineage, breed. In the Indian context, caste can be broadly defined as a complex social grouping which is largely based on lineage. Both – *Varna* and *Jati* can be described using this term. But in order to make it understandable and differentiated, one can compare *Varna* with Class and *Jati* with Caste. There is a clear classification model for the class system where there is a total of 5 classes – *Brahmins*, *Kshatriyas*, *Vaishyas*, *Shudras* and *Dalits*. On the other

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108 Ibid., 91.
109 According to the provisions in the Constitution of India, the *Dalits* or Untouchables are referred to as the *Scheduled Castes* and *Scheduled Tribes.*

hand, there exist thousands of castes all across India. Since there is no clear definition of what defines a caste, it is difficult to assign it specific attributes. The castes are then further classified into the class system. To make it more concrete: Brahmin is a class which consists of castes of Brahmins like the *Deshastha Brahmins* of Maharashtra or *Goud Saraswat Brahmins* from the coastal belt of Konkan or the *Nambudiris* from Kerala. The classification of castes in a hierarchical system granted some castes grouped in the category of *Brahmins* a particular sense of superiority and authority in the social setup. Though the other castes that were grouped into the remaining three categories were considered as 'inferior' to the uppermost class, they were nonetheless considered to be a part of the society. The worst treatment was and to a large extent even today continues to be donned out to the castes that were grouped together as the *Dalits*. The option of upward mobility in the society didn't really exist for members of the other classes, especially for people belonging to *Shudra* and *Dalit* category, since marriages were permitted among members of the same caste, same class as caste and class was something one inherited. Though the constitution of free India, adopted in the year 1950, has barred the caste-system and makes discrimination on the basis of caste a punishable offence, the caste system and the societal discrimination, hierarchical structure it entails continues to play an extremely important role even today.

At a superficial level, the classification system of castes into classes appears to be a profession-based one, in reality the ramifications go far beyond just the 'profession-based segregation and classification' of people. Two key aspects, among many others, that used to and continue to affect the day-to-day lives of people include a reluctance within large sections of the society concerning intermingling of classes and castes through marriage and limited opportunity in terms of job, education, upward social mobility for people belonging to the lower castes. There have been conscious efforts by the Indian state and the judiciary to address this issue by

means of affirmative action[110]. Over the course of time since Independence, there have been a series of legislations that have been introduced to ensure protection of these communities – especially against exploitation by members of the upper castes. In spite of these progressive steps taken by various governments, the caste-based hierarchy and its rampant usage as a tool to justify discrimination, continues to plague Indian society even today. It is also worth mentioning here that a number of Dalit people who converted to Christianity or Islam in order to escape from the rigid caste-system in Hinduism, continue to face caste-based discrimination even today because their ancestral caste-affiliations are known, in spite of their new adoptive religious identity. This phenomenon of presence and influence of caste within the folds of Islam and Christianity is a special feature specific to the Indian subcontinent.

A question that one could pose is how does this theoretical, outdated scheme continue to exercise such an influence on today's Indian society? The answer is somehow simple, yet extremely complicated. The historical dominance of a few castes, due to the roles assigned to them by the caste system, ensured that the other castes, which belonged to the lower classes had almost no place in societal order when it came to development and education. The *Brahmins*, who are, like the church clergy in Christianity, considered to be the authority on the scriptures, were allowed to interpret them and prescribe a social order 'based on the scriptures'. The catch was that since they couldn't be questioned about the authenticity and legitimacy of their interpretation of the scripture and they had an exclusive authority and access to the scriptures, the new societal order based on the *Manusmriti* that evolved, automatically positioned the *Brahmins* at the top of the pyramid and in a position of power. Closely following in their steps were the *Kshatriyas* or the class of warrior castes whose primary function was to rule.

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110 Affirmative action in India is primarily in the form of reservations for historically as well as currently disadvantaged groups in the fields of education, employment (predominantly in the public sector) and politics. The groups who are eligible for the benefits of these reservations are known as Scheduled Castes, Schedules Tribes and Other Backward Classes.

They were the royalty of the new societal order, making them another strong centre of power. The remaining classes, continued to be at the bottom of the social pyramid, though they were not specifically discriminated against by the British because they belonged to the lower classes. This meant that the lack of access to education for these classes continued, and the lack of access to wealth, which anyway was a reality under the British rule for the general population barring royalty, continued, thus enabling them to be at the bottom of the social pyramid for a prolonged period

In the run-up to Independence and post-Independence, several activists and social reformers, the most notable being the chairman of the drafting committee of the Constitution of India, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, took a serious note of this prevalent system and ensured the abolition of the caste system, caste based discrimination and the launching of an affirmative action programme in 1950, one of the oldest of its kind in the world. Though the State, especially the judiciary, has tried to shoulder the responsibility of uprooting this particularly complicated problem in the Indian society repeatedly over a period of time, the political apparatus and society have consistently resisted it. Most of the major political parties in India have abused the constitutional provision of affirmative action for the purpose of appeasement of its voters during elections, while delivering very little in reality. Society on the other hand, continues to grapple with the caste problematics. There may have been attempts of drawing generations of historically backward classes into the mainstream wherein they were granted access to education, jobs in a structured manner, but the social mobility among the various castes and especially classes continues to be problematic even today. The problematics of caste based discrimination has been regularly at the centre of controversies even in today's India: whether it is the circumstances leading up to the suicidal death of Rohit Vemula[111] or the beating up of a groom from a lower caste for riding a

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111 Rohit Vemula was a PhD student at the University of Hyderabad belonging to a scheduled caste. Due to alleged activities under the Ambedkar Student's Association, he and 5 other students were suspended from the University following

horse in his marriage procession[112] which the local upper castes consider to be an exclusive privilege or then the violent killing of a youth[113] in the name of 'saving the honour of the family' (also referred to as honour killings), – modern day India continues to offer ample examples of caste based discrimination and violence on a day-to-day basis.

The presence of caste in daily lives, the emerging power equations and the impact of these power equations on several aspects of an individual's life (irrespective of their caste affiliations) have often been at the centre of a narrative of Bollywood films. The problematics of an intimate relationship between two individuals from different castes present multiple dimensions of inquiry and have been handled in a series of films – from old films like *Sujata* (1959) to more recent ones like *Masaan* (2015). This already difficult and complex topic presents even a further challenge in cases where there is an additional aspect of abuse based on notions of power and hierarchy. Films like *Gulaab Gang* (2014) or *Article 15* (2019) tackle the highly sensitive issue of abuse, while also trying to give space to the caste-rhetoric that is at the base of this kind of abuse. All these films have rich narratives which portray a series of cultural clashes at a societal level, the interpersonal clashes at the family level and then a more decisive clash of cultures at the level of the individual protagonists. This conflict and clash between

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which they went on a relay hunger protest. He committed suicide on January 17, 2016. In the suicide note that he left behind, he went on to say 'The value of a man was reduced to his immediate identity and nearest possibility. To a vote. To a number. To a thing. Never was a man treated as a mind. As a glorious thing made up of stardust. In very field, in studies, in streets, in politics, and in dying and living.' ("Full Text: Dalit scholar Rohith Vemula's suicide note" on timesofindia.indiatimes.com, accessed on March 1, 2020 under https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/hyderabad/Full-text-Dalit-scholar-Rohith-Vemulas-suicide-note/articleshow/50634646.cms

112 "Dalit Groom beaten, forced off horse during marriage procession" on timesofindia.indiatimes.com, accessed on December 8, 2018 under https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/indore/madhya-pradesh-dalit-groom-beaten-forced-off-horse-during-marriage-procession/articleshow/63789554.cms.

113 "Hyderabad: Inter-caste marriage again" on indianexpress.com, accessed on December 8, 2018 under https://indianexpress.com/article/india/hyderabad-honor-killing-woman-hand-nearly-chopped-off-5364988/.

classes and castes has never been more present in the Indian society than today – the conscious lower castes claiming their space and voice in the mainstream discourse and as a result, increasingly unsettled upper castes denying them this space. Caste Identity, even in today's India, continues to be an extremely important tool for discrimination and is shamelessly exploited by political parties for their political gains. Whether politicising of caste and claiming of votes based on it works, or whether it translates into actual benefits for the lower castes, is an extremely vast and debatable question.

This is a very brief introduction to an expansive topic that has defined the social fabric of the Indian society. Having said that, delving deeper into the origins, problematics, different aspects and the politics of caste system would divert the focus of this investigation. Hence, I would like to focus on the two key aspects mentioned above while looking at the diverse cinematic representations of this problem – predominantly in Bollywood. One would be the caste-based discrimination against the members of the lower caste on a day-to-day basis in modern India.

A central factor defining the course of the film analysis is how the topic of cultural identity, the typology of conflict, the socio-cultural contexts are displayed in Indian cinema. Secondly, I would also focus on the frame, image and sound composition that are represented through the films and how they play an equally important role in setting the tone of the film. It is the subtext that is being communicated through the image, sound that allows the filmmaker to present the said conflicts and contexts. The important question that then arises, considering this background, is how would an identity conflict, based on the concept of caste, in the case of a particular protagonist look like? Bollywood films have time and again tried to bring out the complexity of the topic of caste and how it affects the lives of people belonging to the lower castes. However, the way the Dalit protagonists are portrayed has changed tremendously. While writing a review of the most recently released film *Article 15,* Harish Wankhede, a professor for political science, encapsulates this change perfectly. He says,

It has been argued that the Dalit representation in Hindi cinema reflects philanthropic upper caste sensitivities. Dalit characters are often shown as powerless (Sujata and Sadgati), wretched (Paar and Bandit Queen) and dependent upon the morality of the social elites (Aarakshan and Lagaan). However, in recent times, films like Rajneeti, Guddu Rangeela, Manjhi, Masaan, Newton and Sonchariya attempted to break such stereotypes. Dalits were now no longer just victims of caste atrocities, but complex characters. The recently released Article 15 is a welcome addition to films that portray Dalit subjectivity in a nuanced manner. [114]

So, the manner in which the nature of the conflict has changed is interesting. A Dalit character is no longer dependent on the rationality, big-heartedness of an upper caste protagonist in order to claim a space for himself in the societal order. Instead, a Dalit character, is now trying to break free of the stereotypes by himself while trying to bring about a decisive change in the manner in which his character evolves. These characters are not scared of posing uncomfortable questions and rattling the existent social hierarchy while demanding answers. An interesting nuance of some of these narratives is also the fact that these characters are firm believers of the democratic principles and constitutional provisions that have ensured the creation of opportunities, at least at a theoretical level. As a result, their struggles are not necessarily directed towards demanding a separate space in the mainstream as a *Nation* but are focussed on claiming a space to voice their concerns, to claim their rights.

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[114]   "An upper caste gaze" in The Indian Express, accessed on July 18, 2019 under https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/an-upper-caste-gaze-article-15-dalits-bollywood5831109/.

3.2.4   Gender

The evolution of the gender discourse in India in the post-independence era is a fairly interesting phenomenon. It may not have shown the steep, promising rise and an exponential, consistent development as compared to many other countries, especially in the West, but the evolution has nonetheless been there. Lack of gender equality in the Indian society has always been a major detrimental issue – irrespective of British or independent India.

The *Manusmriti*, which was often referred to as a guide for organising the societal order in ancient India, especially in regard to the caste system, plays an important, yet somewhat ambivalent role when it came to the position, rights and duties of a woman in the society. The *Manusmriti*, if looked at from an academic perspective, is a very systematic, orderly effort to differentiate between the various constituents of a society at different cross sections: differentiation based on account of caste, community, occupation and gender, to name a few. Of all these issues, the deliberations on the topic of gender are the most ambiguous – partially also because the *Manusmriti* isn't a single piece of work written by one author but a work that has come together over generations[115]. In one of the chapters prescribing behaviour of a student towards his teacher and his teacher's family, the *Manusmriti* deliberates on the behaviour of the student to the woman based on caste, while also vilifying women. It says,

> The teacher's wives of equal class should receive the same honor as the teacher, but wives of unequal class should be honored by rising up and greeting them. […] Anyone who is over 20 and able to distinguish between the attractive and the unattractive should not greet here a young wife of his teacher by clasping her feet. It is the very nature of women here to corrupt men. On that account,

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115   Patrick Olivelle and Suman Olivelle, *Manu's Code of Law: A Critical Edition and Translation of the Manava-Dharmaśastra*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

prudent men are never off guard in the presence of alluring young women. For an alluring young woman is capable of leading astray not only the ignorant but even learned men under the sway of anger and lust.[116]

Further on, there is a small chapter dedicated to honouring women.

If they desire an abundance of good fortune, fathers, brothers, husbands, and brothers-in-law should revere their women and provide them with adornments. Where women are revered, there the gods rejoice; but where they are not, no rite bears any fruit. Where female relatives grieve, that family soon comes to ruin; but where they do not grieve, it always prospers. When female relatives, not receiving due reverence, curse any house, it comes to total ruin, as if struck down by witchcraft. If men want to become prosperous, therefore, they should always honor the women on joyful occasions and festive days with gifts of adornments, clothes, and food. [117]

This attitude towards women could easily lead one to believe that the scriptures grant women an equal status in the society and that they teach the society about practical ways and occasions how one can pay respect to the woman of the family. But shortly thereafter, it goes on to say, while defining the dynamics of a relationship between a man and a woman, it takes a different tone altogether:

Day and night men should keep their women from acting independently; for, attached as they are to sensual pleasures, men should keep them under their control. Her father guards her in her childhood, her husband guards her in her youth, and her sons guard

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116   Ibid., 105.
117   Ibid., 111.

her in her old age; a woman is not qualified to act independently.
[118]

The ambivalent nature about the status of women in a society is evident through these very contradicting approaches and leads one to question the leanings of the text – if it leans more towards an equal, rights-based, egalitarian, thinking society or a society ruled by scriptures, prescribing the most favourable way of life. The answer to this question is quite evident but lies below the superficial: prima facie the scriptures seem to be leaning towards a more biased approach.

> No man is able to thoroughly guard women by force; but by using the following strategies, he will be able to guard them thoroughly. He should employ her in the collection and the disbursement of his wealth, in cleaning, in meritorious activity, in cooking food, and in looking after household goods. When they are kept confined within the house by trusted men, they are not truly guarded; only when they guard themselves by themselves are they truly well guarded. [119]

The texts, the prescribed behaviour for men is meant to lead women to *want to believe* that they are being treated respectfully and have a revered place in the Indian society whereas, in fact, they are just a tool that defines the power equations between various entities: a husband who controls his wife, a father who controls his daughter and a son who controls his mother is particularly powerful in a patriarchal family setup since the woman doesn't have the slightest opportunity to explore her own personality, her own desires. She is considered to be a shallow figure, who looks at men purely as objects of lust – and a man who controls, keeps a check on the

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118   Ibid., 190.
119   Ibid., 190.

kind of people she comes in contact with, who keeps a check on her desires, aspirations (sexual as well as general ambitions in life) and 'allows' or 'disallows' her to explore them, is then naturally considered a powerful person. Though this text which is considered to be the guiding principle by large for the Indian societal order originated in a different space and time, its relevance and its influence on the societal structure of the Indian society – not just within India but also on the diaspora community living outside of India – continues to be indisputable. The scope and extent of influence may have changed, but the influence continues to be there.

What is particularly fascinating is that the two very different, polarizing ideas about the status and character of a woman as described in the *Manusmriti* is in fact the attitude that the Indian society practices in reality when it comes to women. So, on the one hand, we might celebrate and bow our head in reverence in front of the goddesses like *Lakshmi*, *Saraswati* and *Kali*, while on the other, we fail to associate the exact virtues and qualities that these goddesses are known for with the women around us. *Lakshmi* is the goddess of wealth and prosperity, *Saraswati* is the goddess of education, wisdom whereas *Kali* is a goddess which destroys the evil. As a society, we often consider access to wealth and education to be a birth right predominantly reserved for boys and men while failing to empower the women in our society to be in a position to defend themselves. India may have been one of the few countries in the world to have had a woman as a Prime Minister early on, but at the same time, it has one of the highest number of cases of violence against women. India may have introduced adult franchise for women right after independence – a very progressive step considering the fact that developed countries like Switzerland introduced it only in the latter half of the 20th century, but the principle of equality that is the basis of this right and is so enshrined in the Constitution, is not a part of the reality in the Indian society.

The ambivalence surrounding the status of women in the Indian society, leaning more towards a patriarchal and discriminatory behaviour towards women, presents itself not only in the context of a man-woman

relation and equality between the genders but extends itself even to the psyche of women who consider this secondary status as a rightful one, the kind of violence that they practise against other women demanding a more equal, egalitarian society[120]. Having said that, the discourse regarding the status of women differs in India largely between the rural and the urban setup. Without wanting to generalise, it is my observation that women in urban cities – because of access to education and exposure to a broader context going well beyond the local, as well as the increased costs of living which requires both the partners to be a part of the work force – their life conditions have largely defined the way women claim their space in the public discourse. There continue to be elements in the urban society who are not happy with these developments, but their presence is combated by equally vocal and assertive women. What is particularly interesting is that prima facie, it might appear that the society in a city is more liberal, is educated, but the gender discrimination that they practise in their day to day lives is so deeply ingrained into their psyche, that more than often, it is difficult to get rid of it. The circumstances in which women live may have changed at a superficial level – they may be educated, working women. But this doesn't necessarily mean that they are either exempted from fulfilling their traditional duties like being solely responsible for the upbringing of a child, doing the household chores and cooking, nor are they exempted from being victims of sexual abuse just by the virtue of being educated and living in a city. Women in rural India, on the other hand, continue to be a part of an extremely rigid, conservative, patriarchal societal setup which sets limitations on them about having a say, an opinion about things happening around them, about their life choices. A conservative, close-knit

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120   The most recent example for this is the verdict of the Supreme Court of India in 2019 granting permission to women of all ages to enter the temple in Sabarimala. It is a widely held belief that the god residing in this temple is celibate and hence, entry to women devotees in menstruating age was prohibited. With the verdict in place, groups of women devotees tried to make their way to the temple, but were not only met by angry men protestors, but also by hordes of angry women protestors demanding the upholding of Hindu culture.

society makes it difficult for an individual woman to strive for her rights, express her thoughts, explore her sexuality.

What is common in both the settings is that for a 'perceived' transgression that a woman might have committed, the consequences she needs to suffer are more than often similar in nature. What is also common is the politics of ownership of the body wherein a woman's body – adhering to the advice set out in the *Manusmriti* – merely changes ownership due to her perceived inability to uphold the family honour. As has been the case in other parts of the world, the commodification of women – to inflict pain and insult in times of war by raping and abusing them, to establish a power equation wherein the one who has ownership of the woman is automatically perceived to be the stronger one – has been a shameful part of the Indian history as well. Whether it is the mass rapes that occurred during the time of the Partition and 1984 riots in New Delhi, or rape cases like the *Nirbhaya*[121] and the Kathua rape case[122] that have rocked the country over the past few years – in both scenarios, women have been and continue to be a looked upon as a commodity by large sections of the Indian society which refuses to acknowledge them the status of a human being with equal rights. Especially in the context of the Kathua rape case, there were several attempts by Hindu right-wing groups to justify the horrendous act[123] by stating that it was religiously motivated as a retaliation against Muslims in order to attain/regain control over grazing lands which were being accessed by Muslim shepherds.

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121 On December 16, 2012, a 23-year old woman Jyoti Singh was brutally beaten, gang-raped and tortured in a private bus. She gradually succumbed to her wounds and died on December 18, 2012. Since Indian law prohibits the naming of a rape victim, the case came to be referred as the *Nirbhaya* which means fearless. Her name became public only later.

122 An 8-year-old girl – Asifa Banu – was abducted and found dead near the village of Kathua in Jammu and Kashmir in January 2018. This case was one of the most brutal cases of child- and sexual abuse in recent times. The most worrying part of this case was the involvement of police officers according to the final investigations.

123 "India outrage spreads over rape of eight-year-old girl" on BBC.com, accessed on September 9, 2019 under https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-43749235.

The Indian film industry, even the commercially produced films from Bollywood, portray an extremely ambivalent picture of women. So, on the one hand we have films that objectify women, portray scantily dressed women as a commodity dancing on salacious songs that are famously known as *Item Songs*. The sole purpose of inserting these songs in films is to attract a huge number of male viewers, who enjoy this visual stimulation. Another aspect that contributes to the high popularity of these 'Item Songs' is that in their own odd way, they offer a chance to explore sexuality to a vast majority of the population – a topic which otherwise is considered to be a taboo topic in India and is not to be discussed in public. On the other hand, we have a tradition of strong films which focus on the conflicts of a woman like *Mother India* (1957), *Mahanagar* (1963) up until today's times with films like *Chokher Bali* (2003), *English Vinglish* (2012), *Queen* (2014), *Mary Kom* (2014), *Lipstick under my Burkha* (2016), *Pink* (2016) etc. These films have presented women as the lead figures – women who are strong, intelligent, independent and who in their own ways and are challenging the societal norms. These films have not shied away from addressing some extremely sensitive issues besides gender equality like sexuality, consent and abuse. The ambivalence that exists in the Indian society pertaining the status of women, thus, continues to be mirrored in the films that are made and consumed by the same society.

An identity conflict arising at the cross section of gender is usually situated around a complex premise of how a female protagonist sees herself, where she thinks her rightful position in the societal order is vs. where the society around her sees her and where they think she belongs. For instance, a well-educated female protagonist, who considers herself to be a liberal, open-minded person, who is capable of balancing a career with family duties may not necessarily be perceived by the society around her in the same way. Thanks to her exposure to education and Western culture and the openness and critical mindset that often comes along with it, her character and integrity are deemed questionable by a conservative, traditional society around her. If she also happens to be a working woman, she

is considered to be unable to strike a balance between work and family life. An internal conflict would then arise as a result of the clashes between these varied notions about her personality. This kind of gender-based conflict has been efficiently portrayed in a number of films.

3.2.5 Globalisation and Modernisation

Globalisation and modernisation are two of the most important phenomena that have an irrefutable influence on our times. Though it is possible to differentiate between them at a conceptual, theoretical level, the interconnectedness between them is hard to ignore in today's context. Modernity, with its roots in the Enlightenment era as experienced in Europe in fifteenth, sixteenth and the seventeenth century, is considered to be a starting point of modern thought. Culturally speaking, the era of Enlightenment, also known as the Age of Reason, characterises modernism by representing continuous and inevitable progress based on universal values of science, reason and logic[124]. Globalisation, on the other hand, can be defined as 'the act or process of globalising, the development of an increasingly integrated global economy marked especially by free trade, free flow of capital, and the tapping of cheaper foreign labour markets'. What started out as an economic phenomenon has long transcended into other spheres of our lives. In countries like India, globalisation and liberalisation of the economy that happened in the last decade of the 20th century enabled a mass exposure to modern thoughts – it made modernity accessible to common people.

The economic effects of Globalisation maybe tangible in more ways than one, but the social impact of what entailed this phenomenon cannot be underestimated. Arjun Appadurai, an eminent scholar on globalisation, identifies the interconnectedness of the social, the political and the cultural developments across the world with the economic globalisation that set

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124   K Moti Gokulsing and Wimal Dissanayake, *From Aan to Lagaan and Beyond. A guide to the study of Indian cinema.*, (Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books, 2012), 54.

them off. In his essay "*Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy*"[125], he states:

> The complexity of the current global economy has to do with certain fundamental disjunctures between economy, culture and politics which we have barely begun to theorize.

> I propose that an elementary framework for exploring such disjunctures is to look at the relationship between five dimensions of global cultural flow which can be termed: (a) ethnoscapes; (b) mediascapes; (c) technoscapes; (d) finanscapes and (e) ideoscapes. I use the terms with the common suffix scape to indicate first of all that these not objectively given relations which look the same from every angle of vision, but rather that they are deeply perspectival constructs, inflected very much by the historical, linguistic and political situatedness of different sorts of actors: nation-states, multinations, diasporic communities, as well as sub-national groupings and movements (whether religious, political or economic), and even intimate face-to-face groups, such as villages, neighborhoods and families.[126]

Further ahead, he goes on to explain each term. While explaining *Mediascapes* he says:

> 'Mediascapes', whether produced by private or state interests, tend to be image-centred, narrative-based accounts of strips of reality, and what they offer to those who experience and transform them is a series of elements (such as characters, plots and textual forms) out of which scripts can be formed of imagined lives, their own as

125   Arjun Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy" in *Theory, Culture and Society*, (Nottingham: Sage Publications, 1990), 295-391.
126   Ibid., 296.

> well as those of others living in other places. These scripts can and do get disaggregated into complex sets of metaphors by which people live as they help to constitute narratives of the 'other' and proto-narratives of possible lives, fantasies which could become prologemena to the desire for acquisition and movement.[127]

A keen understanding of this particular observation is absolutely necessary since it enables us to understand the complexity of migrations – especially economic migrations. It refers to the medial perceptions and interpretations of the new *Homeland*, of the life it offers, and which are in turn transported back to the original *Homeland*, in turn giving rise to a perception among the local people about a life in the new imaginary *Homeland*. This perception is particularly attractive for a lot of people – especially the ones who are typically at the lower rung of any societal order since it promises them a future in this new *Homeland*. The real conflict starts though when the perceived notion of this *Homeland* becomes a reality and especially, when the perception doesn't match with the reality. The series of events around the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s (Liberalization of the Indian economy, Fall of Berlin Wall, Disintegration of the Soviet Union, freer movement of labour etc.) led to an even steeper westward migration. This migration not only led to a cultural conflict at the individual level, but also led to an 'import of Western ideas' or transporting of a *Western Mediascape* back home which led to more conflicts at a societal level. This category of Indians, who chose to call their new *Homeland* [128] their homes, themselves went through and continue to go through, a sort of identity crisis. At the same time, a *Mediascape* also offers the possibility of creating a *Mediascape* of the lost *Homeland* for the people who are born and brought up in an adopted *Homeland*, of presenting the lost home to them through narrative- and image-based accounts. For a lot of people belonging to the

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127   Ibid., 299.
128   Cristina Emanuela Dascalu, *Imaginary Homelands of writers in exile: Salman Rushdie, Bharati Mukherjee and V.S. Naipaul*, (Cambria Press, New York, 2007).

diaspora community, not just Indian, this is the reality with which they live, in which their children grow up. They carry with them the *Idea of Their India* (or their own respective *Home*), more often than not, suspended in time. This idea not only prescribes a particular set of rules to be followed by *Good Indians* (an extremely personal choice like to live by yourself or in a big family, being in a live-in relationship etc.) but also largely influences their interactions with the society around them. So, an Indian coming from a conservative Indian Hindu family, who rejects consumption of beef, probably also rejects the idea of intermingling with people of other castes or religions fearing impure influences, who doesn't believe in having sexual intercourse without being married, denies homosexuality etc., may find himself/herself unable to adjust to exactly this kind of circumstantial situations in his/her new home. Not only does he/she reject this kind of interaction and a stimulus, he/she also tries to transfer, in extreme cases even enforce these influences, the prejudices he/she is holding on to, to the next generation.

Naipaul, himself went through something similar – albeit at a different juncture in history. His experience of growing up with an *Idea of India* and the actual experience of *Being in India*, though, is still something a lot of people even in today's time can associate with.

> I was born in 1932, 15 years before the Independence of India. I grew up with two ideas of India. The first idea – not one I wanted to go into too closely – was about the kind of country from which my ancestors had come. We were an agricultural people. Most of us in Trinidad were still working on the colonial sugar estates, and for most of us life was poor; many of us lived in thatched, mud-walled huts. Migration to the New World, shaking us out of the immemorial accepting ways of peasant India, had made us ambitious; but in colonial and agricultural Trinidad, during the Depression, there were few opportunities to rise. With this poverty around us, and with this sense of the world as a kind of prison (the barriers

down against us everywhere), the India from which my ancestors had migrated to better themselves became in my imagination a most fearful place. This India was private and personal, beyond the India I read about in newspapers and books. This India, or this anxiety about where we had come from, was like a neurosis. There was a second India. It balanced the first. This second India was the India of the Independence movement, the India of the great names. It was also the India of the great civilization and the great classical past. It was the India by which, in all the difficulties of our circumstances, we felt supported. It was an aspect of our identity, the community identity we had developed, which, in multi-racial Trinidad, had become more like a racial identity. This was the identity I took to India on my first visit in 1962. And when I got there, I found it had no meaning in India. The idea of an Indian community – in effect, a continental idea of our Indian identity – made sense only when the community was very small, a minority, and isolated. In the torrent of India, with its hundreds of millions, where the threat was of chaos and the void, that continental idea was no comfort at all. People needed to hold on to smaller ideas of who and what they were; they found stability in the smaller groupings of region, clan, caste, family.129

Growing up with an idea of India and then actually being in India, being confronted with the ground realities can alter the way a lot of those people look at that particular part of their identity: whether it is caste, religion or gender-based issues. Equally problematic is the growing up with an idea of India and actually, physically being in a different cultural, societal setup leading to a complete confusion and rife-with-conflict situations – at societal levels and at personal levels. A youngster growing up in a traditional, conservative Indian family setup but living in a Western society,

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129   V. S. Naipaul, *India. A Million Mutinies Now*, (Basingstoke/ Oxford: Pan Macmillan, 2011), 8-9.

which in spite of its own set of problems, is fairly progressive, might be confronted with a series of questions like the traditional division of labour between the parents, gender equality, conflicting ideas about relationships, etc. These questions have a bearing not only on the day-to-day lives of people but also define the way they develop as individuals and their compatibility with a society in which they are living. I am not arguing that all things Indian are conservative and need to be gotten rid of while all things Western are modern and the ones we need to adapt ourselves to – what I am trying to highlight is that there needs to be a discourse on Indian modernity. The point of looking at this kind of conflict is to analyse how these clashes of polar ideas lead to the creation of a mixed identity, which brings together the best or worst from both and also to see how individuals deal with them.

Since this topic has been of interest consistently and gained popularity among today's generation, especially the diaspora communities who find themselves confronted with it, it is only natural that films were made to address this subject. The protagonists in these films, their ambivalent relationship with *Home* and the country, society they are living in, the mixture of influences – the portrayal of all of this in a film offers the viewers a chance to take a step back, look at their own situation objectively and try to understand the nature of this kind of conflict. Films like *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham* (2001), *Bend it Like Beckham* (2002), *Kal ho Naa Ho* (2003), *The Namesake* (2006), *My Name is Khan* (2010) dealt with various aspects of alienation, longing for a homeland, clashes between conservative, traditional thought processes and the situations arising out of exposure to a western lifestyle. Though this may be true, I chose not to look at this variant of identity conflicts since a range of scholarship already exists which deals with the various issues that influence the life of an Indian person or a person of Indian origin living abroad. I have chosen to focus on the conflicts arising in Indian society due to issues rooted in modernisation and the interconnectedness of modernisation with globalisation.

The Indian society – with its ethnic, linguistic, religious diversity – is one of the most diverse, heterogenous and pluricultural societies around the world. Though it is hard to define and describe the Indian society in singular terms, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that it is a fairly traditional, conservative, to a large extent, religious society. It is a society that is organised in a very hierarchal way where a variety of hierarchies are at play: class-based, caste-based, religion-based, gender-based, urban-rural etc. These hierarchies continue to influence the day-to-day lives of millions of Indians even today as the Indian society struggles with itself. On the one hand, there is a conscious effort by segments of the society to keep any kind of modernisation of the society at bay, on the other, there is a section in the society, which is actively striving against these hierarchies, claiming a space for themselves in the public discourse. To look at modernisation conflicts in the Indian society is an extremely interesting venture: more so because it looks at a series of conflicts that concern not only the society at a meta-level but also the lives of individuals in so many ways. A conservative society trying to keep 'Western' influences like gender equality, diverse sexualities, education, a society rejecting the idea of abolition of caste system and caste-based discrimination, resisting the idea of people from different religions coming together - all this, and many more, can be looked upon as examples of how widespread are the modernisation conflicts in the Indian society. What is interesting is that often, efforts to challenge the prevalent structures like caste systems or women claiming gender equality get labelled as 'Western influences' without giving the phenomenon a second thought – that in the process of evolution of a society, over a course of time, the suppressed, weaker sections of the society will, at some point, want to claim their place in the societal order. Western societies, which we today refer to as progressive societies, weren't always like this. They themselves went through a process of evolution, faced resistance and an unwillingness of the society to change (and are still in that process in varying degrees) when it came to things like gender equality, accepting and respecting *Other* cultures. To say that modernisation, a critical questioning of the existing

structures and challenging them is a purely Western idea would hence be, in my opinion, a bit of a stretch.

The modernisation conflicts are closely connected with the conflicts originating in the context of globalisation. Though the conflicts may be geographically situated in different spaces, the nature of the conflicts connects them. Members of the Indian diaspora resisting any kind of new cultural influence, any discussion pertaining the prevalent practises that the members intend to continue with, even in their new home, are in a way an extension of the conservative, rigid society that they left behind in India, which in turn, is resisting a change of the prevalent, rigid practises. On the other hand, those people in the diaspora community who are more welcoming of a critical questioning, open to dismantling some of the prevalent practises and curious to understand the nature of these practises, find common ground with those sections of the society within India who are trying to do something similar.

While talking about cultural phenomena like modernisation and post-modernisation in India, it is also necessary to contextualise what modernity entails in the Indian context. Neelam Wright has critically discussed this fairly new phenomenon while referring to the writings of Indra Nath Choudhuri[130].

To avoid this kind of exclusivism in my research I maintain allusions to Western postmodernism and instead view postmodern manifestations in India through the very way in which Choudhuri justifies current modernisation practices in India – as an active response to (and critical engagement with) the West, rather than simply a passive process of Westernisation. Choudhuri seeks Indian modernity through an introspective turn to roots, tradition and history as opposed to cross-cultural borrowing, but he overlooks India's inherent tendency for cultural appropriation, particularly

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130   Indra Nath Choudhuri, "Facets of postmodernism: A search for Roots. The Indian literacy scene" in *International Postmodernism*, ed. Hans Bertens, Douwe Fokkema, *Comparitive History of Literatures in European Languages XI*, (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: J. Benjamins, 1997), 491-497, under https://doi.org/10.1075/chlel.xi.63cho.

vis-à-vis its colonial connections with the West. What's more, he acknowledges India's past indigenisation of Western artistic modes as a positive and productive method of achieving cultural innovation and producing alternative experiences and perspectives, listing in particular movements such as imagism, the anti-novel, the anti-play, expressionism, beat poetry, and experimentalism. It would be equally unethical (and somewhat condescending) to deny Indians this alternative perceptivity, particularly the newer generations, who can find this to be a liberating escape from oppressive traditionalist cultural regimes. Thus, cultural appropriation could instead be better viewed as a powerful system of rebelling, critiquing and Otherising the West through mimicry.

In overview, Choudhuri's essay proposes that Indian postmodernism should be observed through the Indian subject's own realities, independently of the West. But how can one do so when these realities are so inherently tied up with the West, and when the postmodern, by definition, summons the demotion and abstraction of social realities? Despite certain differences in perspective, Choudhuri's account is useful for my own investigation into postmodernism in Indian cinema. Firstly, with regards to his idea of Indian modernity as a reaction or response to the West: Indian modernity is not to be confused with Westernisation or modernisation because it still absorbs and expresses traditional values and shows reluctance towards the technological. For Choudhuri, Indian modernity is not achieved through what is borrowed, but rather through the country's own roots, traditions and realities. This idea of accessing and constructing the modern through discourses of the past (tradition, culture, mythology, religion) is particularly compelling, and something I will adopt and explore in my own investigation of Indian cinema.[131]

The approach, initially adopted by Choudhuri in the context of literature and then by Wright to investigate films, helps in looking at films in a very realistic and academic manner when it comes to the construction of

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131 Neelam Sidhar Wright, *Bollywood and Postmodernism*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 71-72.

Indian modernity (which can be further categorised into Hindu modernity, Islamic modernity etc. as suggested by Ashis Nandy[132]) in Bollywood productions. The approach of looking at modernisation and post-modernism in the Indian society as not a mere Westernisation or blind imitation of the West, but more as an Indian subjects' response to the interactions with the West, to the new cultural influences considering his own cultural predispositions and an attempt to understand the cultural appropriation of these developments is especially an important step in order to distance ourselves from a postcolonial approach which upholds the divisions between the *Us* and *Them* and looks at modernity from a strictly Western perspective. This approach not only helps contextualise the ambivalent, confusing, sometimes even polarising hybrid-discourses on topics like gender equality, abolition of caste system or technological advancement etc. that have come up in the Indian society over the recent years since the variety and diversity of opinions from different sections of the society was in turn dependent on their own cultural predispositions, which in turn was affected by their own social standing in the Indian societal order. My approach to the film analysis is based on these views of the topic of, especially my understandings of Indian modernity.

3.3   Objects of research

The films that have been selected here serve as representatives for the kind of conflicts enlisted above. Most of these films belong to the genre of popular, commercial mainstream Hindi films or Bollywood films while one film is situated at an intersection between Bollywood masala films and art cinema. It has been a conscious decision to choose films that came out after the turn of the millennium i.e. after 2000 since they represent a very ambivalent Indian society. A society which is on the cusp of modernity and

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132   Rachel Dwyer, *Filming the Gods. Religion and Indian cinema*, (Oxon/ New York: Routledge, 2006), 159-160.

globalisation but at the same time very strongly rooted in tradition, religion, conservative and orthodox beliefs and patriarchy. This time frame can be looked at as a point of transition and it is a very interesting junction for a society on the verge of a number of small but deeply affecting conflicts – *A Million Mutinies* as V. S. Naipaul would probably refer to them.

With the year 1990 ushering in economic liberalisation in India, the end of the cold war and changing power dynamics at a global level, mobility – in every sense of the word, became the trend. It involved economic and social mobility – for those who had always been shunned to the bottom of the social pyramid and were now aspiring to make a successful life in the wake of a liberal economy; it involved international mobility – enabling middle class (in this case) Indians with limited means to having an opportunity to go abroad, have a chance of interacting with the *Other*, opening oneself up to multiple cultural influences and probably leading to a *Cultural Chaos*. It also meant an upward mobility based on gender issues – not only for women but also for people who identified themselves as having fluid gender identities – by rejecting a binary perception of gender and a claiming a space for themselves in the bigger scheme of things. All these conflicts, when interwoven with a background of a diverse, versatile, societal setup, produced interesting narratives. The films that have been chosen here ably represent this clash of multiple ideas, an evolution of different ideas and identities, about where people are coming from and where they aspire to be, how the environment in which they are located is responding to these changes. They represent a shift in societal and individual perceptions and their responses to a multitude of things – ranging from Caste, Religion to Nationalism, Globalisation, Gender, Modernisation.

Before choosing the following films as examples to represent each category of the aforementioned conflicts, I watched an exhaustive and wide array of films (for each category), a list of which I have provided in the filmography. On watching these films, I decided to choose the following films based on the presence of a strong focus on the Hero's journey and

the evolution of his/her identity and the films' compatibility with my research questions. It was also a conscious decision to leave out films from regional languages and focus on Hindi films.

It is also important to reiterate that while choosing films that represented identity conflicts concerned with nationalism, it was a conscious decision not to choose films falling in the category of War Films. One of the most popular genres of films in India that is guaranteed to stoke sentiments of patriotism mixed with nationalistic fervour are the ones dealing with India-Pakistan relations. Even then, it was a very conscious decision to leave out a series of very popular films from recent years like *Uri* (2019), *Raazi* (2018), *Tiger Zinda Hai* (2017), *Sarbjit* (2016), *Phantom* (2015), *Ek Tha Tiger* (2012) or for that matter, any film dealing with India-Pakistan relations for the simple reason that these films very easily categorize the good and the bad, the *Us* and *Them* - the Bad and Them in most cases being Pakistan, and thus consequentially Muslims. In the broader context of the inquiry within my thesis, I prefer to focus on the evolution of different kinds of nationalisms within the Indian context, without necessarily looking for an external *Them*. I would like to look in depth at the categorization within the Indian society of the *Us* and *Them* which has also been reflected in other kinds of films.

- ### *Swades* (2004)

Swades is a film telling the story of Mohan Bhargava and was directed by Ashutosh Gowarikar, starring Shahrukh Khan in the lead role. The film draws its inspiration from a number of sources – most notably from the Kannada Film *Chigurida Kanasu* (2003) and from the real-life story of Aravinda Pillalamari and Ravi Kuchimanchi[133]. Though there are a number of films that deal with the sense of the loss of a homeland that a number of

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133   "From inspiring Swades to being questioned on the immigration status: Aravinda Pillalamarris journey" on Scroll.in, accessed on May 16, 2019 under https://scroll.in/magazine/828148/from-inspiring-swades-to-being-questioned-on-immigration-status-aravinda-pillalamarris-journey.

NRI (Non-Resident Indians) face, this particular film made the news for a number of reasons. For one, it had a film star like Shah Rukh Khan in the leading role. Ironically, Shah Rukh Khan had also played the lead role in a film titled *Pardes* (1997), which means foreign country and romanticised the homeland, the *Own*, while portraying the West in bad light and considering it responsible for the 'bad' influence on an otherwise cultured Indian youth. Secondly, it showed a different narrative - one that spoke about a journey coming full circle for the protagonist, his resolve to come back, come *home* and the cultural, social hurdles and moments of awakening he faces on this journey. This part of the narrative differed from other films focusing on a similar topic (like *My Name is Khan* or *The Namesake*) in the sense that it chose to focus more on the conflicts an individual faced when he came to being accepted *back* by his *Own,* rather than the conflicts he would face while trying to make himself comfortable in a new place and make it *Home*. *The Namesake* implicitly addressed the topic of a longing for a homeland, the narrative of the film primarily focussed on the protagonist's life abroad, showcasing the frictions in their lives when being confronted by the *Other* or by other Indians i.e. *Own* in a foreign setup. *Swades*, on the other hand, focussed on the frictions in the life of the protagonist on coming in close contact with *Own*. This was an important factor since the narrative of the film allowed me look closely into the changing notions of *Own*, which can often be mistaken to be fixed. Additionally, the choice of *Swades* made a compelling argument since there exists a wide range of scholarship on films representing lives of Diaspora Indians but very few focusing on the return of Diaspora Indians to India.

This film looks at a plethora of topics – ranging from the resistance Indian society shows when it comes to the caste system to the urban-rural divide but most importantly, its forthright resistance to any new cultural, social impulses arguing that they go against the age- old Indian traditions and that any liberalisation of the Indian societal structure is necessarily a Western influence which needs to be rejected. Simply put, it problematises

a series of conflicts which fall under an overarching conflict of modernisation in the wake of globalisation in the Indian society and its responses to it. I will look at the identity construct of the main protagonist Mohan Bhargava in this film at the cross section of identity conflict and modernisation.

- ### *Rang De Basanti* (2006)

Rang De Basanti is a film produced by Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra and was released 2006. The plot of the film unfolds as a non-linear narrative – with two plots developing at the same time. One plot largely focuses on a group of 6 youngsters in their late-20s, living in New Delhi and leading a fairly carefree life, until rampant corruption involved in the purchase of aircrafts leads to the death of one of their very close friends. The other plot focuses on the history of Indian Independence, six Indian freedom fighters in particular, as seen by the British filmmaker Sue McKinley. Sue is in possession of the memoirs of her grandfather who was a British officer in colonised India and intends to produce a film based on them while portraying some incidents from the lives of Indian Freedom fighters like Ashfaqullah Khan[134], Ramprasad Bismil[135], Bhagatsingh[136], Chandrashekhar Azad[137]

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134 Ashfaqullah Khan: an Indian freedom fighter from the North-Western Province in British India, known for his role in the Kakori train robbery on August 9, 1925.
135 Ramprasad Bismil: an Indian freedom fighter from the North-Western Province in British India, known for his role in the Kakori train robbery on August 9, 1925.
136 Bhagatsingh: an Indian freedom fighter from the Punjab province in British India, known for his role in the shooting of the British police officer John Saunders in Lahore in 1928 and the bombing of the Central Legislative Assembly in New Delhi in 1929.
137 Chandrashehar Azad: an Indian freedom fighter from the Central provinces of Berar in British India, known for his role in the Kakori train robbery on August 9, 1925 and the shooting of the British police officer John Saunders in Lahore in 1928.

Shivram Rajguru[138] and Durgawati Devi[139]. Both the plots culminate half-way through the film when the narrative allows both the plots to develop along similar lines – most importantly identifying the *Us* and *Them* in both the contexts – i.e. the revolutionaries/ youngsters vs. the system, the establishment.

   One of the primary reasons of choosing this film is that *RDB* is one of the few films which has successfully managed to establish understandable, fathomable connections between the past and the present of the modern Indian State while ensuring that during the process of establishing these connections, the film addresses some of the most common and problematic issues dictating the current political setup. The film tries to compare the struggles of Indian freedom fighters during the Independence struggle with more current, real-life debates surrounding the purchase of the MIG Aircrafts by the Indian Government for the Indian Air Force, but the nature of the struggle is identified to be similar. In both cases the struggle is between a large part of the general public in a perpetual state of societal stagnation, helplessly subscribing to their circumstances as Destiny and the Establishment. This conflict is an overarching conflict accommodating a further series of sub-conflicts within it: the re-contextualizing of the colonial history in the wake of more current political conflicts in India, followed by the re-birth of historical rebellious figures from the Independence movement in their modern-day avatars. The revival of cultural clashes (inter-religious clashes in this particular case) that yet again seem to be returning to disrupt the day-to-day lives of ordinary people, a constant re-defining of *Us* and *Them* (Us in Present vs. Them in Past, People vs. Estab-

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138   Shivram Rajguru: an Indian freedom fighter from the Bombay Presidency in British India, known for his role in the shooting of the British police officer John Saunders in Lahore in 1928.

139   Durgawati Devi: an Indian freedom fighter, born into a Bengali family in British India, known for her active support in the shooting of the British police officer John Saunders in Lahore in 1928 and the bombing of the Central Legislative Assembly in New Delhi in 1929.

lishment, Hindu vs. Muslim, Rich vs. Poor etc.) - each of these unique experiences help us situate and understand the interconnectedness of socio-political factors rampant at the time with the medium of cinema as a tool/lens to reflect upon these socio-political factors.

- ### *Kai Po Che* (2013)

Kai Po Che is a film adaptation directed by Abhishek Kapoor and based on a book by an Indian author Chetan Bhagat *The 3 Mistakes of My Life*[140]. The textual narrative focuses on the three mistakes the narrator makes, whereas the film narrative doesn't treat the so-called mistakes as mistakes while highlighting the actual problematic issues central to the narrative. The plot of the narrative is based in Gujarat and has strong connections to the way politics was evolving in the state at the beginning of the 21st century. The film and the book are fairly different in terms of their treatment of the plot and in the ways that they portray the characters and their stories. The character of Govind for instance, in the book, is the one telling the story from his perspective, talking about some events in his life he considers were the 3 biggest mistakes of his life. The film, on the other hand, starts out with a reference to the biggest mistake in Omkar's life for which he has served a prison term. The most decisive factor behind the choice of this film is that the narrative looks closely at Gujarati society and its responses to the political changes taking place, which in turn serve as a baseline for looking at how the politics in the Indian subcontinent evolved as a result of some of the incidents shown in the film. The film helps in connecting the dots between very complex ideas about how an exclusivist political ideology, which seems very theoretical in nature, invades the private space, gives the *Other* a face and creates disruptions in the personal space.

- ### *Parched* (2015)

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140   Chetan Bhagat, *The 3 mistakes of my life*, (New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 2008).

Parched is a film directed by Leena Yadav that focuses on the lives of four women in rural Rajasthan. Although well received critically in some parts of the world, the film failed to garner big response at the box office domestically. The narrative focuses on the lives of Lajjo, Bijli, Raani and Janaki while highlighting how patriarchy uses traditions and customs to legitimise discrimination against women. A number of reasons contributed to choosing this film – firstly it is a very strong narrative presented from the perspective of a woman which gives the narrative an authenticity. Secondly, the film portrays lives of women in rural Rajasthan, who are direct victims of patriarchy and face bigger challenges when combatting it. Having said that, these protagonists provide a counter-narrative to the stereotypical image of a helpless woman in rural India, without any support system – they are very strong figures who have endured a lot of violence, stress in the past and even then, still stood their ground. The most important part of the narrative comes when the three older women take it onto themselves to ensure that the youngest of the lot, Janaki, doesn't fall victim to the same customs and traditions. This particular incident is in stark contrast to a lot of other narratives that portray violence against women propagated by women.

- *Newton* **(2017)**

Newton is one of the most recent productions in this mix of films that were chosen for the thesis. The film is directed by Amit Masurkar and traces the story of an idealistic government officer who is entrusted with the duty of conducting elections in a very small constituency in the heartland of India. The narrative is very different from the rest of the films in many ways. Firstly, it addresses the issue of underrepresentation of other minorities (other than the religious minorities) which is usually not a topic for Bollywood productions. Secondly, the film falls under the genre of black comedy, which again is a genre that is not so often used by Bollywood filmmakers. Most importantly, the film goes beyond the popular discourse surrounding the security forces (police, military and para-military forces)

while questioning their role in a democracy like India. All these critical questions pose a bigger question about the understanding of concepts like democracy and nationalism in a diverse (not only in terms of religions or castes but also traditions) country like India. The portrayal of conflicts arising out of these varied positions and perceptions on screen makes this film indispensable for my thesis, since it looks at how notions of progress and modernisation, democracy etc. are understood differently in different parts of India by different people.

- *Article 15* **(2019)**

Article 15 is the most recent film that I chose for my inquiry into the topic of how sensitive issues like caste and caste-based discrimination contribute to a very complex identity conflict at a cross section of gender and caste and how it is portrayed in a Bollywood production. The title of the film refers to a constitutional provision in the constitution of India which prohibits discrimination against individuals based on caste, religion, gender and how this article is actually implemented (or not) in reality. The narrative of the film is based on real-life events like the Badaun/ Badayun gang rape in 2014[141] and the Una flogging incident in 2016[142]. The film also focuses

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141 Badaun/ Badayun Gang rape case: on May 27, 2014 a gang rape of two teenage girls was reported in the village of Katra, Badaun/ Badayun district in Uttar Pradesh. Though the reports initially suggested that the girls belonged to the lowest castes (the Dalits) – normally referred to as Scheduled Castes/ Scheduled Tribes (SC/ST) in India, it turned out later that the girls in fact belonged to a slightly upper caste, falling under Other Backward Classes (OBC). Though the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) cleared the accused of any wrongdoing after a lengthy inquiry and stated that the girls had not been sexually assaulted and killed but had committed suicide instead, wide sections of the population and media continue to raise questions about the validity of this conclusion.

142 Una Flogging incident: On July 11, 2016, 7 members of a Dalit family were assaulted in public by cow-vigilantes in the village of Una, Gir District in Gujarat. The attackers, claiming to be members of a cow-protection group, claim that the Dalits had killed the cow they were found skinning. The Dalit members argued that they were only skinning a dead cow. Not convinced by this, the vigilantes tied the members of the Dalit family to a car and beaten up with sticks, iron pipes and knifes. The assault was recorded on video and went viral on the internet.

on how caste-based discrimination cannot be separated from law and order enforcement agencies, since the members of this task force are members of a society, of a caste, way before they become the face of a law enforcement agency. Though this might seem like a hierarchical listing of the identities of these officers, it actually refers to a more complex phenomenon than that. It allows us to look at identities in a manner which questions this hierarchical listing and ponder over the possibility of comparing their identities to the concept of rhizomatic identities which allow different traits in a person's identity to take over a decisive role in various situations. The film has a stellar cast and was critically acclaimed with decent success at the box office, driving home the point that the Indian audience, especially in urban and semi-urban centres, is also maturing in their media consumption patterns and is readier than ever to be confronted with the harsh realities of the political and societal environments they live in.

4.   Film Analysis

This section forms the core of this investigation and hence needed to be meticulously planned out. Even though I have differentiated between the nature of the conflicts and divided them into six sub-categories while outlining the research layout, due to the extreme interconnectedness and complexity of the nature of some of the sub-categories, I have decided to further divide them into two broad categories and then sort the six sub-categories into these two categories for the sake of the film analysis.

- Identity Conflicts and the evolution of Nationalism in India
    - Colonialism and Evolution of nationalism: *Rang De Basanti* (2006)
    - Religious Nationalism: *Kai Po Che* (2013)
    - Secular Nationalism: *Newton* (2017)
- Identity Conflicts and Evolution of the Indian society
    - Modernisation Conflicts: *Swades* (2004)
    - Gender-based identity Conflicts: *Parched* (2015)
    - Caste-based identity Conflicts: *Article 15* (2019)

The first category "Identity conflicts and evolution of Nationalism" focuses on the very powerful connection between the origins of nationalism (with reference to the colonial history), its evolution and its finer aspects in India – from the time of Partition up until now. Each of the chosen films – for each category – represents more than one strands of nationalism in its narrative, with a slightly more accented focus on one particular one. *RDB*, for instance, has an extremely nuanced focus on the colonial past of the country and emergence of nationalism in the context of colonialism while interweaving other contexts like religious nationalism and disenchantment with the state, thus questioning the whole premise of Nation as a political construct. *KPC* focuses primarily on the aspect of religious

nationalism. *Newton*, on the other hand, raises basic questions about who the Indian state represents, the functions and the responsibilities of a democratic Indian Nation state.

The second category "Identity conflicts and evolution of the Indian society" focuses primarily on the variety of conflicts that are experienced by individual citizens and manifest themselves at a societal level. Even though the conflicts in the first category are also closely connected to society, there is a very broad and a strong political context to those conflicts. Whereas in the context of the films in the second category, the conflicts portrayed in the films are focusing on the paradigmatic cultural conflicts, shifts in the Indian society. Conflicts which are questioning the very basic principles and forces like caste, class, gender etc. on the basis of which the Indian society is divided. Each of the chosen films address more than one kind of cultural conflicts – with an accentuated focus on one particular form of it. For instance, a film like *Swades* primarily looks into the soul-searching journey of Mohan from an American city to a remote Indian village, while also addressing a series of conflicts like the caste system, rejection of gender and caste equality. *Parched* looks at the evolution and shifting of gender paradigms in rural India by following the story of four women. *Article 15* critically looks at the existence of the caste system in day-to-day lives in India, while also bringing up the issue of an intersectional pattern of violence.

4.1   Identity conflicts and the evolution of nationalism in India

Nationalism is a very interesting but an equally problematic political concept, with its origins rooted in the late 19th and the early 20th century. Concepts like Imperialism and Colonialism dominated the political discourse at that time and served as a valid justification, a purpose for the existence of a number of kingdoms which were multi-ethnic, multi-cultural by nature. Be it the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Ottoman Empire or the British Empire – they inherently represented the interests of only a few. Some may argue that in such empires with multi- ethnic and multi-cultural composition, a ruling class representing ideas of imperialism, colonialism served as a unifying and stabilising factor, which may be true. But even then, the primary purpose for the existence of these empires, going back to historical times, was to unify people under the crown of a particular king or a queen. As mentioned earlier, for any kind of nationalism to be successful, it needs to have an absolutely clear idea about the kind of people it wants to represent. With this criterion in mind, nationalism as we know it today, started making its presence felt, around the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. Phenomena, some of them even rooted even in the earlier century, like industrialisation and the advent of the press, the Age of Enlightenment and critical thinking, a slow but a steady rise in literacy rates, etc. led to an increased political awareness among the common people. This, in turn, led to an increased awareness about their political rights and duties, an effort towards claiming a space in the political spectrum which otherwise had been dominated by the ruling dynasties and the rich upper classes. Complex cultural and political phenomena like the fall of the Austro-Hungarian empire in 1914 with the outbreak of the first world war and the consequential rise of various forms of '*ism*'s – Fascism in Italy, National Socialism in Germany etc. laid the

groundwork for subsequent forms of nationalisms that came up around the world during the course of the 20th century. With this historical context as a point of reference, it is slightly easy to delve into the project that is the evolution of Indian Nationalism.

As has been mentioned at various points before, the very abstract concept of India – not the geographical one but the political one – didn't exist till the arrival of the British. So, it is clear, that the origins of Indian Nationalism are inherently correlated with Colonialism. The creation of the idea of India is tied with the notion of putting up a united front against an invader than an internal enemy. The British Colonisers themselves weren't quite sure about if and how one could define India – especially because it was nowhere close to the existing ideas of Nation-states that existed in Europe at that point of time. Since the terrain that they were dealing with was so unfamiliar and pluralistic in nature, it seemed to be chaotic. Anil Bhatti addresses this issue in a broader context of pluricultural states and rise of nation states in the early 20th century.

> The colonial model, which dominates, seeks to proceed from chaos to order. Complexity is viewed as chaos, which does not admit of administrative regulation. India's complexity, for instance, was viewed by colonialism as a chaos, which required domestication. It was domesticated under colonialism by an extraordinary development of classificatory and taxonomic energy. […] A colonial bureaucratic order destroyed pluralities of social communication and replaced it with taxonomy and classification.[143]

What unfurled, as a result of this taxonomic classification is the systematic categorisation of the Indian society into compartments under-

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143   Anil Bhatti, "Heterogeneities and Homogeneities: On Similarities and Diversities" in *Accommodating diversity: ideas and institutional practices.* ed. Gurpreet Mahajan, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 81.

standable to the British – so the castes and classes were put into compartments, religions simplified into the Muslims and the non-Muslims, who came to be referred as Hindus. This understanding of the term Hindu, even though it adhered to the original meaning of the word – people living on the banks of the Indus or *Sindhu*, created a political, administrative segregation of the society into two. It not only destroyed pluralities of social communication, it also destroyed the pluralistic nature of the society that represented the Islamic and the non-Islamic people in the Indian subcontinent by putting them all under either one of the categories. So, the term *Hindu*, a Persian term referring to the people who lived beyond the Indus, now started gaining momentum as a political one.

Diana Eck touches upon this topic in her book *India: A sacred Geography*[144]. She reflects on the deliberations of a British civil servant, Sir John Strachey, who, while addressing a conference on *What is India* in Cambridge in 1883, had tried to articulate this uncertainty:

> There is no such country (India), and this is the first and most essential fact about India that can be learned. India is a name, which we give to a great region including a multitude of different countries. There is no general Indian term that corresponds to it. […] Scotland is more like Spain than Bengal is like the Punjab.… There are no countries in civilized Europe in which people differ so much as the Bengali differs from the Sikh, and the language of Bengal is as unintelligible in Lahore as it would be in London. […] This is the first and most essential thing to learn about India—that there is not, and never was an India, or even any country of India, possessing, according to European ideas, any sort of unity, physical, political, social and religious; no Indian nation, no 'people of India,' of which we hear so much.… We have never destroyed in India a national government, no national sentiment has been wounded,

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144   Diana Eck*, India: A Sacred Geography*, (New York: Three rivers press, 2012).

no national pride has been humiliated; and this not through any design or merit of our own, but because no Indian nationalities have existed. […] It is conceivable that national sympathies may arise in particular Indian countries; but that they should ever extend to India generally, that men of the Punjab, Bengal, the N.W. Provinces, and Madras, should ever feel they belong to one great nation is impossible. [145]

Sir Strachey makes a valid point when he talks about the very sensitive issue of an Indian identity. The scholastic and political deliberations about the question of an Indian Nationalism, about the Indian identity picked up momentum in India just around the same time as the deliverance of this speech. Aided by this double-edged sword, on the one hand, a systematic segregation of the Non-Muslims (as Hindus) and Muslims and an absence of an Indian identity on the other, the project of the creation of an Indian nationalism started gaining ground. With this background, it is no wonder, that the administrative segregation of the population aided in creating a religious commonality, thus further leading to the creation of a political variant based on this commonality in the form of religious nationalism. The blunder of mistaking a religion for culture and using it as a base to demand a separate nation State was one of the results of this process. Syed Alam Khundmiri, a Muslim scholar, encapsulated the essence of this problem very effectively. He talked about the existence of two powerful myths when it came to the question of Muslim identity in the Indian society: one of a 'national mainstream' and another of a 'cultural identity' of the other group. Khundmiri emphasized that:

Muslims are not one homogenous cultural group in the entire country, if culture is not confused with religion. There are still strong grounds to believe that India comprises different cultural

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145   Ibid., 62.

groups, the bases of which are not merely religion. The myth of a national mainstream gives strength to other myths. The upholders of this myth do not remember that what is called by this name and is supposed to be an existent reality is that hazy image of pre-medieval India, which could only be revived, in a romantic nostalgic mood. This hazy image is the most formidable source of obscurantism in our country. Similarly, the distinct cultural identity of Muslims has a restricted meaning as their distinct religious notions and ethical norms are concerned and beyond that, any mention of a distinct Muslim identity is a myth. The future of Muslims is tied up with the growth of idea of secularism and the rise of institutions based on this idea.[146]

While some groups like the Indian National Congress chose to focus on the cultural identity and their distinctness and respect this plurality in the Indian society, others like the *Hindu Mahasabha* or the All India Muslim League chose to understand religion as a culture, a fairly concrete, non-translatable and non-permeable concept. This gave rise to variants of what it meant to be an Indian, who qualified as Indian and of course, to a number of variants of nationalisms based on the answers to these questions.

Even though there is a large amount of scholarship available on the evolution of Indian Nationalism and it would be a mammoth task to try and delve deep into this topic on the side-lines of this project, it is necessary to briefly summarize the most important events in the evolution of Indian Nationalism – and not just in terms of the pre- and post-independence context but also in the context of the socio-political developments happening in the country. This short exercise will provide a temporal and contextual explanation to a lot of events that I will bring up in the due course of the film analyses.

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146 *Secularism, Islam and Modernity. Selected Essays of Alam Khundmiri*, ed. M. T. Ansari, (New Delhi/ Thousand Oaks/ London: Sage Publishing House, 2001), 280-281.

Establishment of political organisations like the Indian National Congress (which embodied secularism in the light of the European Enlightenment) and the All India Muslim League, the Hindu Sabha (both of whom claimed to solely represent the interests of the Muslim and the Hindu Populations in British India at the given point of time) was an important step towards the development of varied, polarised ideas of nationalism in India. As Sir Strachey said, India as country didn't exist in order to claim an Indian brand of nationalism, an Indian Nation in the European sense of the word. It evolved with a very simple principle of having the British Crown as a common enemy. Even at this very nascent stage, the different schools of nationalisms developing differed in how they defined themselves. The Indian National Congress seemed to be representing a wider section of the Indian society without claiming an exclusive support of a particular religion or caste. Having said that, the fact that most of the senior figures in the Congress, right from the time of its inception, were high-caste Hindus, cannot be ignored. The All India Muslim League – evident from the choice of its name – became a platform representing interests of the Muslims in the Indian subcontinent. It is very important to understand here that the Muslim League wasn't the only one representing Muslim interests, but Muslim interests was the only thing they represented (as opposed to the Congress – which seemed to represent broader interests). Similarly, the *Hindu Sabha* became a platform representing Hindu interests. They were not the only ones to do so, but the only ones to solely represent Hindu interests. The Congress party demanded more political rights on behalf of the Indian population, the Hindu Sabha did so on behalf of the Hindu population and the Muslim League on behalf of the Muslim population in the Indian subcontinent. The parallel development of these three political organisations in India can also be looked at in the light of the evolution of three predominant schools of nationalism in India – a secular, democracy-based version of nationalism inspired by the European Enlightenment, a very customised-to-Indian-context version of nationalism acknowledging

the existence of several religious, linguistic and ethnic communities existing in the Indian subcontinent and lastly, religious nationalism which strived to represent the interests of members of their religion in particular. The first two brands were more or less being represented by the Congress party while the third school came to be represented by the Hindu Sabha and the Muslim League. The first two variants of nationalism had a defined group of people they were representing and hence also a very clearly demarcated *Other* – in this case the British Empire – whereas the last brand of nationalism found the *Other* in another religious community (either the Hindu or the Muslim community), thus not making it necessary to have the British empire as their opponent.

The partition of Bengal in 1905 was a decisive moment in the history of the rise of nationalism in the Indian subcontinent. At the behest of the Governor of Bengal Lord Curzon, it was decided to divide Bengal for administrative ease since this province was the single biggest province in British India – comprising Bengal (today's West Bengal and Bangladesh), Orissa, Bihar and Assam. Only after the partition was through, Lord Curzon is known to have acknowledged that he now considered East Bengal as a Muslim province and West Bengal as a Hindu province based on the majoritarian status of each of these communities in East and West Bengal respectively. There had been a number of examples in the past where the ruler belonged to a particular religion and the citizens residing in his kingdom belonging to a different faith had faced a backlash or were discriminated against on this basis. But the partition of Bengal set a new precedent. It was probably for the first time in the history of the Indian subcontinent that a conscious effort had been made to divide the populations along the lines of religion. In *A History of India*[147], Hermann Kulke even goes to the extent of saying that Indian Nationalism, largely guided by the Indian National Congress, would probably have been able to maintain some of its liberal features, had it not been for the Partition of Bengal.

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147   Hermann Kulke and Dietmar Rothemund, *A History of India*, (London/New York: Routledge, 2004).

Radical nationalism was stimulated by the partition of Bengal in 1905. Originally, the partition of this vast province – which at that time still included Assam, Bihar and Orissa, in addition to Bengal proper – was mooted for purely administrative reasons. But when Viceroy Lord Curzon finally executed this administrative act, it was obviously meant to strike at the territorial roots of the nationalist elite of Bengal. The province was split right down the middle: east Bengal and Assam formed one province, and west Bengal, Bihar and Orissa another. Lord Curzon did not hesitate to point out to the Muslims of eastern Bengal that he conceived of this province as Muslim. The Bengali Hindus, on the other hand, noted with dismay that they were in a minority in the new province of Bengal. They mounted a furious agitation in which political terrorism became a prominent feature as young 'Extremists' took to the cult of the pistol and the bomb. The repartition of Bengal in 1911 showed that the administrative needs could have been met in a different way to begin with: Bengal was once more amalgamated and Bihar and Orissa formed a new province. Had the British refrained from splitting Bengal in the first place, they would have saved themselves a great deal of trouble. Terrorism now spread in Bengal and increased with every future instance of repression; without this first partition of Bengal, Indian nationalism might have retained more of its liberal features. [148]

On the other hand, though the Partition of Bengal wasn't supported by Muslim leaders in the region before the partition, they seemed to notice the advantages of partition once it was done. Historically, the Muslim population in the times of a United Bengal was at an extreme disadvantage. They mostly belonged to the peasant classes having less or almost no political representation and in the service of rich landlords, most of who were

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[148] Ibid., 289.

Hindu. The Partition of Bengal was, however, reversed in 1911 following sustained protests across India. This first partition of Bengal based on religious lines set a precedent for another Partition that followed decades later. One of Satyajit Ray's iconic films, *Ghare Baire* (1984), is set in this time and combines the topic of nationalism with notions of gender equality.

The evolution and the development of the Congress Party and the Hindu Sabha continued and even today continue to play an important role in the development of different schools of nationalism in India. The evolution of the Muslim League and their vociferous claim to be the sole representatives of the Muslim community in India had started raising its head post 1930. The proponents of this school of thought believed the Muslims in the Indian subcontinent to be a Nation in their own regard. They believed that the existence of Muslims in a country with majority Hindu population was endangered, that they were incompatible with each other in terms of rituals, beliefs and philosophies for a peaceful coexistence. Though this school of thought had been around since a while, only at the beginning of 1930 did it start gaining traction and attracting attention when Muhammed Iqbal endorsed and legitimised it by giving this claim a philosophical framework. Eventually Muhammad Ali Jinnah took it up as a cause to turn it into a political reality, leading to the creation of Pakistan in 1947. What is interesting to note is that though religious nationalism had been evolving simultaneously within the Hindu and the Muslim folds, the factions in the Hindu fold propagating the creation of a Hindu Nation didn't gain as much traction as much as the idea of creation of Pakistan did among the Muslim population for a number of reasons.

As interesting as the origins and development of the Indian Muslim League are, while discussing the evolution of nationalism in (post-Independence) India, events concerning only the Congress and the Hindu Sabha and its various manifestations over a period of time (*Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, Jana Sangh, Bharatiya Janata Party*) are relevant here. Pakistan and the Muslim League may be referred to some extent but will not

be the main focus. The question of Indian Muslims, however, continues to be one of the central areas of this inquiry, especially in the post-Independence period, since it has not only informed the Indian way of looking at Secularism but has also played a decisive role in defining the context of Hindu Nationalism or *Hindutva*. The post-Independence era in the modern history of India is of particular relevance in the context of the film analysis since it focuses on India as we know it today – with all the complexities of a young nation, divided at Independence.

The post-Independence, modern Indian Nation state, by virtue of its diversity and the origins of the creation of an Indian identity rooted in the colonial past, is itself problematic since it defies the logic of a common culture, origins and identity. Consequentially, all kinds of nationalisms that are rooted in the Indian context are equally confusing and problematic. Every form of nationalism needs to have a defined idea, an idea about the kind of people that they represent (and also those they exclude) hence necessitating a debate on who does this nation state represent? And who are the people who are considered to be constituting the Nation and who are the *Other*? What does it mean to be an Indian? The colonial history, which facilitated and required the creation of *Other*, giving the *Other* a face – which in that case was the British/Portuguese/French, helped create an idea of India, an abstract but a strong political identity with a common opponent. With Independence, the colonial *Other* started to lose its meaning. Time and again new *Other*s have emerged – sometimes Pakistan or China or the West, sometimes an internal *Other* like the minority communities in India, lower castes, financially backward communities or other internal components that questioned the status-quo of the 'Idea of India'. The idea of who constitutes the Indian nation has largely fluctuated since its inception between the idea of composite cultural nationalism and religious nationalism (with a few examples of some attempts to introduce the European Enlightenment inspired variant of secular nationalism in India). The former was one of the core principles on which the Indian constitution is

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based, the latter has gained appeal among the masses over the years – especially since the late 1980s. Hence, when we talk about identity conflicts portrayed in Indian cinema that deal with nationalism and those dealing with religion, it can sometimes get difficult to differentiate one from the another because the boundaries between the nature of the two conflicts has increasingly become blur.

A leading political theorist, Francis Fukuyama, looks at dignity as an Inseparable part of identity constructs and how the innate wish to be respected, to be recognised is invariably connected with nationalism.

> Luther, Rousseau, Kant, and Hegel understood dignity in different ways. But they were universalists insofar as they believed in the equality of dignity of all human beings based on their potential for inner freedom. Yet the demand for recognition often takes a more particular form, centering on the dignity of a particular group that has been marginalized or disrespected. For many, the inner self that needed to be made visible was not that of a generic human being, but of a particular kind of person from a particular place and observing particular customs. These partial identities could be based on nation, or they could be based on religion. Because they demanded recognition of the dignity of the group in question, they turned into political movements that we label nationalism or Islamism. [149]

His contextual reference to Islam here is not to be misunderstood or misappropriated – in the broader context he is referring to failed immigration and integration policies of a lot of Western countries, leading to a sense of not belonging to the country, where the Muslim diaspora is found to be living and thus looking for new identities where more than often,

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149   Francis Fukuyama, *Identity: The demand for dignity and the politics of resentment*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), 59.

they have found refuge in their religion[150]. This question and problem is worth at least a few books and abundant research has been done on this – nonetheless at this stage, it is necessary to clearly state the context of this citation.

What Fukuyama is trying to explain here goes well beyond just Muslims – he talks about the basic human wish to be recognised and being treated respectfully. If one increasingly starts getting a feeling of not belonging, of not being respected and dignified, which can happen in a non-democratic setup far more quickly than in a democratic one (since an ideal democratic setup allows equal space to all elements of the society to talk about their concerns and find solutions for them), the aspiration to win such a space for the community one belongs to, is but only natural. Identity, if looked at in a broader sense, can be considered to be a mix of traits, groups, communities one feels one represents, is also in this way connected directly to the various ideas of nationalism since *Nation* in its modern meaning represents this sense of belonging based on a commonality.

The topic of clashing nationalisms is an overarching problem present in some of the films chosen here. The issue of identity conflicts, primarily focusing on the evolution and changes a protagonist undergoes, is also present in all the chosen films. The intersection, at which both these topics interact, represents a broader discourse on nationalism, religion, identity politics and each individual's evolution over the course of a story line. The scientific framework of a rhizomatic identity used to look at this evolution is itself a very dynamic concept and is apt to describe the identity conflicts one often faces in our times. A scientific reading of the chosen films using this framework will help us in discovering and deciphering the multiple levels and layers of these identity conflicts.

Cinema, which is considered to be a powerful medium, often functions as a mirror to the events happening in a society, and Indian cinema, true to its function and the diversity it possesses, has efficiently brought to the fore

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150   Ibid., 67-69.

these debates. For the purpose of this chapter, *Rang De Basanti* (2006)*, Kai Po Che* (2013) and *Newton* (2017) are three films which fit the bill and will be used while analysing the discourse surrounding the above-mentioned debates and its cinematic manifestations. *RDB* and *KPC* look at a series of conflicts that arise when different notions of nationalisms clash. Considering the differentiation suggested by Pathak, the clashing variants in the films would be composite cultural, religious and secular nationalisms. *Newton* on the other hand, with its tongue-in-the-cheek form of humour, focuses on the rejection of an urban and upper caste form of nationalism.

4.1.1   Colonialism and the evolution of nationalism: *Rang De Basanti* (2006)

Rang De Basanti (*RDB*) can be considered to be one of the most successful films in recent times. The plot of the film has references to reality and focuses on the corruption and scandals in the purchase of armaments in India and the increasing discord among the civilians about the State apparatus and its inability to effectively curb corruption. It is a non-linear narrative with characteristics of parallel narratives. Non-linear because it keeps going back and forth between the lives of some freedom fighters in pre-Independence times and a group of friends at the turn of the 21st century; parallel because each of the narratives is progressing simultaneously and they are connected to each other by the similarity of the situations they portray. The (first) plot takes us through the lives of six young people in Delhi – Daljit Singh aka DJ, Karan Singhania, Aslam Khan, Sonia, Sukhi Ram and Lakshman Pandey. These youngsters, at the persuasion of a British filmmaker Sue McKinley, end up playing the roles of six freedom fighters from the Indian Independence movement (second plot), namely Chandrashekhar Azad, Bhagatsingh, Ashfaqullah Khan, Durgawati Devi, Shivram Rajguru and Ramprasad Bismil. Through the non-linearity in the narrative, the film allows us to study the origins and the evolution of the three various discourses of nationalism within the framework of one single

film – namely composite cultural, secular and religious nationalism. It also connects this evolution trajectory with events of historical importance – before and after Independence – in the Indian context.

RDB is Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra's second film. Mehra started his career as a film director with *Aks* (2001) which was critically acclaimed. While talking at a workshop conducted by the Screenwriters Association in 2012, Mehra gave a brief context about how he came up with the idea for the screenplay of *RDB*.

> I was making a documentary called Mamooli Ram, on Amul, the milk revolution with Kamalesh Pandey. We were sitting in a small hotel room in Nanded, drinking. We started singing songs, and we both realized we liked similar songs. And so, *Rang De Basanti* was born. He was angry with the system, I was helpless with the system. We wanted to do so much. But we really can't do anything and it was born out of anger. He wrote a story called *Ahuti*, meaning sacrifice. *Ahuti* was about the armed revolution about India, between the years 1919 and 1931. It started with Ashfaqullah Khan, Ramprasad Bismil, Bhagat Singh, Rajguru, went on to Chandrashekhar Azad and so on. We had this amazing screenplay called *Ahuti*, which we had also termed as *The Young Guns of India*, which started with a train robbery, Azad on a horse and so on. I said, "let's do *The Young Guns of India*". We were going to go on the floor, and suddenly there were a couple of films on Bhagat Singh made. But they came and went. Not because they were good or bad films, not because they were written badly or not written so bad. I'm not being judgmental about them. And this is very important: because they did not reflect the sentiment of today's time. Nobody in the audience could identify with something which was [in the] past. It wasn't that

there wasn't idea of patriotism in us, but it was sleeping somewhere. And you had to kind of relate to it in today's world.[151]

The reference to this small anecdote serves multiple purposes: firstly, it helps in establishing the broader context of the film that would connect various time frames with one another – from the Indian Independence struggle to current Indian youth, drawing parallels between the kinds of conflicts that the protagonists are faced with at the given time. Secondly, it also unravels a personal connection that Mehra shares with the evolution of the story – the director's own disappointment with the system, his anger at it. Mehra has expressed his anger with the system in general, how the days from his youth when he and his friends protested against the *Mandal Commission* had a bearing on the plot of the film, in a series of interviews. If we were to visualise the film as a densely woven fabric considering the concept of *Textures*, this personal connection of the filmmaker could be considered to be one of the most important strands giving the fabric its particular texture, making it more relevant than ever before. Most importantly, it made the film palatable for a contemporary audience, who could associate with the story being told. As mentioned by Mehra, there wasn't a dearth of films on Indian revolutionaries like Bhagat Singh[152], but the only film to have made any kind of measurable impact on the society surely turned out to be the one he made.

The *mise-en-scéne* of this film, like most of the Bollywood productions, is deeply entrenched in religious, cultural and historical symbolism. The term *mise-en-scéne* is to be understood in a broader sense in this context – it applies to everything that gets to be a part of the staged scene: from the

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151 "Has the Indian Script arrived?", filmed December 13, 2008 at a conference organised by the Screenwriters Association in Mumbai, accessed on July 24, 2019, video under https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8BFSpBoX9uM&t=23m34s.

152 There have been 7 films made about the life of Bhagat Singh so far, three of them in the year 2002. *Shaheed- e-Azad Bhagat Singh* (1954), *Shaheed* (1965), *Shaheed-E-Azam* (2002), *The Legend of Bhagat Singh* (2002), *23rd March 1931: Shaheed* (2002), *Rang De Basanti* (2006).

finest details of the image and its composition (colour, placement etc.), its symbolism to the things/people in the scene to the light composition of the scene. All these details are deeply rooted in the socio-cultural, historical and religious context that India provides. For an initial understanding of the film and the unravelling of its contexts, as mapped out in the methodological chapter of the thesis, a familiarity with the Indian independence struggle and current affairs is necessary. It is also important to understand that terms like nationalism and patriotism have a different significance in the Indian scheme of things than in the West, especially Europe, since the origins and emergence of these concepts in India is closely connected with the British colonial rule. To make it simpler, the wish to have an Indian nation-state, led by Indians and free of any British domination, the rise of Indian Nationalism, would evoke positive connotations as opposed to the German variant of Nationalism which wreaked havoc in Europe. Similarly, harbouring patriotic feelings towards the Indian nation-state and fighting for its independence was largely perceived as a rebellious, positive and daring act (even in a global context when talking about colonisation), whereas the combination of patriotism with nationalism that emerged in Europe at the beginning of the 20th century, the gross abuse of military power towards the establishment of nation-states is something that continues to evoke negative reactions. Therefore, it is no wonder that a country like Germany, which has a strong tradition of *Erinnerungskultur*[153] (culture of remembrance) meant to warn the society of the evils of nationalism and patriotism, responds defensively to the usage of these terms in a positive way. Similarly, for a country like India, which attained freedom from the British by means of Indian Nationalism (the most important factor, besides the extremely weakened British exchequer as a result of the second world war) and patriotic acts by the freedom fighters, these terms are considered

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153 *Erinnerungskultur*, in general terms, refers to the culture of remembrance, which entails a conscious effort to keep parts of the collective past alive in order to revisit those moments in history and to process the problematic past. In German speaking countries, this term specifically refers to remembering the experience of the Holocaust during the second world war.

to be positive traits. In the current political discourse in India though, these two terms, especially nationalism are being used in a different context and are becoming increasingly problematic and are developing in a way that they could soon be no further from the very exclusive, hegemonic understanding of Nation and Nationalism. The emergence of the term *Anti-National*[154] is a part of this discourse.

The title of the film – *Rang De Basanti* – has its origins in the song *Mera Rang De Basanti Chola* penned by Ram Prasad Bismil and roughly translates to *O Mother, colour my robes in colours of spring (in yellow)*. The reference to spring, however, has a deeper meaning. It not only refers to changing weather but also to a wish for new beginnings after a harsh winter – a reference to the British colonisation of India and the wish that it comes to an end soon. The song was penned by Ram Prasad Bismil, a noted revolutionary, a freedom fighter and a contemporary of Bhagat Singh. Legend has it that Bhagat Singh kept humming this song while being led to the gallows and hence the song can be considered as an appeal to the motherland to colour his robes in saffron, a colour symbolising sacrifice and rebellion. Considering the diverse contexts, the origins and the legend about the song and also the storyline it represents in the film, a contextually apt translation of *Rang De Basanti* could be *O Mother, colour my robes in saffron*. Additionally, it is also noteworthy that the reference to the colour saffron plays upon a dichotomy that is also a part of the narrative – on the one hand the reference to an impending rebellion (in the pre-Independence period against the British) as well as the rebellion in the current context (against the Central Government representing the State) and on the other hand to the phenomenon of *Saffronization*[155] in the Indian political sphere.

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154 Anti-National is a term that has emerged in the current mainstream political discourse in India and is increasingly being used as a derogatory term to label individuals who are open critics of the government of the day. Terms like *Urban Naxals* have also evolved as a part of this discourse.

155 Saffronization or saffronisation is a political terminology (referring to the saffron robes of the Hindu ascetics) used to refer to exclusivist policies of right-wing Hindu nationalism (or *Hindutva*) which seeks to homogenise the Indian state into a Hindu nation with religious minorities like Muslims and Christians reduced to a

With reference to the concept of *Textures,* one could say that the broad topics that any text (or in this case, film) focuses on, form the basic structure of any kind of fabric for a narrative that evolves from it, regardless of the form of the narrative (film or text). In other words, the broad topic provides the context and the material to place the narrative in and makes it feasible in the first place. When we look at *RDB*, the broader context of the film is provided by invoking the Indian independence struggle and then cross-referencing it with a modern-day India around 2002-2005. The question that arises then is how would the two different time frames even work, since both the timelines chosen are so distinct in nature from each other? They are understandably very different – primarily because of the socio-political, historical contexts that they are rooted in. Mehra uses his handiwork and screenplay skills to address this issue. He creates access points in the narrative that help connect these timelines. He looks for, as becomes evident later in the way the narrative is presented, non-linear connections that can be used to establish these access points. With non-linear I don't necessarily mean chronologically linear events, I rather mean looking at events in sequential, orderly manner where one would look at two different timelines in terms of time and probably not in terms of the contents of the timelines while making the aspect of time secondary. In case of *RDB*, for instance, Mehra doesn't compare India in pre-Independence time with the modern–day India at the turn of the 21st century. He, in fact, places them next to each other, initially not even trying to connect these two timelines and lets them stand that way. Through this, he actually makes the audience aware of how different these two timelines are in terms of their socio-political and historical contexts. Once this stage is addressed, he then moves on to establish some thematic connections, overlaps between the two narratives, between the protagonists in the present and the figures they

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status of second-class citizens, and its Sikh, Buddhist and Jain minorities incorporated into Hinduism. The definition of Hinduism, as propagated by *Hindutva* activists is very narrow and exclusive.

play in the past. If he were to go about it in a linear way, the components of the two timelines could have probably looked like this:

Table 7. Timelines in RDB

Timeline 1	Timeline 2
British Empire	Modern day India (Partition happened in 1947)
Colonised India – represented by British officers like McKinley, Dyer, Scott etc.	Democratic state – represented by politicians like Defence Minister Shastri etc.
Young revolutionaries rebelling against the colonial government	Youngsters in New Delhi who are ignorant, detached to what is happening around them.

If the narrative were to focus on these aspects of the individual timelines, there would be very little to connect the two timelines. Instead, what Mehra did, was to approach the narrative in a non-traditional, non-linear way, finding commonalities between both of them enabling the connection of the two timelines easy.

Table 8. Timelines commonalities

Timeline 1	Timeline 2
(British) State as an aggregator, justifying use of violence against innocent citizens	(Indian) State as an aggregator, justifying use of violence against innocent citizens
Protecting their own officers like Dyer, Scott from any kind of punishments, consequences for committing this injustice.	Protecting their own like defence minister Shastri, businessman Singhania from any kind of punishments, consequences for being a part of a corrupt system which and committing injustice.

Young revolutionaries rebelling against the colonial government, protesting it and seeking revenge for events like Jallianwala Bagh, killing of Lala Lajpat Rai	Youngsters in New Delhi who are initially ignorant, aloof to what is happening around them, then protesting a corrupt government and seeking revenge for the death/killing of their friend

One can easily notice the difference now that with a different approach, the filmmaker is able to unveil the commonalities, access points connecting both the narratives. This way, while the broader reference points of the narrative remain the same, the thematic strands constituting the narrative, are woven in a different pattern. It ensures that the focus isn't more on establishing how different the narratives are from each other, but in fact, how they are more similar than one would think. It is also clear that the main narrative is made up of two sub-narratives, each placed in a different social, political and cultural context – the first one is a narrative situated in the Indian Independence struggle while the other one is situated in contemporary India. The characters that are a part of each of these sub-narratives evolve as a group. Considering the characterisation proposed by Tröhler, one can safely say that the film boasts of two different groups of *Ensemblefiguren* (one located in the Independence struggle, the other one in the contemporary context). These two *Ensembles* contribute to a bigger mosaic of the narrative, making the entire group of characters a *Figurenmosaik* and the film a *Mosaikfilm*.

Going back to the nature of the conflict both the narratives represent, Nandini Bhattacharya terms it as a conflict between the hegemonic state and the citizen, in which the citizen doubles up as a saviour in order to reinvent the state itself.

Events in *RDB* appear hailed as a collective consciousness only in the sense of an inevitable response to a hegemonic state: the colonial state-induced resistance; the neocolonial state induces resistance; resistance is always similar in mode and appearance, because it is not about the particular subject or context. It is, rather, the state hailing its citizen savior through its crisis and reinventing itself. Erasing distance and difference between iterations and successions of events erases their singular specificity, as well as the discontinuity scuttling the structural frameworks of history. [156]

The State reinvents itself through the actions of the protagonists that eventually starts off a debate about the status of the Indian democracy. *RDB*, of all the films chosen for investigation in this thesis, particularly focuses on the aspect of the concept of rebirth, of reinventing oneself, of rediscovering oneself – *Renaissance* in a way. *Renaissance* is, however, a very Euro-centric concept. It is strongly rooted in European history and culture. The question then arises: what does this film, with a strong India-related narrative, have to do with *Renaissance*?

Jack Goody, a British anthropologist speaks of *Renascence*. It means rebirth and if interpreted in a broader concept, means a recurring re-contextualisation. In the context of my interrogation here, the use of *Renascence* is more befitting since it offers a broader framework to look at the series of events in a more locally rooted context.

Goody suggests:

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156   Nandini Bhattacharya, *Hindi Cinema: Repeating the subject*, (Oxon/ New York: Routledge, 2013), 44.

> All societies in stasis require some kind of rebirth to get them moving again, and that may involve a looking back to previous era (Antiquity in the European case) or it may involve another type of efflorescence.[157]

The way the Indian society, especially the urban youth is portrayed at the beginning of the film and also later on as it comes up during various discussions, it appears that the Indian society is indeed in a state of stasis. Building up on Goody's argument and understanding rebirth in a broader sense, one could say that for a society to get moving, to develop some kind of momentum, it needs to undergo a process of reinventing, rediscovering itself. Mehra's screenplay and the narrative evolve exactly in this manner while he uses concepts like rebirth, realigning, redefining, rediscovering in multiple ways to make the change in the society he portrays inevitable. He uses rebirth to literally portray the rebirth/ reincarnation of the revolutionaries from the freedom struggle in current day India. By sense of chronology, it would be the rebirth of the figures from the past in the present. If we defy the chronology, one could also consider it as rebirth/reincarnation of the modern-day figures in the past, while playing some characters in a film. Whichever way one chooses to look at it, the concept of rebirth is omnipresent throughout the film. Though Goody argues that India hasn't faced any major cultural and political disruptions, any kind of disenchantment with the world in order to experience a *Renascence* in order to undergo a major change[158], I would argue otherwise. There are several problems with Goody's line of argument. First problem is trying to singularise India in terms of a cultural entity. There is no such thing as 'Indian culture', it is rather a multiplicity of *Kulturnationen*. Secondly, the Indian society has often found itself at the crossroad of being in a state of stagnation, offering a fertile ground for change to set in. So even if we were to

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157 Jack Goody, *Renaissances: The one or the many?,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 7.
158 Ibid., 161.

consider Goody's argument that the Indian subcontinent very rarely faced a cultural discontinuity as faced in some other parts of the world, it did face a lot of political discontinuities and ambiguities, making it ready for change. Be it British Colonialism, Indian independence struggle, Independence and Partition of India, the Emergency in the 1970s, the rise of Hindu Nationalism and the destruction of Babri Mosque, the frustration with the rampant corruption, the scepticism surrounding the legal system – all these societal contexts always offered enough potential for a *florescence* to bloom from the discord. My understanding of culture invariably makes me look at the evolution of culture (which is a constant process) in the context of these socio-political contexts. They are highly interdependent and the one finds an expression in the other. In this spirit, within the framework of this thesis, I consciously differentiate between *Renaissance* and *Renascence*. The *Renaissance*, as it happened and was experienced in Europe, was something specific to that particular point of space, time and socio-political conditions. I would abstain from picking up the term and relocating it to a different context – this time to India. I would rather adhere to the broader term of *Renascence* in an Indian context.

As far as the film is concerned, it mainly refers to the Indian independence struggle and British colonialism and the struggles of a common man in today's times with a corrupt system, enhanced with insightful background like the rise of Hindu Nationalism and further marginalisation of the minority communities, etc. A lot of other equally significant Renascences, often limited to smaller regions and embedded in diverse multiple cultural spaces and socio-political contexts, cannot and should not be referred to in singular terms – there are too many examples which are culturally, locally very important topics, but probably relevant to a particular part of India. As the two plots, situated in two different times, culminate halfway through the film when the narrative allows both the plots to develop on similar lines – most importantly identifying the *Us* and *Them* in both the contexts – it is the revolutionaries/ youngsters vs. the system, the establishment.

The film tries to place the efforts of the five Indian freedom fighters during the Independence struggle and real-life debates surrounding the purchase of the MIG Aircrafts by the Indian Air Force in a context where the nature of the struggle is similar: a large part of the general public in a perpetual state of societal stagnation, helplessly subscribing to their circumstances as destiny, and their struggle against the Establishment. This conflict is an overarching one, accommodating a further series of sub-conflicts within it: the re-contextualizing of colonial history in the wake of more current political conflicts in India, followed by the re-birth of historical rebellious figures from the Independence movement in their modern-day avatars. The revival of cultural clashes (inter-religious clashes in this particular case) that yet again seem to be returning to disrupt the day-to-day lives of ordinary people, and the constant re-defining of *Us* and *Them* (Us in Present vs. Them in Past, People vs. Establishment, Hindu vs. Muslim, Rich vs. Poor etc.), help us situate and understand the interconnectedness of socio-political factors at the time, through the medium of cinema as a tool/lens to reflect upon these socio-political factors.

When we look at the figures in the film, one can slowly understand why I chose the concept of *Rhizome* to describe the evolution of our identities. It is a very inclusive, broad concept allowing a non-linear trajectory for the process of growing and altering identities. Each of the main figures – a total of 12 (six in the current context, six from the past) – has a different social context and baggage that influences the way they react to certain situations, how those situations define their personalities and their thought processes. When we give each of the characters a closer look, one would realise that the figures all represent the fabled social diversity in India. A Sikh, a Muslim, a Hindu, people from lower as well upper middle class, conservative and liberal. Furthermore, the script of the film assigns the protagonists a double role: within the framework of the film, they are also an audience of their own history through the script of the documentary film. This tactic is used to draw them into a parallel world, complete with

a broad range of emotions encompassing the human existence and enabling them to experience an essence of their own consciousness, of their own history, of their societal contexts and offering them a platform, distanced from their realities, to reflect on spiritual and moral questions that plague their existence. Most importantly, a successful outcome of the struggle in the parallel world, situated in the past, is fixed, offering a hope for success to the protagonists situated in the present. There are instances in the film where the director brilliantly puts to use the non-linear narrative, switching back and forth in time portraying both the struggles at the same time. The screenplay of the film allows the director to place the protagonists in the position of an audience: in other words, there is a film within a film. The main protagonists are looking back at the lives of six revolutionaries through the screenplay provided by Sue, who in turn recreated it with first-hand information provided by her grandfather, an officer in the British Army. They embark on a process of rediscovery – understanding their own history through the connections they forge between history and their current-day dilemmas. They all undergo a process of identity alterations as they take on new ways of thinking, of revolting against the injustice of the establishment to which they were very indifferent till just a few days ago.

This film, through the format of the narrative it employs, doesn't have one single character that can be categorically described as the central figure in the film. Hence, when it comes to looking at the evolution of the characters and their identity conflicts, it would be wise to look at the identities of the six main characters in the film. The group evolves as a single entity and so do their identities.
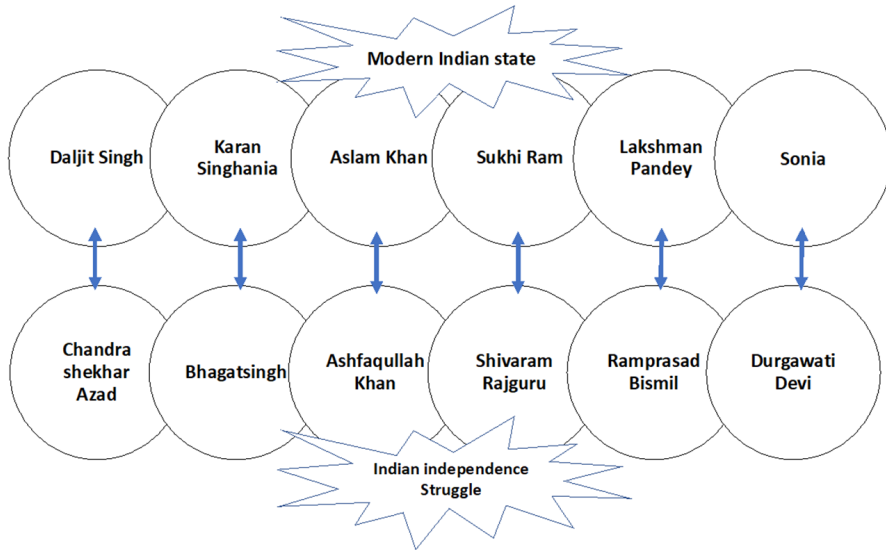
IMG. 7, RDB, Characters

To begin with, all the members of the group undergo a change, an evolution in tandem with the narrative. What is specific to this narrative, granting it a special texture, is the fact that they evolve in a rhizomatic way and not in a hierarchical, systematic order. Having said that, the journeys of DJ (Chandrashekhar Azad), Karan (Bhagatsingh), Aslam (Ashfaqullah Khan) and Lakshman (Ramprasad Bismil) are portrayed more in depth, along with providing us a detailed background of most of them. The narrative provides very few biographical details about Sonia (Durgawati Devi) and Sukhi (Shivram Rajguru) for us to trace their jouSrneys as comprehensively as in the case of the others.

The whole group, to begin with comes across as a bunch of ignorant, aloof youngsters. They represent a cross section of the society. While Karan appears to be affluent, reserved and an introvert, Aslam is a member of the minority community who has a creative mind and is an artist. DJ is the oldest in the group and appears to love parties, get drunk and make merry. Lakshman, on the other hand, is introduced as a populist, right wing

figure with an utter hatred towards Western culture. Sonia and Sukhi blend in well with the group without actually presenting any particularly noticeable traits at the beginning. If we were to imagine the evolution of the group as a whole, we could compare it with the visual of a rhizome. The back and forth of the figures moving into the focus, coupled with the traits that they are taking on, modifying and shedding, is in tandem with the structure of the narrative. While the characters of Aslam and Lakshman evolve simultaneously and respond to each other (and the characters played by them), the characters of Karan, DJ, Sonia and Sukhi respond primarily to the broader contexts around them.

Let us consider the figure of Lakshman for example. The character in the context of this film is full of symbolism and dichotomy. Lakshman derives his name from the figure of *Lakshman*, a very devoted brother of the central figure *Ram* in the Indian epic *Mahabharata*. True to his name, Lakshman plays the virtuous man in the film, particularly highlighting his unwavering loyalty to whichever side he decides to be on. At the beginning it is his party and his party elders, later it is his foe-turned-friends. His attire is a direct indication of his political affiliation – he belongs to a party which believes in the ideology of *Hindutva* and thus the saffron colour, the vermilion mark and his utter dislike for Western culture. Aslam, on the other hand, is an antithesis to Lakshman. He is casually dressed, very soft-spoken and presents his artistic nature and shows no symptoms of being an 'anti-national'. He seems to have no problem with his partying friends, though he is not seen drinking or smoking. The interesting part about Lakshman's character is that considering his attire in the opening scene, as his character begins to unfold over the course of the film, one notices a change in his physical appearance. In fact, as a result of his interactions with the group and Aslam, his initial monolithic idea about who can be referred to as an Indian, undergoes a tremendous change, together with the inner conflicts he goes through. So, while at the beginning, Aslam and the group are evidently the 'others' and don't belong into his idea of India, in the later part of the film, they do. Similarly, the political party that he represents at the

beginning seems to him to epitomise what India and Indian culture is all about. Over the course of the film, also as a result of his association with the group and Sue's film, due to the exposure to the thoughts of freedom fighters that he receives, and largely because of the inexplicable usage of violence against him and his friends, who are just demanding explanations and justice, this political party falls in his eyes. This inner journey is particularly noticeable in the case of Lakshman because his character undergoes the largest shift. The other characters are principally shown interacting with the *Other* all along in the film and hence their evolution isn't as evident as in the case of Lakshman.

Lakshman, who starts off as a narrow-minded, populist rejecting any form of Western culture evolves over the course of the film in a rhizomatic fashion. When he enters the story being played out in the past, he enters it with his political affiliation to a party that rejects any 'Westernisation of Indian society', which contributes largely to his prejudices against Muslims, his problem with the youngsters being ignorant and aloof about Indian history. However, when he re-enters the current time frame and finds himself discussing the history of Indian Independence with the rest of the group, he starts loosening up and acknowledges the interest of the youngsters in history and starts being a part of the conversation. Over the course of the film, it starts becoming clearer to him that the political party that he is a part of, a party that rejects the 'westernisation' of India, is in reality doing less for the betterment of India while being an accomplice to corrupt politicians. On the other hand, the people he considered as the Westernised *Other* so far, start appearing to be worthy of his respect. Some elements of his original identity, like belief in the exclusion of the Muslim *Other*, become redundant, while some traits like his pride about being an Indian continue to accompany him. We see similar changes in the attitudes, thinking and response patterns of the others in the group towards Lakshman as well.

The characters of DJ, Aslam, Karan, Sukhi and Sonia contribute equally to the diversity of the group. DJ is a Sikh man, evidently older than

the rest and someone who assumes the role of the protector in the narrative. His mother and grandfather are shown to be living on the outskirts of Delhi. Aslam is a Muslim boy, an artist at heart with secularist, liberal leanings. He comes from a family of limited means and is acutely made aware of him being different (a Muslim who fraternises too much with non-Muslims) by his family at various stages. His family seems to have more conservative religious tendencies. Karan comes from a very rich family, with only his father alive. He seems to be leading a life of neglect and ignorance – not only is he ignorant/negligent of his surroundings in the beginning, he is also at the receiving end of this behaviour from on his fathers' part. Not much is known about Sukhi or Sonia's families. But as a group, they seem to have a fairly liberal, open-minded (though marred with ignorance sometimes) approach to their surroundings and the people they interact with. They present a stark contrast to character of Lakshman and the filmmaker places the narrative between these two extremes, weaving it in a way, that their paths meet at the end.

Before I start to look at the Hero's journey, I would briefly like to explain my take on the figure of the Hero in this film. The narrative of this film is so complex and non-linear that it is impossible to attribute the role of the Hero to one particular character – even if we were to choose one character, he/she would still represent two characters which they play in two different time frames. The evolution of the whole group of characters can be investigated by comparing it with the concept of *Ensemblefigur* as suggested by Tröhler. When the two sub-narratives, each representing an *Ensemblefigur* within its own fold, merge together to form a bigger narrative that stretches over the course of the film, the characters involved are then further placed on a broader canvas of figures which can be referred to as *Figurenmosaik*. One could almost say, that just like the nature of the identity structures of the protagonists, the narrative operates in a somewhat rhizomatic, non-hierarchical way where a series of figures alternately assume the central role, add a distinct touch to the narrative and step back making way for the others to step up. This process is strictly non-linear and it is

not foreseeable as to who will assume the central role in the next sequence. Even if the end is foreseeable after a particular point, the viewer is not ready for the death of a majority number of figures central to the film.

Though the theoretical framework chosen for this film, especially in terms of the journey of the Hero(es), attempts a chronological and systematic classification of stages, within the ambit of a film it is impossible to exactly define the borders between any two stages. In the following few pages, I have attempted to trace the journey by combining it with film analysis and identifying the different stages. The non-linear structure of the film in fact aids this identification because in many stages, a stage ends with change in time frames portrayed.

 Limited awareness of the problem/ Ordinary World (0:00:50[159]): In the opening sequence of the film, within a few seconds, the viewer is confronted with four images (IMG. 8- IMG. 11). The first one is of a person applying Kohl or *Soorma*[160] to his eyes, the second image of a person taking a ritual bath, the third of a person standing inside a prison in a prisoner's garb and the fourth one of a person who informs the audience of his encounter with another revolutionary – Lenin. This very brief sequence is loaded with symbolism and references. For an audience familiar with the cultural codex in the Indian subcontinent, the first image would that be of a practising Muslim man, since applying *Soorma* is a practise observed by a number of Muslim men. The second image is that of a practising Hindu who recites parts of the holy scriptures while taking a bath, kind of a spiritual cleansing. The third one refers to their presence in a prison and the fourth one sets the context, especially through the use of sepia suggesting a different

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159 To make the identification of the referred sequences easy, I have provided a tentative timeline for each segment of the Hero's journey.

160 *Soorma* is a Persian term for Kohl. It is widely believed in Islam that the Prophet Mohammad used Kohl and hence, many religious Muslim men tend to use it. Though Kohl/Kajal is also used by women of other religious denominations, it usually Muslim men (and not men from other religions) who wear *Soorma* as a marker of their religious identity.

time in the past. It is a time in British India and the images in the sequence suggest that Indian revolutionaries are being held in a prison, probably by the British. The following sequence, set in today's London, defines the broader framework of the film. It is a story from colonised India, of young men fighting against the British Empire, waiting to be told in modern times by a British filmmaker Sue McKinley, whose grandfather was a witness to this story. Within a span of first few minutes, the opening sequence of the film sets the framework for the different contexts in the film. It gives a temporal, local, historical and socio-political context while highlighting the religious, political diversity of the protagonists it portrays.

The beginning of the film, through its non-linearity in terms of time, jumps back and forth between two different time frames – roughly 75-80 years apart from each other (considering the sequence of the events showed in the film) within the first half an hour. It starts with a flashback into the memory of James McKinley, an officer in the services of the British government. Sue's journey starts with her being in London. The memoirs of her grandfather and her wish to turn it into a film represents her familiarity, however limited, and her interest in India. Her initial interactions with her producers, their falling out, her conversation with Sonia on her arrival in India tell us that she is aware of the problems she could face in India while making the film, but decides to travel to India nonetheless. She has defied dominant socio-cultural conventions (in her context the British one) by wanting to make a film about the lesser known freedom fighters from India (as opposed to the popular ones like Gandhi, Nehru). In all probability, this is not such an interesting topic for a British audience, as erstwhile colonisers. At this stage, DJ, Sukhi, Karan, Sonia and Aslam (hereon referred to as the group) and Lakshman Pandey are shown to be ignorant and unaware about a lot of things. This concerns not only the history of Indian Independence but also their lack of awareness about their current contexts – the society that they live in, corruption in the system they are a part of, ignorance towards the history of diversity in the country, etc. Since they haven't been looking at their realities in a critical way as yet,

they have a perception of a normal life where there are a lot of things which appear to have dualistic nature in their view – the *Us* and *Them*, Good and Bad, Indian and Western, Hindu and Muslim etc. The arrival of Sue McKinley into their lives can be considered as a trigger that awakens the curiosity of the protagonists about certain events not only in their past, but also their present.

These first few minutes at the beginning of the film introduce quite a few topics that will be addressed in the film over the course of the next few hours. These topics range from the Indian Independence struggle and the common enemy for all – the British, the fall of the British empire and Indian Independence, a kind of a disconnect and disinformation amongst today's youth about the past (while also showing the appeal that these names hold even today), a sense of disappointment, disillusionment with the modern Indian State and its chosen way of dealing with issues. Over-arching this narrative, is the evolution of the ideas of Nation and Nationalism. Adhering to the idea of *Textures* that I have introduced earlier, these three broad topics are then built upon over the course of the film and give the film a unique texture of its own, interspersed with inter-medial, inter-cultural and historical references. Since the presentation of the topics mentioned above cannot be done in a linear, systematic way, I will attempt at analysing the film as a first step in film analysis by looking at certain scenes in the film. The choice of these scenes is solely based upon the efficiency with which they present the multiple complexities in one scene.

One of the scenes at the beginning of the film introduces us to the lifestyle of today's urban, fairly affluent youth. The main protagonists in the film – DJ, Aslam, Sukhi, Karan, Lakshman and Sonia, along with Sue – are introduced to each other in this sequence. This interaction immediately manages to expose a multitude of fault lines defining the current generation and by extension, the contemporary Indian society. The scene shows a group of youngsters including DJ, Aslam, Sukhi, Karan and Sonia, accompanied by Sue partying late into the night somewhere around Delhi. The appearance of Lakshman Pandey on the scene and his followers and

their objection to Western music, lamenting about the youngsters' lewd and obscene partying, polluting and disrespecting the Indian culture and him warning off the youngsters – all these apparently small arguments point to a larger complex of issues, on which public opinion in India is divided. Exposure to and taking on of Western cultural influences as opposed to safeguarding the Indian culture is the most apparent reason for the skirmish, which in turn exposes deeper fault-lines. Lakshman tells off Aslam while calling him a 'bloody Pakistani' when Aslam tries to stand up to him, before DJ interferes. This reference points to a historically problematic issue of the perception and status of Muslims, a religious minority, in post-Partition India.

The three most apparent issues in this sequence – namely Western cultural influence and its rejection by a section of the society, a highly problematic moral policing by Lakshman and his goons as custodians of the 'Indian culture' (which is difficult to define to begin with) and thirdly, the stature of a Muslim in the social ladder – are all highly interconnected and can be compared to the way current socio-political contexts in India developed over the years. The issue of the Partition, closely linked with some current political issues like that of the state of Jammu and Kashmir[161], the status of the Muslims in Indian society etc. is a recurring issue even in today's political landscape.

Important stakeholders in this complexity of realpolitik are the political parties the BJP and the Congress, and the RSS, which serves as the

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161   The state of Jammu and Kashmir had a special provision under the Indian constitution with article 370 which gave the state far more autonomy than other states in deliberating on internal matters. Advocates of this clause firmly believe that this clause was necessary in order to protect the sensitive demographics of the only Muslim Majority state in India. Opponents of this clause firmly believe that this clause gave Kashmir unnecessary powers and that this clause should be nullified in order to ensure that the same set of rules apply for all the states in the Indian union. On August 5, 2019 the central government led by Narendra Modi's BJP declared the dissolution of the Article 370 and also changes in the power structures within the state. The state was divided into Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh and both would now be treated as Union Territories that will be governed directly from New Delhi.

ideological source of the BJP. In the Vision and Mission of the RSS, it is stated that:

Sangh's alone has been the voice of genuine patriotic concern amidst the cacophonous, politically inspired shibboleths of unde-fined secularism, etc. […] The struggle for political independence occupied the minds of people; this was but natural. However, what was askew was the tacit assumption that the advent of freedom would automatically usher in a revival of genuine nationalist values which had perforce receded during foreign rule. Looking to the West as the pinnacle of civilization, irrationally perpetuating the Britishers' self-serving theories of the 'White Man's burden'; that the Hindus were 'a nation-in-the-making', that the Hindus had achieved nothing of significance in the past, that Westernisation was the only hope for 'the dying race' that were the Hindus; un-questioning acceptance of myths floated by Westerners even in the name of history (e.g., that the Aryans came from outside), that life in Bharat was and had always been at a near primitive state; - ac-ceptance of such numerous myths had virtually become mandatory for anyone with the slightest pretensions to education or intellec-tuality.

That this breed still claims adherents even seven decades after In-dependence bespeaks the intensity of the overarching colonial leg-acy.[…] While efforts to hasten political independence were being pursued in various forms, there were few or no sustained efforts for restoration of the Hindu psyche to its pristine form. Indeed, it is the latter which should constitute the content or core of free-dom. […]

The 800-year-long resistance of the Hindus to Islamic rule had its own lesson for the British. Seeing that physical repression would

not be of much avail, the British, through subtle and not-so-subtle ways, attempted to subvert the Hindu mind itself. They did succeed in part; and a Westward-looking social segment was created, mainly through enforcing the new system of education tailored to generate armies of clerks end 'brown sahibs'. Needless to say, in such an environment, a cleavage developed between the society and its cultural roots and legacy. The nation's identity became eroded.[…] This was indeed foreseen by Dr. Hedgewar. Years of thinking had convinced him that a strong and united Hindu society alone is the sine qua non for not only the all-round prosperity but for the very survival of Bharat as an independent sovereign nation. Social cohesion alone could ensure national integrity.[162]

This interplay of arguments – of the British presence in India and the possibility of Westernisation of Indian society – and that, then in turn, being used to legitimise a singular claim over culture and the creation of a monolithic Hindu identity is a thematic strand that can also be traced in the film. Since this thought process clearly identifies the *Other*, namely the Muslim, it is also easy for believers of this particular school of thought to then proclaim that the Muslim and his culture doesn't belong to the Indian culture (scarily enough, again, parallels are available in a global context – the African, Mexican migrant doesn't belong to the USA, the Muslim refugee doesn't belong to Germany etc.). This particular dichotomy, especially in the Indian context since it is also closely associated with the Partition of India, is very problematic. The interconnectedness of these issues facilitates an attitude like Lakshman's – a Muslim not only has no place in India, if he wants to express an opinion or claim his rights, he should instead move to Pakistan. This attitude, especially Islamophobia, one could argue, is keeping in line with the rise of populism across the world in addition to the history of the Indian subcontinent. But when one considers the fact

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162   "Vision and Mission", Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, accessed on July 15, 2019 under https://www.rss.org/Encyc/2015/3/13/Vision-and-Mission.html.

that India is home to the second largest Muslim population in the world after Indonesia[163], the magnitude of the problem and its potential implications in sheer numbers are scary[164]. Offshoots of the RSS like the BJP, ABVP[165], VHP which draw their ideological inspiration from the RSS and also hold members from the cadres of the RSS in senior positions, have a similar attitude when it comes to their fairly monolithic, exclusive understanding of Indian culture. The character of Lakshman is representative of this particular interplay.

A small sequence focusing on a conversation between Aslam and his father addresses this sense of not feeling safe, not feeling as if you belong manages to capture the sentiment perfectly. When Aslam returns home one evening, his father expresses his anguish at his 'useless friends who drink', who disgrace his religion, corrupt him and asks him why he can't find friends in his *own* community. His father uses a series of terms which are typically used in Urdu – a Persianised version of Hindi. He refers to the term *Qaum*[166] while asking Aslam to look for friends from a similar community, which is the Urdu/Arabic synonym for a Nation – more in the sense of a *Kulturnation*. He also uses the term *Gairmajhabi* to refer to his Non-Muslim friends. *Gairmajhabi* means non-believers but in this particular context, it refers to the people who don't fit his father's idea of *Qaum* – so

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163   "10 countries with the largest Muslim populations", Pew Research Center, accessed on August 12, 2019 under https://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/muslims/pf_15-04-02_projectionstables74/.

164   The majority of the Muslim population lives in the north Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir. The fact that the BJP led government annulled the constitutional provision granting the state a special status has added to these worries.

165   ABVP stands for *Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad* and is a student wing of the RSS. It was established in 1949.

166   *Qaum* is a highly political term, especially in the context of the Muslims in India and the partition of India. Muhammad Iqbal, who is considered to be the founding father of Pakistan, had argued in the publication *Ehsan* on March 9, 1938 that he feared that people like Maulana Madani, who pitched for the Muslims to support the Congress, were presenting dangerous views to the Indian Muslims and that he feared that the Indian Muslims would have to lose their identity in the nationality of other Indians.

basically his non-Muslim friends. His brother adds in saying that this country never accepted Muslims as their own and never will. He gets annoyed at Aslam for having Hindu friends. This stage in the film has thus set out the broader framework in which the narrative is situated and the topics that will recur over the course of the film.

Increased awareness, need for change/ Call to Adventure (0:47:45): As a result of their association with Sue, the group is now increasingly venturing out of their comfort zones and defying existing socio-cultural norms. These include having to start interacting with *Other* elements in the society, people they have chosen to stay away from. This applies to the group as well the character of Lakshman who is also interacting with Sue because of her interest in the history of Indian Independence. Since this is a situation that doesn't make any of the protagonists comfortable, they end up getting anxious about it and it leads to a series of uncomfortable moments, sometimes even leading up to a fight. The interaction between Lakshman and members of the group is a defining moment at this stage. In one of the scenes at this stage, when Lakshman approaches Sue, he recites the snippets from the poetry '*Sarfaroshi ki tamanna ab hamare dil main hai, dekhna hai zor kitna baju-e-katil main hai*', which was penned by Bismil, the character he eventually ends up playing. Roughly translated, these lines mean '*my heart yearns for a rebellion, we shall see how strong the opponent is*'. He recites these lines by heart not only to Sue but also to the alleged representatives of the Western culture he detests, who are disrespecting, polluting their own culture (in his perception) and at the same time finding it difficult to relate to the characters of the revolutionaries they are supposed to play. The recital of these lines, especially by a character like Lakshman, who seems to be resistant to any kind of change, especially a cultural one, can be considered to be an ironic, yet conscious play, hinting at an impending rebellion that his character will soon be a part of, and the forces he will come to oppose will test his tenacity. Before moving on to looking at the interconnectedness of these issues, it is also important to look at the *mise-en-scéne* of this particular sequence. Characters like DJ, Sukhi, Aslam, Karan, Sonia represent one

spectrum of Indian youth - educated, well-versed and comfortable with Western cultural influences, comfortable with the presence of women, largely affluent youth in the Indian society. Their affluence is symbolised through their clothing, their choice of cars and bikes, the consumption of beer, their familiarity with Western music and similar details. Lakshman Pandey and his goons on the other hand turn up at the site dressed in a saffron scarf wrapped around their necks, Lakshman with a vermilion marking on his forehead. Both these groups are Indian. This very interesting juxtaposition of two opposing ideas of being Indian is another thematic strand interwoven strongly into the fabric of the film which also delves deeper into the debate of who belongs, who doesn't belong, who is considered an Indian and who isn't.

Fear or resistance to change/ Refusal of the call (0:49:40): This is one of the first decisive moments in the film. In this sequence, the conflict potential between the group and Lakshman becomes evident and ends up in a fight between all of them. As a result of this, Sue decides to abandon her project as she realises that neither of the two sides are willing to cooperate with each other and any possible interaction between them would possibly only end in a fight. Sue, trying to be the voice of reason, is trying to make the others understand that if they want, they can work together. On failing to do so, she has an emotional outburst and decides to abandon the project altogether. At this moment, we are looking at DJ and Lakshman, both in the role of a hero. Lakshman can be seen taking on the role of a discriminator, since he is still resisting the idea of working with a bunch of 'Westernised youth' while DJ assumes the role of a protector, protecting and defending the minority member, Aslam, in his group.

The two scenes – the one where Lakshman, as a representative of a majoritarian religious political outfit, rejects Aslam as an Indian because he is a Muslim and the other where Aslam's family, especially the men, question his moral compass because he chooses to be passive and make friends with Hindus, outside of his *Qaum* – represent a mutual rejection of each

other. Here, the *Other* doesn't fit well into the defined norms of who belongs and who doesn't. In the Hindu political right, the idea of the Holy Land and the Fatherland being the same is central. This idea thus excludes the Muslims or the Christians. since their Holy Land and Fatherland would be two different places. In the Muslim political right, one of its founding fathers, Muhammad Iqbal, cites precisely this reason as the core reason why Muslims can never belong to India.

> […] The Maulana has not realised that by offering his interpretation he has put before the Muslims two wrong and dangerous views. First, that the Muslims as a nation can be other than what they are as a *millat*. Secondly, because as a nation they happen to be Indians, they should, leaving aside their faith, lose their identity in the nationality of other Indians or in "Indianism". It is merely quibbling on the words *qaum* and *millat*. Otherwise the view is the same that has been described above and which the major community (Hindus) in this country and its leaders are every day persuading the Indian Muslims to adopt, *viz.*, that religion and politics are entirely separate, and if the Muslims want to live in this country, they must understand religion to be a merely private affair, which should be confined to individuals alone. Politically, they should not regard themselves as a separate nation; they should rather lose themselves in the majority.[167]

So, while the Hindu right rejects any space for existence for a Muslim in their idea of India, the Muslim right equivocally rejects the idea of belonging to India citing the same reasons that the Hindu right suggests – namely cultural compatibility based in religious differences. One could almost say, that the one needs the other to legitimise and further their own political gains.

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167   Muhammad Iqbal*, Islam and Nationalism*, published in *Ehsan* on March 9, 1938.

As Sue experiences an emotional outburst, the other two elements in this sequence – Lakshman and the group – briefly introspect. As DJ assumes the role of a Hero, he promises Sue that he will make sure her film is made and that the group, from this point on including Lakshman as well, shall cooperate. Her passion, as an outsider, for Indian history, rekindles some interest and willingness to cooperate among the group.

If we were to borrow Carmen Ulrich's synthesis discussed earlier on, we could use the terms 'Closed-' and 'Open understanding of culture' to describe the schematics of the film. In Lakshman's world view, theirs is a society with interculturality as its defining element. It allows and acknowledges the existence of two separate cultural spheres, which are mostly separate from each other and any possible interaction between them is bound to lead to collisions and clashes. Protagonists like Aslam and DJ on the other hand, would fall under the concept of an 'Open understanding of culture', since in their understanding, culture seems to be a result of a joint development in a common space. It allows the possibility of cultural translation and interaction; it involves an aspect of mutual tolerance. In their view, the society that they live in, is multicultural.

This stage also unveils the underlying and ambivalent *Want* that the group of youngsters are strongly feeling – of wanting to support their friend Sue in her project of making a film on the lives of the revolutionaries. This *Want* is bigger than their individual reservations and ambivalence about the whole idea of the film, about the Indian Independence struggle and even of working together. Lakshman's *Want* is slightly different than that of the other members of the group and it stems from his own fascination with the Indian Independence struggle and respect about the revolutionaries that are at the centre of the narrative of Sue's film.

Overcoming fear/ Meeting the mentor (0:53:40): Through the medium of Sue's film, the group has set aside its inhibitions and has agreed to work together. Sue's film introduces them to their mentors – the freedom fighters from the Indian independence struggle. This moment onwards, we start

seeing the actual process of the evolution and changes in the identity structures of the protagonists. Following up on this line of thought, that of understandings of culture, another interesting aspect in this film is that of a constant shift in the question of who represents the *Other*. The non-linear narrative of the film allows the filmmaker to portray this shift in an effective manner. In a sequence somewhere around the middle of the film, Sue and Lakshman are shown sitting together on a cart, exchanging thoughts. The cart is being drawn down rail tracks and a glance at the diary in Sue's hand tells us about the scene she is planning to shoot – the Kakori train robbery[168]. Sue's interest and respect for historic figures awakens a keen sense of respect for Sue in Lakshman's mind. At this junction, there is still a very concrete line that separates Lakshman and Aslam. This separation is brilliantly portrayed by showing Aslam and DJ standing on the other side of the cart, with their backs towards Lakshman and Sue. Lakshman, representing a populist political outfit is as foreign to Aslam and DJ as Sue who represents the colonial history, which is almost as foreign to them. This is followed by the filming and portrayal for Sue's film; of the actual *Kakori* train robbery and how Bhagat Singh, Azad, Ashfaqullah Khan, along with their colleagues escape the British. It also shows a memory of Bhagat Singh about the *Jallianwala Bagh*[169] and the brutal killings of unarmed protestors by the British forces. The *Other* in this part of the sequence are the British.

Committing to change/ crossing the threshold (1:02:34): In the sequence that follows, the narrative starts moving more fluidly between the present and the past. As and when the real-life figures i.e. DJ, Sukhi, Karan, Sonia,

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168 The *Kakori conspiracy* was a train robbery that took place between Kakori and Lucknow on August 9, 1925. The plan involved robbing of cash being transported to the British treasury to finance the revolutionary activities. The plan was conceived and executed by Ram Prasad Bismil, Chandrashekhar Azad, Ashfaqullah Khan amongst others.

169 Jallianwala Bagh Massacre is considered to be one of the bloodiest massacres in the history of British Rule of India. It took place under the supervision of General Dyer on April 13, 1919 in the city of Amritsar in Punjab killing at least 400 people and leaving thousands injured. General Dyer refused to express regret about his actions and found support in large sections of the English society.

Aslam and Lakshman interact with their mentors i.e. with Chandrashekhar Azad, Shivram Rajguru, Bhagatsingh, Durgawati Devi, Ashfaqullah Khan and Ramprasad Bismil, the figures they play in Sue's film, one can see a noticeable change in their characters. Every time they go back in time, they seem to be taking a problem they are facing in the current time back in time with them. The particular event that is being filmed in the past, seems to hold the keys or at least points them to probable solutions. In this sense, they're literally crossing the threshold - from the world of familiarity and passiveness to a more dynamic and active world - and at a subconscious level, also committing to change. One small example worth considering here is the sequence where the group is shown having a meal together in a *Dhaba*[170] owned by DJ's mother. As the discussion around the table progresses and addresses issues concerning the killings at Jallianwala Bagh, the British colonisation of India and the state of today's India, Aslam moves into the frame and sits in close proximity next to Lakshman. In this instant, Lakshman gets up and distances himself from Aslam. The *Other* in this part of the sequence, is of course, the Muslim. The narrative moves back in time to a conversation between Ashfaqullah and Bismil. In a wonderfully crafted intramedial reference, they are pondering over their situation – how they are being hunted down in their own country. At this stage, Bismil suggests to Ashfaqullah that he should go to Afghanistan, be safe amongst his *own*. This can be connected to Lakshman's primary reaction on seeing Aslam – that he should go away and be amongst his own. Ashfaquallah, visibly hurt, questions Bismil if Bismil doesn't consider him to be one of his *own*. Ashfaqullah's response to Bismil's suggestion makes it clear to Bismil that a Muslim can be as Indian as a Hindu like himself, that a Muslim can consider India to be his motherland as much as any other Hindu. Lakshman, impersonating Bismil in the flashback, carries these impressions back into the reality and though it takes him a long time to make peace with Aslam, one can acutely see the varied layers of his personality evolving.

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170   *Dhabas* are roadside restaurants in India serving local cuisine. The food served here is affordable and they also double up as truck-stops.

The interesting thing about this part of the sequence is that within a span of a few seconds, the characters undergo a major change in their attitude and understanding of the *Other*. While Lakshman is unable to bear the presence of a Muslim in close proximity, the character of Azad that he plays in Sue's film, is consciously pondering over the question as to why he didn't consider another Muslim, who is also fighting to free the same motherland as he is, to be his own and suggested that he escape to Afghanistan, to his own people. This pondering, yet again has a connection to the broader thematic context of the film.

This particular sequence can also be considered rhizomatic in nature, in terms of the way it portrays the evolution, the taking on and letting go of certain traits in one's identity. If we consider the last parts of the sequence just described, we could examine this phenomenon in the case of Karan and Lakshman in particular. While Karan, in reality, is portrayed to be a rich, spoilt, aloof youngster, the character he plays in Sue's film is that of a deeply intellectual, emotional, responsible youngster. So, when Karan shifts gears and goes back in time, he goes back in time as an ignorant youngster, aware of the corruption in the country, but choosing to ignore it and waiting for his chance to escape to the USA. He takes along with him questions about Indian history. When he finishes shooting the scene in Sue's film, he comes back to his reality, still very much stuck in the past and asking questions about oppression by the ruling classes and killings of the innocent.

Experimenting with the new conditions/ Tests, Allies, Enemies (1:05:15): All the protagonists can be seen trying to inculcate some of the impulses they have received from their interactions with their mentors, rooted in the past, in their lives today This whole new process is exposing the protagonists to different thought processes and making them question a lot of their conceptions. They are seen comparing the lives and times of their mentors with their realities and critically trying to question a lot of things like their relation with their country, their relation with other religions, the rebellious streak that pushed the freedom fighters to rebel against the injustice being

meted out to them. Experimenting with new conditions not only means having to face a new set of challenges at an emotional level, it also means having to identify one's allies, friends and enemies on this journey. The group seems to be warming up to each other, slowly moving away from considering each other as enemies towards becoming allies, if not friends right away.

In the part playing in the pre-Independence time, as a part of Sue's film, the characters played by the group are now facing persecution. The two main protagonists on display here, Bismil played by Lakshman and Ashfaqullah played by Aslam, are shown to be making their peace with the fact that they will be executed. Their handling officer, on the other hand, is finding it difficult to accept that he will be responsible for the death of these young boys. Though the figure of James McKinley is a secondary one, the evolution of his persona is also interesting. Through his writings familiar to the audience from the beginning of the film, we know that he is in awe of the young freedom fighters, who are willing to sacrifice their lives for their motherland. What one probably doesn't expect is his emotional vulnerability when he is tasked with torturing them for information, and eventually with the task of executing the young rebels as a punishment for their rebellion against the British Empire. While the time portrayed in the film is around 1927, a small bit in this sequence also points us to what is to come in the course of time – the Partition of India based on religious lines. This experiment with time is a daring attempt on the part of the filmmaker. Since he is aware of the time and socio-political context his audience is situated in, he is experimenting with them when he takes them back in time, comparing their current contexts with the historical challenges and then, while they are still figuring out the historical references in a different time, using popular and known rhetoric of two-nation theory, divide and rule etc. to remind them of what happened in the future. When the sequence from the past ends, the characters of Lakshman and Aslam are shown sharing an intense gaze, also making it clear that the characters they have played in Sue's film have left an indelible print on their minds,

that they might be in awe of the camaraderie of the characters that they played and might be reconsidering their own attitudes towards members of the other religion, especially Lakshman. The concept of 'future' is yet another interesting concept here because of a variety of reasons – firstly because this future is somewhere between the two different time frames being portrayed but is never shown. One of the most momentous events in this future, the independence and Partition of India, is again an event with a dichotomous relation with the audience – when they stand in the past with the rebellious protagonists, this event seems distant and the probably even unattainable, but when they move back into the current time frame and are on the same pedestal with their peers, this event is a concrete fact of their past. Since the audience brings in a certain amount of factual knowledge about the Independence of India, the filmmaker seems to be challenging them to understand the nature of the struggle, what this freedom, independence means, that with freedom comes responsibility for every citizen towards their motherland, in designing the future of their country, in now being responsible and actively trying to solve problems rather than point fingers the other way. He cleverly uses the character of Ajay to this end.

Preparing for major change/ Approach (1:11:01): In this section of the film, roughly halfway into the narrative, the audience is now familiar with the going back and forth in time. Coming back to the sequence we are referring to at this stage, while the group adores Ajay for having found his passion and his commitment to the country, they also are seen to be facing a dilemma of sort. They are struggling to understand the passion that drove the revolutionaries, and now even Ajay, to committing their lives to their country. As they try to cumulatively look at all that has gone wrong in the country since Independence, Ajay draws their attention to the fact that they cannot be merely sitting and complaining about things not working. If they want a change, they should do something to bring about the change. Another short sequence, in which the group pretend that Ajay is dead and carry him while pretending that he received full state honour, points us to

the probability of an impending death. Lakshman can also be seen increasingly warming to the group, respecting at least some members of the group – especially Ajay and Sue for their commitment to the history, to the country he considers is supreme to all. All in all, this sequence can be considered as the beginning of a turning point in the film since we have now seen the protagonists preparing themselves and the people around them for a major change that is looming on the horizon.

Big change with feeling of life and death/ Ordeal, Death and Rebirth (1:39:36): The death of Ajay Singh Rathore, a professional pilot with the Indian Air Force turns out to be the turning point in the whole narrative. After this point, the narrative evolves in a way that the two-time frames portrayed in the film – the pre and post-Independence times – start developing in the parallel, making the juxtaposition of these two different time frames even more coherent. This starts with two events – one is the bombing of the Central Legislative Assembly in New Delhi in 1929[171] to draw the attention of Indians and also the world to the unjust rule of the crown in India, with a special reference to the Defence of India Act, 1915[172] and second is the accidental death of Ajay in a plane crash. The sequence of the final rites of Ajay, where DJ is shown assuming the role of the next surviving male kin[173], is loaded with symbolism addressing the religious diversity in India, and its connection to the vague concept of Nation. DJ being assigned the duty of setting Ajay's funeral pyre on fire cannot be merely attributed to him being older than the others. In spite him being Sikh, he is entrusted with the responsibility of setting fire to Ajay's pyre. This figure could easily

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171 Bhagat Singh and Batukeshwar Dutt bombed the Central Legislative Assembly in Delhi on April 8, 1929 in order to protest against the implementation of the Defence of India Act 1915.

172 The Defence of India Act was an emergency criminal act introduced by the Governor General of India in 1915 in order to contain the rise of revolutionary activities during and in the aftermath of the First World War.

173 In the last rites performed on a dead person in Hinduism, the dead body is usually placed on a stack of wood and set to fire after performing some spiritual acts like the reciting a hymn from the *Vedas*. The next of kin, usually a male relative, whose father is dead, is entrusted with the responsibility of setting fire to the funeral pyre of the dead person.

have been Sukhi or Karan, since they are Hindus and seem to have known Ajay just as long as DJ. It could have been Lakshman as well since he is evidently a staunch, practising Hindu. DJ being assigned this role is a reference to the fact that even today, in India, the staunch proponents of Hindutva, consider religions like Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism to be off-shoots of Hinduism and hence, also as people who belong to India since their Holy-Land and their Fatherland are the same. This sequence also portrays Aslam at the funeral, with his head covered, as is normal in Islamic rituals for the deceased and offering his prayers for Ajay in a predominantly Hindu setting. Sue, predictably a Christian and also an outsider, is present at the funeral as well. The presence of the Air Force personnel at this ritual, due to Ajay's professional connection, highlights Ajay's own perception – that he was an Indian first before anything else. The spirit of the Indian nation, strongly rooted in its syncretic composite cultural nationalism represented by Hindus, Muslims, Christians etc., who are Indians first, is amply visible in this sequence. Proponents of religious nationalism classify their citizens primarily based on their religion. The concrete separation between this and the following stage is a bit difficult because both the stages contain elements that could fit well in the other stage. The primary reason for this could be the non-linear narrative of the film.

Accepting consequences of new life/ Reward, Seizing the sword (1:45:15)*:* Once the heroes start coming to terms with their loss, the necessity to do something against the injustice meted out to them and their friend starts seeping in. To protest against the injustice being meted out to Ajay and his memory, they decide to follow the path of non-violence and organise a protest at a landmark in Delhi, Jantar Mantar. This is a particularly interesting juncture in the film for two reasons – firstly, it is from this point onwards that the bigger *Need* which is underlying the narrative so far starts revealing itself. The *Need* focuses on rebelling against the establishment and the injustice that the State is practising against its citizens. Secondly, the sequence connects two very seemingly different events. The protest, which is supposed to be a non-violent one, turns violent because of aggressive means adopted

by the state. It also makes it very clear to the heroes that their struggle to get justice for their friend may not succeed by non-violent means. This is a direct parallel with the life of Bhagat Singh, who eventually became very disappointed and disillusioned with the Non-Violence Movement of Mahatma Gandhi and over a period of time became convinced that one needed to resort to use of violence to combat violence. Lakshman's disillusionment with his political party, the people he considered to be his peers, is also a highlight in this sequence. It is not conceivable for him why a party, which claims to be supremely nationalistic, to be custodians of Indian culture would want to suppress the injustice being done to Ajay's memory, a victim of corrupt practises and a true soldier.

It can be considered as a moment of rebirth for most of the protagonists in the film. After seeing the emotional turmoil that DJ and the rest are going through after the violent attack on the protestors, Sue is shown thinking that once this night passes and they awaken from deep sleep, they may be reborn as a different people. This notion of rebirth, interestingly, has also been applied to the State – the atrocious, unjust British rule returning back in the form of a corrupt, unjust Indian State, both variants resorting to use violence to suppress dissent. This sequence allows us, in fact, a direct comparison with the Hero's journey as described by Campbell/Vogler since this point onwards, this will be the new life that the heroes will lead.

New challenge and rededication/ the road back (2:00:11): The bigger conflict in the narrative now is the corruption. The grand scale of the project the heroes have taken on and the challenges only become evident once they set out on this path. A series of superimposed sequences start after this point in the film. This approach that paves the way for the climax, though innovative and unique in some ways, also has an unsettling effect – not only on the protagonist and his immediate social circle giving them a feeling of being in a life-and-death situation, but also on the audience since it evokes a particular kind of uncertainty, combined with curiosity. The sequence in

question begins with Karan, who plays the character of Chandrashekhar Azad in Sue's film, dreaming about the massacre of Jallianwala Bagh, which his character had witnessed as a child and then at a subconscious level comparing it with the killing of his friend, Ajay, at the hands of the defence minister. Following this, the heroes are shown discussing what could be the best course of action. From this point onwards, the movement of the characters back-and-forth between the past to the present becomes more fluid. As it becomes clear that the defence minister could be an accomplice in the death of Ajay, his being guilty is then compared with the guilt of the British empire in general, who were also guilty of killing innocents (particularly Jallianwala Bagh and the killing of Lala Lajpat Rai in the film).

An image of the figure of the defence minister in the current context is superimposed on the image of General Dyer in the historical context – both ordering the shootings of innocents for the gain of the political entities they represent (IMG. 14 and IMG. 15). While one represents the British colonial government, the other one represents the current Indian state. The change of the parties invoking *Jai Hind* (Victory to India) also changes – in the first sequence it is the freedom fighters revolting against the British rule, in the second one it is the corrupt politicians, appearing as and representing the state apparatus. The term *Other* and its constantly changing, ambivalent face becomes evident here, once again. While in the past, the heroes are seeking revenge of the death of a leader Lala Lajpat Rai at the hands of a British officer, in real time they are seeking revenge for the death of their friend Ajay at the hands of an Indian politician. In tandem with the figures they are shown to be playing in the past, they decide to take a very courageous step of killing the figure who they think is responsible for these deaths – the officer James Scott[174] and the defence minister respectively. This stage is also important in terms of the looking at the

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174 James Scott was the superintendent of police and the responsible officer who ordered a *Lathi Charge* (baton charge) on the people protesting against the Simon Commission on October 30, 1928, most notable of them being Lala Lajpat Rai. He personally charged at Lala Lajpat Rai, who later succumbed to his injuries and died on 17th November 1928.

inner journey of the Hero vs. his outward journey since this situation forces the heroes to respond to what is happening in the real-time world around them, while he/she are struggling with an inner fear. Though an intense sense of fear grips the heroes, it also gives them a cause they are passionate about, now finally being in tune with the characters they play. In both the settings, it is a group of young men out to right the wrongs, by ways they deem are right and will create some impact after their initial failure by resorting to non-violent means.

Final attempt, last minute dangers/ Resurrection (2:04:30): The killing of the defence minister fails to create the impact that the heroes were hoping for; instead, the state machinery chooses to protect one of their own. Even when evidence points at corruption on the part of the defence minister, together with Karan's father, the state apparatus seems to be busy protecting the dead defence minister as a brave soldier, who died in the service of the country. This rhetoric, yet again, is similar to the rhetoric employed by the British government during its rule in India since according to their perspective, they used violence for self-defence and to maintain law and order. When the heroes realise that their step of killing the defence minister has actually put him on a higher pedestal than when he was alive, it infuriates them. As a result, the group considers and eventually decides to go public and confess what they have done. In their eyes, they have nothing to hide since they done nothing wrong. They also know that this path could probably end only in one way – their arrest or even death. This is a particularly emotional moment in the film that appeals to the audience – a group of youngsters who didn't seem to have any connect with the country that they lived in, who were utterly ignorant to larger problems and lacked any kind of passionate association with India, have come a long way. Not only are they now connected with the characters from the Independence struggle but have also internalised the values that they stood for, their passion for their motherland. The rebellion to seek revenge against the injustice of the British Government has also come to influence the individuals in many ways than one. While at an individual level, each protagonist is aware that

this is their final chance of securing a victory in the conflict they had set out to address, they are undergoing a lot of internal conflicts before the final act. Karan for instance, kills his own father, an accomplice to the dead corrupt minister, in order to complete one step in the process of revenge. Though this development isn't directly comparable to the biography of Bhagat Singh, who ran away from his parental home to avoid marriage and commit himself to the Independence struggle, in an odd way, Karan too distances himself from his surviving parent by not just going away from him, but by killing him. He too, sacrifices himself from the riches in his life which would have made it possible for him to flee and instead, commits himself to the freedom of his country – albeit in a different sense than Bhagat Singh. He commits himself to freeing his countrymen, especially Ajay, of the injustice handed out to them. Sukhi, initially not convinced of the approach adopted by the group, comes around and decides to go along in spite of his apprehension. All of them who decide to be a part of this last leg, beside Sonia and Sue, are also aware that this could be the last act of their lives.

Mastery/ Return with Elixir (2:13:00): This stage is the final stage in the Heroes' journey. On their way to taking the radio station hostage, a final morphing of the two characters that each of the protagonists has played, is in its final leg. The thoughts that James McKinley had expressed with regard to the young freedom fighters he was in charge of, are now applicable to the 5 protagonists from today's time. They have taken on a lot of traits of the figures they played and have been inspired to do something good for their country. Their choice of the public broadcasting radio station, All India Radio whose slogan is *Bahujan hitay, Bahujan sukhay* (roughly translated, it means for the benefit of the masses, for the betterment of the masses) is also symbolic of the nature of their act. Their aim of committing the murder in the first place, is their solution to start addressing the problem of corrupt politicians and hold them responsible to their actions – and this in a bizarre way, for the benefit of the masses, for the betterment of the masses. They use the radio station to announce to the whole country

that they are responsible for the murder of the defence minister and presenting their reasons for this act, starting a debate among various cross sections in the population. By committing this final heroic act, the protagonists have finally won the conflict that they were aiming to address – by kickstarting a wider debate about the state of the nation and the political establishment and by punishing them. Ironically, the final act that the state commits against them, with the police and special force commandos as their agents, is an act of violence, yet again making a comparison with the British colonial power feasible. Though the youngsters have come clean of the crime they committed and also made it evident that they don't possess arms anymore, them being alive is considered far more dangerous and hence their execution is ordered. Ironically, the young men had set out to avenge the death of a soldier for which the political establishment was responsible. Yet, it is the same soldiers, who have now been entrusted with the task of bringing down these young men on orders of the political establishment. This final stage, where the protagonists claim a victory, doesn't turn out well for the protagonists in the context of this narrative. The victory comes in various forms – that they manage to get the guilt of killing someone off their shoulders, that they get a chance to present the truth about the corruption and death of the defence minister, by raising questions about the political establishment and demanding answers from them, in the form of the public anger towards them and starting a wider debate about the corruption and holding politicians accountable.

This sequence is, yet again, loaded with symbolism. To begin with, DJ's mother, who wears a thread binding her two fingers because she believes it may protect her son, wakes up to a morning where the thread has come lose. This small act hints at an impending danger for DJ's life. Sonia, while speaking to her comatose mother-in-law, tells her that the sacrifice of Ajay's life will not go waste, referring to some kind of justice/revenge being sought. A series of symbolic acts, varying in their portrayal and the religions they represent, and are rather ritualistic in nature, dot this sequence. Aslam's father praying in the mosque (IMG. 16), a Hindu sadhu offering

Arghya (an offering to God) at sunrise (IMG. 17), DJ's grandfather and mother appealing to the almighty to accept the sacrifice of the young boys (IMG. 18), a glimpse of the war memorial in New Delhi (IMG. 19) – all of them are symbols pointing to a sacrifice. With reference to the title Rang De Basanti, the significance of dawn, the timing of the climax, cannot be overlooked. It refers to the arrival of a new day, metaphorically even a new age and suggests that the sacrifice has been successful. It may usher in a new time and help achieve the goal that the youngsters had set out to achieve – which is riddance of injustice against the subjects by the political establishment.

Another important act that all the main figures are a part of, is the act of making an offering –in the form of a sacrifice for a cause. This practise is deeply rooted in many religions and cultures across India. The act of sacrifice is sacred in major religions like Hinduism, Islam, etc. Though the nature of a *Yajna*/ *Ahuti* in Hinduism is fairly complicated and rooted in religious texts, it is important to understand its broad nature and cultural significance for the context of this film. An individual commits himself to making an offering to a deity of his choice in order to please the deity and ensure that his/her wish is granted. Fire as a leitmotif plays an important role in rituals which are a part of Hinduism, having the role of being the holy witness. It is considered that any act that is committed in the presence of a fire is sacred and religiously binding. The act of making an offering is usually done in the presence of a fire or *Yajna*. The kind of offerings that are offered to a deity are varied and range from jewelry, money, food to an animal sacrifice. If we were to consider this concept at a metalevel and apply it to the film, one could say that the characters being played by the young men in the documentary film and their actual selves in current time can be looked at as offerings – they readily make the choice to offer their lives in the holy fire that has been lit to achieve freedom. While the motif of death is strongly presented at the time when the revolutionaries are hanged in the film by depicting the gallows, the motive of fire is present in the current time context – during the death of Ajay, during the rally that

they convene in order to protest against the corruption charges against Ajay and last but not least, at the time when they offer themselves to an important cause with fire as their witness.

The music of the film, composed by A R Rahman, continues to be very popular. As opposed to a lot of Bollywood films, most of the songs in this film actually serve a purpose and contribute to the narrative in their own way. While songs like *Ik Onkar* show the tolerance practised in a religious space like a Gurudwara, a song like *Lukachupi* expresses the utter sense of loss a mother is feeling on the loss of her son – a child who would play hide and seek (*Lukachupi* in Hindi) and who has now hidden from her permanently. The style of the songs like *Khalbali* or *Masti ki Paathshala* are closer to the lifestyle of the youngsters. The *Be a Rebel* version of the song *Paathshala* serves as a precursor to the impending connection between the present and the past suggesting a rebellion in the offing. The lyrics of this song in particular bear resemblance to the Indian National anthem in a way because they try to refer to the vastness, diversity and past of the country with apt words[175] – an Anthem for the Young Indians, if you may.

Going back to the schematics combining Carmen Ulrichs' approach to different understandings of culture and Wolfgang Welschs' ideas about different forms of cultural setups, one could analyse the evolution of the group in terms of their understandings of culture. DJ, Karan, Sukhi, Sonia and Aslam are a part of a cultural paradigm that is largely an urban, elitist, affluent setup and can be considered a culture in its own. Aslam, who is a Muslim, though not affluent, is a part of this group. DJ is a Sikh which becomes evident only later on while Sukhi, Sonia and Karan are predictably Hindus. Their seemingly effortless intermingling with each other and a good sense of camaraderie leads us to think that they have an open understanding of culture. Culture, according to them is a joint product of all that every member brings to the table in terms of cultural practises. Lakshman, on the other hand is a character whose figure could very well represent

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175 "Paathshaala – Be a rebel" lyrics, accessed on September 2, 2019 under http://www.lyricsoff.com/songs/paathshala-be-a-rebel.html

what has been termed as a closed understanding of culture. His understanding of *Own* and *Other* is very dualistic and culture, at least at the beginning is a fairly uniform, singular, monolithic entity which is probably not accommodative of any other cultural influences, practises that don't classify as Hindu (in his perception). Yet again, the way Lakshman's understanding changes from Closed Understanding to an Open Understanding is the most notable one, since the majority shifts take part in his case whereas the others are either responding to his actions (like Aslam – primarily as a response to Lakshman's anti-Muslim rhetoric) or then to the broader contexts (like DJ, Sukhi, Sonia and Karan). Another example we can look at is Karan. His character is shown to be usually aloof and reserved. Through his exposure to the figure of Bhagat Singh, he discovers new perspectives to look at his own reality. As it turns out later in the narrative, his father is a member of the ruling class and is involved in the death of someone innocent. Getting inspired by the character he has played in the film, one that revolts against oppression of the innocent, he kills his father. The presence of a rhizomatic identity constellation in Karan's case can be best investigated by seeing how his figure evolves over the course of the narrative – at the beginning of the film, he is a rich, spoilt, aloof, even ignorant youngster. Over the course of the story, his core personality unfolds and exposes new aspects like being emotional, his vulnerability about losing someone close to him (first his mother and then Ajay). As he allows himself to grieve over the loss of Ajay and decides to do something about his father, who is an accomplice in Ajay's death, one can note that the traits that he was just 'portraying' while playing Bhagat Singh, have actually stayed on in him. He can now feel passionately about something; he feels responsible and feels like doing something about the injustice and disrespect being meted out to Ajay's memory. Ignorance makes way for awakening, aloofness for passion. As mentioned earlier, the rhizome considers the process of identity making as a work in progress. It takes on new facets, drops off some and is constantly in the process of becoming.

SEQUENCE ANALYSIS– JALLIANWALA BAGH (1:59:55 – 2:01:04)
(IMG. 28.1-IMG. 28.14)

The sequence, shot by Binod Pradhan, has been shot in black and white making a very conscious choice of differentiating between the good and the evil and showcasing the binary. Though this sequence is very brief and doesn't focus on any of the individual identity evolutions of any of the primary protagonists who are a part of the *Figurenensemble*, this sequence is important for the audience to understand some key elements in the process of the transformation that the protagonists undergo. It helps the audience to get an insight into how they have undergone a profound transformation through their association with the film that Sue is producing and how that association has led them to a point where they can identify the similarities between the patterns of violence practised by the British Raj back then and the state apparatus now. They are starting to draw parallels between how the establishment is misusing and exploiting their position of power to violate the sanctity of their office, to discriminate against the general public – in this case, represented by Ajay. The choice of camera angles and the image composition used to portray the diabolical, exploitative nature of the power equation is complementary to the main plot of the narrative.

The sequence opens with an image showing Sue and DJ in the frame. DJ is shown to be asleep while tightly hugging Sue. Sue is wondering out loud, almost as if talking to the audience, and saying that even if DJ appears to be asleep, he is probably just waking up. As she is saying this, the camera moves closer to her and DJ, going from a wide shot (IMG. 28.1) to a mid-shot (IMG. 28.2) to a closeup (IMG. 28.3) – symbolic for the audience moving closer to DJ and getting an insight into his thoughts. As we get a peek into his thoughts, the first shot is a flashback and shows protestors trapped behind bars (IMG. 28.4). The image of trapped protestors is emerging directly from his most recent experience of being trapped during their own protests. In continuance of the trend in the film, yet again, he is taking an experience from his present and delving into the past, looking to

draw comparisons. The image is a wide shot and has been shot from a lower angle. The use of a low angle shot usually aims at making the object look grand and even threatening. In the context of the film's narrative, however, it is a play on the irony of the situation. On the one hand, the unarmed protestors, are made to appear grander and threatening to the British Government whereas, in fact, they are defenceless and left to fend for themselves in this situation. The following moments capturing the shooting ordered by General Dyer are shot from a wide angle and are mid shots, giving the viewer the impression of being closer to action (IMG. 28.5 – IMG. 28.6). While the first shot portraying General Dyer has been shot from the side (IMG. 28.5), the second shot (IMG 28.7) has been shot from the front and places him in the foreground of the frame while showing his troops in the background granting him more importance as an individual character in the plot as opposed to the earlier shot, where setting the context and the storyline were more important.

In the moments to follow, two historical contexts, represented through two historical images are superimposed. An image rooted in the historical context of General Dyer giving orders to shoot unarmed, innocent Indian protestors is superimposed by an image of the defence minister giving orders to shoot at unarmed, innocent Indian protestors. The superimposition of the images works in terms of logic because of the commonality that regardless of who is handing out the orders, it is the harmless, innocent civilians who are at the mercy of the officers/ ministers representing the state. This superimposition of contexts through the medium of an image continues for a few more seconds providing us with several images that are insightful in terms of their composition and comment on the power structures in the film. It is important to consider how the images portraying General Dyer as well as the defence minister have been shot in two different angles.

The first set of shots of General Dyer and the defence minister are both closeup shots (IMG 28.7 and IMG 28.8). They are being looked at from slightly higher camera angle which makes it seem like the officer is

placed a little low, literally allowing the audience to look down on them. This angle is often used to make the object appear vulnerable. In this case by employing the use of this angle in this particular context, the cinematographer has portrayed the sense of vulnerability that General Dyer (as a representative of the British Raj) as well as the defence minister (as a representative of the Indian state) are feeling due to the presence of unarmed, protesting civilians who seem to be posing a threat while on their quest for justice.

The second set of shots are taken at a wide angle, showing General Dyer and the defence minister at the centre and foreground of the broad frame, placing the responsibility of the violence being propagated on them (IMG.28.9 and IMG. 28.10).

The next shot is a mid-shot allowing the camera to move closer to the protagonist – the defence minister in this case (IMG 28.12)– and help the audience to observe closely how the personal interests of a politician are decisive for the death of Ajay. The reference to Ajay is evident through his brief appearance in the sequence in a manner of questioning of the defence minister for his complicity in the death of Ajay's death and the alternating images show this interaction in the form of a visual dialogue (IMG. 28.11, IMG. 28.13)

The last image shows the defence minister from the same angle (IMG. 28.14) as General Dyer at the beginning of the sequence (IMG. 28.5). This comparison, rather a kind of intra-medial referencing by replicating the frame with one major component changed, signifies how both these characters are connected with each other. This last shot symbolises the coming a full circle – a power transition from a British officer shouting orders to an Indian politician pretending to be humble and respectful (through the gesture of a *Namaste*) but who, in reality, is no different than the British officer.

So how does all of this, the evolution of the protagonists, the change in their understandings of culture contribute to the very current rhetoric of nationalism? Of what is Indian Nationalism? Makarand Paranjape tries

to put together a response this question and connects it to modern-day Indian society. According to him, modern-day India is passing through an intellectual crisis because there seem to be no particularly apt discourse about what Indian nationalism is. He terms it as a crisis in Indian Nationalism.

> One of the components of this crisis (India passing through an intellectual crisis) is the confusion over Indian Nationalism. Very simply, the question before thinking Indians is whether to forget the history and traditions of our national struggle, to deny the sacrifices and efforts of all those who strove that we might be free and self-reliant today, nay, to denounce nationalism itself as a false ideology – and to look for some other way, some other principle of organizing our civic life? Or, whether to go back to these very traditions, to rejuvenate them to deal with some of our present problems?

> Some might consider this is an exaggeration, if not caricature of the issue, yet it is not very far from the truth. The success of the Bollywood movie *Rang De Basanti* (RDB) is a vocal testimony to the crisis in Indian Nationalism. The film touched a sensitive chord in the millions who saw it, especially the youth, who were also the protagonists of the story. Along with other youth-oriented movies like *Yuva*, this film too highlights the difficult relationship that young Indians have with the state. […] The film has several flaws, including the unconvincing equation of the colonial State with that of independent India. But the central issue concerns the relationship between the youth of today and their recent past. From being apathetic and self-absorbed hedonists, the youth suddenly find themselves interpellated into the national story via the lives of another generation of young men, who several decades earlier, took up arms to free their country. In the process, the contemporary

young men learn not only to overcome ideological and religious barriers, but also to arrive at a notion of a nation that is very similar to that of the nationalist struggle. True, they are inspired by those who chose violent methods to strike against the Raj rather than the mainstream Gandhian struggle. Yet, their transition from apathy to involvement is notable, as is their concept of the nation that emerges. This is a nation in which people are not divided along ideological lines and which rejects religious fundamentalism or fanaticism. Justice, dignity and the value of the life of each citizen are important. The sacrifices of those who died to defend the country are remembered and honoured. In this nation, the people struggle against corrupt and callous politicians and actively assume responsibility to make their country better.

The film thus highlights the two main sides of the debate on Indian nationalism, those for it and those against it. The young protagonists begin by being critical, but end being brave, if misguided, proponents of it. [176]

Though his assessment of *RDB* and its reading by society is somewhat apt, what is really problematic is the first part of his statement, especially in wake of current events. Indian Nationalism is indeed going through an intellectual crisis – but it is different in nature than the one Paranjape talks about. Nationalism is in fact one of most discussed topics in India. If this Nationalism can be directly referred to as Indian Nationalism is questionable because for any variant of nationalism to legitimise itself as a variant of Indian Nationalism, it needs to represent the interests of Indians on a larger scale and not just Indians who are Hindus. What we see in today's India is Hindu Nationalism since it puts the Hindu interests above everything else. It is in conflict with the basic idea of a secular country that India

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176   Makarand Paranjape, *Altered Destinations. Self, Society and Nation in India*, (London/ New York: Anthem Press, 2012), 56.

was supposed to be at its inception as opposed to the idea of a country founded on religious similarity which was Pakistan. An even larger problem is the insistence of prescribing a singular, hegemonic understanding (and probably even rewriting) of Indian History. Despite considering that history can never be balanced and fair to all involved parties, leaving out some elements from history altogether like discrediting the Mughal emperors and their influence on Indian culture as a general principle or attempting to discredit the contributions and achievements of stalwart politicians like Jawaharlal Nehru etc. is highly problematic.

With reference to the problematic cited by Paranjape, while there are renewed attempts now to recognise the sacrifices and efforts of all those who strove for freedom, the choice of who these people should be is turning out to be selective and it leaves out freedom fighters, especially the ones who represented minorities. The problem isn't as much with the concepts of nationalism as much as it is with the religious, exclusive nationalism and the fact that a large number of Indians are adopting it with open arms. They are using it as a principle to organise their civic life centred around a common *Other* – the minorities, the lower castes that challenge the one-sided, lop-sided view of Indian history and Indian Nationalism. And unfortunately, the onus of this doesn't lie only on the BJP but equally on all the other political parties who have increasingly become aware of an assertive young middle class, which subscribes to variants of *Hindutva* – from soft to radical – and have adopted it into their political discourse as well. So, while in the public discourse we increasingly talk about towering figures

from the right like Syama Prasad Mukherjee[177], Hedgewar[178] which so far were known largely in the right political circles, or even try to realign the political leanings of potentially secular politicians from the independence struggle like Gandhi[179], Sardar Patel[180] or even Babasaheb Ambedkar[181] to the right, we also increasingly notice the questioning of the commitment of figures like Nehru and Gandhi to Indian independence struggle, the common allegation being connected with their perceived sympathy towards the Muslim minorities and the newly created state of Pakistan.

Another important concept that I have extensively addressed here is that of *Renascence*. The concept of *Rhizome* which is also central to the inquiry here allows itself to combine with the concept of *Renascence* very well because the idea of a *Rhizome* foresees a lot of new offshoots, taking shape from the existing context. In more concrete terms, since we look at the identities of the protagonists in a rhizomatic way, it allows us to have a better understanding of the taking on of new identities, traits, aspects that redefine the person who is taking it on and allows them to undergo the

177 Syama Prasad Mukherjee was an Indian politician and the founder of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh in 1951. It is considered to be the predecessor of the Bharatiya Janata Party. He was particularly opposed to the introduction of the Article 370 in the Indian constitution. He visited Kashmir in 1953 and went on a hunger strike to protest against this provision that required Indian citizens to carry ID Cards when visiting Kashmir and prohibiting them from settling down in Kashmir. On the abolition of the Article 370 in August 2019 by the BJP led Indian Government, a number of BJP politicians described this event as realising Mukherjee's dream.

178 K.B. Hedgewar founded the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh with the aim of creating a united India rooted in Hindutva idelology.

179 "Being Gandhian: Why Narendra Modi's career has been a series of odes to the Mahatma", theprint.in, accessed on August 13, 2019 under https://theprint.in/politics/being-gandhian-why-narendra-modis-career-has-been-a-series-of-odes-to-the-mahatma/128154/.

180 "BJP's politically-motivated appropriation of Vallabhbhai Patel's legacy sits on historically flimsy grounds", firstpost.com, accessed on August 13, 2019 under https://www.firstpost.com/politics/narendra-modi-bjps-appropriation-of-sardar-vallabhbhai-patels-legacy-political-masterstroke-but-sits-on-historically-flimsy-ground-new-delhi-rashtriya-ekta-diwas-4185103.html.

181 "Ambedkar's appropriation by Hindutva ideology", ed. Ram Puniyani, academia.edu, accessed on August 13, 2019 under https://www.academia.edu/12824269/Ambedkars_Appropriation_by_Hindutva-Edigest_Compiled_by_Dr._Ram_Puniyani_.

process of rebirth. This film is also unique in its texture because it experiences a series of *Renascenses* within and beyond the framework of the film and its production. The concept can also be used to address the question of existent allotted social identities and their impact on the cultural positions of the protagonists. I have already commented that protagonists in the present time like Aslam, Lakshman but also DJ, Sukhi, Sonia, Karan undergo a massive change in terms of their understandings of *Own* and *Other*, together with a changed attitude, especially about being responsible, politically conscious citizens. All these characters come from varied social backgrounds i.e. they have been allotted very different social identities by the society. But as is evident in the case of this film, every character undergoes numerous re-births within the framework of the narrative. This rebirth helps every individual character to profile himself/herself in a slightly different manner, making us, the society, wonder if the socially allotted identities were apt, considering the characters' propensity to evolve and respond to changes. In simpler words, the socially allotted identity to Aslam of being a Muslim young man may have contributed to the rise of certain prejudices against him. They may have become stronger during some moments in the film when Aslam's father and his brother ask him to keep away from his *Other* friends leading to the impression that Aslam would eventually end up resenting his *Other* friends. On the contrary, Aslam not only continues to be friends with the *Other* but he also puts himself in the line of harm, and eventually death, in order to seek justice for the killing of his friend. Similar observations can be made in varying degrees in the case of the other protagonists as well. In the case of this film one could safely say, that the protagonists have been able to move beyond the paradigms of their allotted social identities. They have been able to display an openness towards *Other* irrespective of their allotted identities in order to seek justice and freedom from a corrupt system, resonating with the Indian independence struggle. Their commitment to the betterment of India makes them Indians first, everything else later.

Coming back to the different *Renascences* in the context of the film, the film itself is the first part of the Renascence – a series of socio-political events from the present and the past finding their way into popular art. What is also interesting is how the rhetoric around what the group does has evolved. There are different views on it – from classifying it as activism [182] to resistance[183] to terrorism[184]. And then there came a second stage – which was astounding and came to be referred by many as Flash activism[185] or the Rang De Basanti Syndrome[186] – flash simply referring to the spontaneity and suddenness of the event, the principle of self-organization also involving a lot of spontaneity and suddenness and syndrome referring to a set of concurrent things (in this case corrupt state represented by corrupt politicians and judiciary) that usually form an identifiable pattern. A renowned journalist in India, Shoma Choudhury, commented on what was happening in the aftermath of *RDB*.

Sometimes cinema in India subconsciously intuits a latent public mood. In playing the mood back to audiences, magnified by the hyper idiom of Bollywood, it can create powerful role models, offer potent self-images. *Rang De Basanti* seems to have intuited one such mood. Since its launch on January 26, it has seeped through the veins of this country like a viral, hinting at a contiguous idealism, a common youthful energy that binds the patriots of old with the aesthetes of today. Sleeping idealists: the young have loved the self-image. It has made them feel noble, rung a note of

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182   J Edward Mallot, *Memory, Nationalism and Narrative in Contemporary South Asia*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 86.

183   Nandini Bhattacharya, *Hindi Cinema: Repeating the subject*, (Oxon/ New York: Routledge, 2013), 44.

184   Neelam Srivastava, "Bollywood as National(ist) Cinema: Violence, Patriotism and the National-Popular in Rang De Basanti" in *Third Text, Vol. 23, Issue 6,* Routledge, Taylor and Francis, 2009, 709, accessed on August 13, 2019 under https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/09528820903371123?needAccess=true.

185   Prina Werbner, *Political Aesthetics of Global Protest: The Arab Spring and Beyond* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 205.

186   "RDB Stir goes too far" on Hindustantimes.com, accessed on August 14, 2019 under https://www.hindustantimes.com/india/surferspeak-rdb-stir-goes-too-far/story-Wu3WsXRVRg6yclhbnB1CQP.html.

hope. Accustomed to seeing their vacuity constantly magnified on screen in saturated colours and designer labels, stunned by the constant affirmation around them – in films, newspapers, TV channels – that they are pleasure-seeking automatons committed to little but self-love, they have thrilled to the suggestion that they could in fact be Bhagat Singhs in waiting. In the film, the aesthetes find their catalyst. The audiences seemed to be waiting for theirs.[187]

The film was released on the January 26, 2006. This day is celebrated in India as Republic Day. Within a month after the film's release, on February 21, 2006, the Delhi high court acquitted Manu Sharma, an assassin in the Jessika Lal murder case[188] which had been pending in the court since 1999. There had been scores of eyewitnesses confirming Sharma's complicity in the murder, and in spite of this, due to his political connections, he walked free. This event sufficed to offer a fertile ground for rebellion against the corrupt judiciary and executive. This dissent, and the protests arising out of it, went on to become one of the most influential protests in modern Indian history. The visual aesthetics of the protests and the spontaneity with which they were organised, bore a lot of resemblance to the protests organised in the film. The fact that the protestors chose to stage their protests in front of the India Gate also points towards the film's influence on its young audience. The protestors came from all strata of the society – their hatred and disgust for the failures of the judiciary was a binding factor. Following intense media and public pressure, the prosecution appealed, and the Delhi High Court conducted proceedings on a fast track with daily hearings conducted over 25 days. The trial court judgment was overturned, and Manu Sharma was found guilty of having murdered Lal. He was sentenced to life imprisonment on December 20, 2006. Meghana Dileep investigated this very new form of activism and the way it

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187   Nadja-Christine Schneider, "Medialised Delhi: Youth, Protest, and an Emerging Genre of Urban Films" in *South Asia Chronicle 3/2013*, 98-99.

188   Jessica Lal was a model who was killed in New Delhi by Manu Sharma, the son of a wealthy politician while waitressing at a high-profile socialite party on April 30, 1999.

was shaping up. She realised that much of it was happening in the social media space on the internet.

> Bloggers (usually) began their posts by discussing the realist manner in which *RDB* captured the political angst of the urban-educated Indian youth and then went on to draw parallels between the current politicians in India and the corrupt politicians of *RDB*. Bloggers also strongly condemned the corruption and bureaucracy existing in Indian society. […] young bloggers censured Indian politicians in power (both in the ruling party and opposition) for their political decisions and behaviour, especially in relation to issues of specific concern to them like reservation in educational institutions, censorship of media and communal riots between Hindus and Muslims in India. *RDB* makes passing references to all of these issues excluding that of reservation.[189]

Another example resonating with the 'political angst' of the urban-educated Indian youth, also connected with massive corruption was that of the political movement *Jan Lokpal* Movement in 2011[190]. This movement grew from the grassroots and for a brief period it looked like it could become one of the biggest civil movements the country had seen in a long time. The protests against corruption and the ignorance of the government to the concerns of the common people led to a massive gathering of people, standing at Jantar Mantar near the India Gate under the leadership of Anna Hazare.

Yet another example of a protest that rose from the grass roots, took place at India Gate was in the aftermath of the Nirbhaya Rape incident in

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189 Meghna Dileep, *Rang De Basanti - Consumption, Citizenship And The Public Sphere*, (Master of Arts Thesis, Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 2008), 30.

190 The *Jan Lokpal* movement was an Anti-Corruption movement that took place in India between 2011 and 2012. A series of protests and demonstrations took place across India during this time. The main demand of the protestors was to ensure that a strong legislation was brought in against political corruption.

November 2012. It was organised to show solidarity for her, to support her and also to question a lot of societal norms. The media, especially the social media, supported the protestors unequivocally, by providing the people with a platform to voice their resentments against the system, anguish about the crime. If looked at closely, the way in which these protests were operating, and their nature had undergone a change though.

> Prior to the protests in December 2012 and January 2013, candle-lit protests have sometimes been referred to in a derisory manner as the new form of 'middle-class protests'. But as we have not only seen the brutal reaction of the Delhi police and military forces, who fired tear gas and water cannon against the peaceful demonstrators on screen, but once again also in real life in 2013, the protests after the so-called Delhi Gang Rape at India Gate are now perhaps more seen as a symbol of the emergence of a new form of politics which is influenced and increasingly shaped by the powerful position of corporate news media in Delhi and by the so-called urban youth. Urban youth is not understood as a clearly definable or homogeneous group here, but rather as a category which refers to the lifeworlds and shared lifestyles, emotions and longings as well as a widespread notion of many young people that they are neither represented nor acknowledged by political groups and policy-makers in Delhi.[191]

RDB has not only given people new forms of 'middle class protests' but also provided myths about spaces that have come to represent dissent. Jantar Mantar, India Gate have emerged as popular public spaces where people physically protest against any authority.

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191 Nadja-Christine Schneider, "Medialised Delhi: Youth, Protest, and an Emerging Genre of Urban Films" in *South Asia Chronicle 3/2013*, 98.

While the film successfully deals with several issues within the film itself and combines several complexities, it is also privy to a series of *Renascences* as displayed below.

Table 9. Renascences in RDB

Reproduction in the film	Referencing and re-contextualising (evoking the 'dead' culture and referencing it with the present)	Reproduction
Reproduction of events from the life of the filmmaker through the medium of the film	References to the Indian independence struggle and British Raj, Re-contextualising it with a reference to current day affairs	The RDB Syndrome: Protests held in 2006 in the wake of judgement on Jessica Lal case, in 2011 in context of the Jan Lokpal movement, in 2012 and 2013 in the aftermath of the *Nirbhaya* case
Corruption in the purchases of MIG Aircrafts in 2006	Stories of six young Indian revolutionaries and connecting their stories with 5 youngsters from today	Flash-Activism
2005 Case in Allahabad where 4 students took over a TV station	The common man vs. the Establishment -in both time frames	Rise of *Jan Lokpal* movement, demanding more transparency and to deter corruption

and were killed by security forces[192]		

RDB perfectly manages to represent the finer nuances of different understandings of nationalisms. It stands up to the mammoth task of portraying schools of thought pertaining different nationalisms. Ranging from how they used to be in the pre-Independence period, against the backdrop of Colonialism, uniting Indians as one against an outsider British occupier as opposed to a more current context where the face of the *Other* is constantly changing – Muslim, Western cultural influences, the corrupt state. The juxtaposition of these various contexts and combining them with the thematic strand of nationalism, by trying to define and then redefine who is an Indian, who isn't, what does it mean to be an Indian, leads the protagonists to question and revisit their own understanding of history, of their own prejudices and ignorance towards certain issues, in turn, leading them to interact with their own history and evolve. Their evolution isn't only influenced by their personal perceptions of the *Other* and their responses to situations while interacting with this *Other*, but also by the constantly changing face of the *Other*. This whole process of evolution leads to the creation of a wonderfully textured narrative, creating its own intra-medial references, with an overarching connection to topics like the Indian Independence movement, Partition of India and corruption in India, which also appeals to a large cross section of audience since it helps them connect their common reality to their past and try and revisit their own understanding of India and being Indian - just like it does for youngsters in the film.

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192 "Has the Indian Script arrived?", filmed December 13, 2008 at a conference organised by Screenwriters Association in Mumbai, accessed on July 24, 2019, video under https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8BFSpBoX9uM&t=23m34s.

4.1.2   Religious nationalism: *Kai Po Che* (2013)

Kai Po Che (KPC) is a film adaptation based on the book *The 3 mistakes of my life*[193] by Chetan Bhagat. The epilogue of the book claims that this is a story based on real-life events and that one of the characters in the story wrote to Bhagat while contemplating and attempting suicide. Bhagat, who was living in Singapore then, managed to locate the young boy with the help of his contacts in Ahmedabad and later went down to meet him to find out about his story. The story, it turns out, is about the 3 mistakes this young man seems to have made in his life. Abhishek Kapoor, who is the director of the film and has made popular films like *Rock On* (2008), mentioned in an interview at the time of the release that he reworked parts of the book, mostly importantly the character of Omi aka Omkar[194]. Even though this film is an adaptation of a book, I will primarily focus on the film for the sake of analysis.

The time portrayed in the film is around 2000/2001. The exact time frame, though, becomes clear only later in the context of the earthquake in Bhuj and the riots in Godhra[195]. For an initial understanding of the film and also in order to unravel the various contexts it presents and connects, it is important in the context of this film to familiarise oneself with the most important socio-political events that happened in India between 1992 and 2002, with a special focus on the rise of the BJP and subsequently the *Hindutva* ideology. The state of Gujarat is also relevant in the context of the film – not only because of the importance it plays in the narrative (book and film) but also because of the real-time relevance of some events in Gujarat and their influence on the national politics in India.

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193 Chetan Bhagat, *The 3 mistakes of my life*, (New Delhi: Rupa publications, 2014).
194 "Abhishek Kapoor talks about the making of Kai Po Che", The Hindu, accessed on August 18, 2019 under https://www.thehindu.com/features/cinema/abhishek-kapoor-talks-about-the-making-of-kai-po-che/article4397051.ece.
195 On January 26, 2001 a massive earthquake hit the western Indian state of Gujarat. The earthquake had a magnitude of 7.7 on the Richter scale and killed a large number of people – estimated to be between 13,000 and 20,000 and left a huge number of people injured and homeless.

Hindutva as a political ideology had been around for a while but it only started taking concrete shape in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Did it mean that the society developed radicalising tendencies overnight? No. It meant that the socio-political events happening at that time were so grave and divisive in nature that they set the ball rolling for a number of radical positions to come up and evolve. In this particular context of Hindu-Muslim relations, a series of factors, not necessarily restricted to the state of Gujarat, contributed to the divide deepening at a national level. To begin with, the late 1980s saw a steep rise in the Islamisation in Kashmir valley – ranging from changing the names of more than 2,000 villages from local names to more Islamic names to the adoption of a more exclusive approach by fundamentalists[196] leading to a mass migration of Kashmiri Pandits to other parts of India or to refugee camps. As a leading defence studies expert Col. Tej Tikoo would put it:

> Exodus of Kashmiri Pandits from Kashmir in 1989, was their seventh such exodus since the arrival of Islam in Kashmir, in the fourteenth century. This was precipitated by the outbreak of Pakistan-sponsored insurgency across Kashmir Valley in 1989. The radical Islamists targeted Pandits – a minuscule community in Muslim dominated society, creating enormous fear, panic and grave sense of insecurity. In the face of ruthless atrocities inflicted on them, the Pandits' sole concern was ensuring their own physical safety and their resolve not to convert to Islam.

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196   Col. Tej. K Tikoo, *Kashmir: Its Aborigines and their Exodus*, (Atlanta/New Delhi: Lancer Publishers, 2013).

Over 350,000 Kashmiri Pandits were forced to flee en masse leaving their home and hearth. This was the single largest forced displacement of people of a particular ethnicity after partition of India.[197]

The persecution of the Kashmiri Pandits, the rise in insurgency with probable links to Pakistan, combined with the appeasement politics of the Rajiv Gandhi government (Shah Bano case etc.), created a huge political vacuum leaving the majority Hindu voters very disappointed. This political vacuum was waiting to be filled. The vacuum was also bound to offset a series of reactions. Francis Fukuyama discusses this kind of vacuum which has continued to rise in various parts of the world, especially in the United States and Europe. He says,

So there is nothing wrong with identity politics as such; it is a natural and inevitable response to injustice. It becomes problematic only when identity is interpreted or asserted in certain specific ways. Identity politics for some progressives has become a cheap substitute for serious thinking about how to reverse the thirty-year trend in most liberal democracies toward greater socioeconomic inequality. It is easier to argue over cultural issues within the confines of elite institutions than it is to appropriate money or convince skeptical legislators to change policies. […] This points to a second problem that arises with a focus on newer and more narrowly defined marginalised groups: it diverts attention from older and larger groups whose serious problems have been ignored. A significant part of the white American working class has been dragged into an underclass, comparable to the experience of African-Americans during the 1970s and '80s. Yet one has heard little concern from activists on the left, at least until recently, about the

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197   Ibid., 4.

burgeoning opioid crisis, or the fate of children growing up in impoverished single-parent families in the rural United States. Progressives today have no ambitious strategies for dealing with the potentially immense job losses that will accompany advancing automation, or the income disparities that technology may bring to all Americans, white or black, male or female. The same problem afflicts parties of the left in Europe: the French Communist and Socialist parties have lost significant numbers of voters to the National Front in recent decades, while the German Social Democrats' embrace of Angela Merkel's welcome of Syrian refugees led to similar defections in the 2017 elections.[198]

If we were to apply the same logic to the Indian context, one could say that the politics practised by the Congress party (which had been in power at the Centre for the longest time since independence with brief breaks) had tried to use the tool of identity politics (based on caste, religion) hoping to translate the gains of it into a vote bank while largely ignoring the problems and concerns of the majority Hindu population. Would that make the dejected, ignored Hindu population radical and anti-Muslim? No. What it did, in fact, was push this dejected population into the brace of the likes of the RSS, BJP and VHP who, through their *Hindutva* ideology, claimed to represent the interests of the Hindus. It is to be noted that till the early 1980s, the BJP was in fact a more moderate version of the party it later became. It had been trying to stay true to its origins that could be traced back to the *Bharatiya Jana Sangh*[199] and speak in the name of the poor

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198 Francis Fukuyama, *Identity: The demand for dignity and the politics of resentment*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), 115-116.

199 Bharatiya Jana Sangh is considered to be the predecessor of today's BJP and existed between 1951 and 1977. It was considered to be a political arm of the RSS. Members of this party were instrumental in protesting against the Emergency between 1975 and 1977 imposed by Indira Gandhi and joined hands with parties across the political spectrum to fight an election once the Emergency was uplifted.

while highlighting its belief in Gandhian socialism[200]. Only after the huge electoral losses in the 1984 elections and a subsequent change in the party leadership did the BJP start actively positioning itself as the voice of the Hindus. According to the revamped new rhetoric, they would strive to bring back the days when the problems of the Hindus would be addressed first and not ignored, because after all, the Hindus are the majority in India. The BJP would strive to restore the grand Hindu glorious past and establish a *Hindu Rashtra* or *Ramrajya* (the mythical golden age when *Ram* is supposed to have ruled Ayodhya), the rebuilding of the *Ram* temple on the contentious site in Ayodhya and thus reclaiming the space and dignity for Hindus. This served as an excellent counter-narrative to the on-paper secularist leanings of the other political parties (I say on-paper leanings since all the political parties have and continue to practise some forms of *Hindutva* in order to appeal to the Hindu voters, though their approach is not as direct and exclusive as that of the BJP). The biggest success for this rejuvenated *Hindutva* movement, in my opinion, in spite of most of its leaders being high caste Brahmins, was that they addressed the Hindu population as a single unit and did not necessarily focus on the caste, class and other religious divides that otherwise could have been used to address a smaller, targeted group of people – probably even more efficiently. Though this approach appealed to a lot of people, it took a while for it to translate into a sustainable electoral success at the national level[201].

Against this background, a *Ram Rath Yatra* was convened by the BJP under the leadership of Lal Krishna Advani to reclaim the site of the Babri

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200   Raka Ray and Mary Fainsod Katzenstein, "In the beginning there was the Nehruvian state" in *Social Movements in India Poverty, Power and Politics*, ed. Raka Ray and Mary Fainsod Katzenstein (Lanham/Boulder/New York/Toronto/Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2005), 11.

201   BJP started making substantial electoral gains post 1984, but never gained a sizeable vote share till 1998. Due to lack of absolute majority and hence being forced into coalition politics, the BJP was unable to build a stable government without the support of other parties, leading to a milder version of *Hindutva* being used. The first ever election where the BJP received an absolute majority in the parliament was in 2014 under Narendra Modi.

Mosque in order to rebuild a temple for *Ram*. It gained momentum and received widespread publicity and support across India in September 1990. While India was tackling a series of internal problems like the insurgency in Kashmir and the Northeast, the challenges like the liberalisation of the Indian economy, none of the political parties could have predicted the astounding success of the *Rath Yatra*. Though Advani was arrested eventually, the momentum that the *Yatra* had generated continued. Following the destruction of the Babri Mosque on December 6, 1992, began one of the most painful chapters of Hindu-Muslim riots, violence and enmities in the post-independence era and they had a huge bearing on how the politics in India evolved in the coming years.

The carnage and riots in Godhra in Gujarat in 2002 can be looked upon as an extension of the conflict between the two communities. The impact of Godhra riots and the way they were handled by the administration, the response of the state machinery to it, the popular narratives (not the factual ones) surrounding this incident influenced Indian national politics decisively. Despite the riots and unresolved issues about the complicity of the state (though the judiciary has given a clean chit to the government in general), the rise and popularity of Narendra Modi in the state of Gujarat for a continued period of 12 years is astounding. His sustained popularity in Gujarat helped him become a national level politician who is a self-proclaimed Nationalist. The problem, per se, is not with him or the BJP being Nationalists, the problem is more at a fundamental level of what they understand this national identity to be. At a philosophical level, they have a more exclusive, narrow, religion-based understanding of nationalism which is different from the variant of nationalism that was envisioned by the founding fathers of the Indian Nation. *KPC* is a film that showcases Gujarat exactly at the time when Narendra Modi actively became involved in politics and tries to capture the mood in the society at that time. The film helps us detect the fault lines within the society, especially in the wake of a natural disaster, to understand the background of religious conflicts as well as the process of how a sense of religious superiority, of seeking revenge

increasingly gripped the state – probably also leading to the discontent that finally fuelled the Godhra train carnage and the riots that followed.

The film revolves around the lives of four protagonists – Omkar Shastri, Ishaan Bhat, Govind Patel and Ali Hashmi. It tracks the lives of the protagonists from the year 2000 and onwards. The film starts at a point of time somewhere in the year 2013 – beginning with a presentation by Govind focusing on talent scouting in sports all across India, with a special focus on schools. It then moves on to show the release of a character named Omkar Shastri from prison and Govind receiving him at his release. These two small events set the thematic context of the film – that it has something to do with sports and considering the release of Omkar from prison, also with crime or felony, that he may have committed. Govind leads Omi to a coffee shop where a cricket match between India and Australia is being broadcast on the TV. This cricket match serves as a moment for the protagonist to experience a flashback and take the audience back in time.

The first scene in the flashback focuses on three friends - middle class, young men - Govind Patel, Omkar Shastri and Ishaan Bhat. To begin with, the chosen names of the three protagonists – Omkar, Ishaan and Govind – can be considered as a play on the holy Hindu trinity represented by the gods Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh. Omkar represents the cosmic sounds *Om* and is considered to be a representation of the sacred creator, Brahma. Omkar is also one of the names given to the Hindu god Ganesha. Mahesh (popularly known as Shiva or Shankara) is represented by the name Ishaan and the lord Vishnu is represented by the name Govind. According to Hindu mythology, Brahma is considered to be the creator of the universe, Vishnu shoulders the responsibility of maintaining its balance. Mahesh is responsible for the destruction of evil. The character of Ali, who is introduced later in the narrative, on the other hand, is a Muslim. His name, with origins in Arabic, means a champion. True to their names and the traits, characteristics they represent, the protagonists do fulfil the destinies their names denote – Omkar represents the creator in multiple metaphorical

ways through his active contribution in helping create the most decisive circumstances in the film ranging from ensuring capital for their business venture to being an instrument of violence at the climax in the narrative. Ishaan on the other hand, true to the nature of Shiva, is the one who wreaks havoc in this universe and disturbs the perceived balance, only to ensure the victory of the good over evil. Govind, representing Vishnu, fulfils the responsibility of being the one maintaining a balance in this universe – he is the one who aids Ishaan in his fight against evil, he intervenes to save Ishaan and ultimately, he is also the one to support Omkar when he falters and is confused with nowhere to go. In a metaphorical sense, one could also say that Govind is acutely aware of the importance of a respectful co-existence judging by the fact that in spite of the riots in Gujarat, which cost him both his friends, he still continues to be a mentor to Ali and works with him.

The visual aesthetics of the film and the montage of the images in this film are deeply entrenched in the religious, socio-cultural and historical symbolism – especially of the western Indian state of Gujarat. The narrative focuses on a middle-class, aspirational Gujarati society – comprising Hindus and Muslims. While in the case of *RDB*, a familiarity with the history of Indian independence was a prerequisite, with *KPC* it is necessary to be familiar with events in the history of modern India – especially post 1980 – in order to understand the broader contexts. As mentioned before, the decade between 1980 and 1990 marked a significant change in Indian polity as this time coincided with the rise of religious nationalism in India. Two events are important while looking at this rise. The first one is the destruction of the Babri mosque in 1992, which I have already elaborated upon earlier and the second one is the carnage in Godhra, in Gujarat in 2002. One of the central aspects combining both these incidents is the fact that large organs within the state machinery, responsible for maintaining law and order, chose to act slowly or not act at all to maintain law and order and to stop the destruction of a mosque (irrespective of their reasons) or save the people whose lives were endangered. A large section of people in

the Indian society would immediately retort saying that in the case of Babri mosque demolition, the Hindus were only reclaiming the space that was originally theirs. In the case of Godhra, the popular argument used to justify the incidence is that whatever happened to the Muslims in Godhra was only a reaction to what happened to the Hindu pilgrims. The central problem in both the cases is the way the society and the State machinery responded to it. The act of demolition in the case of the Mosque (and even of the temple centuries before) is no doubt problematic and so is the hideous crime of setting an entire carriage of a train on fire[202]. But even more problematic is the way the society as a whole (Hindus and Muslims) responded to both these events by falling prey to hate speech, terrorists and right-wing politicians inciting violence without exercising any restraint. At the same time, while the State authorities could easily have managed to disperse the congregation of people in Ayodhya in 1992 and imposed stronger curfews in the aftermath of the carnage in Godhra, they chose to look the other way or act slowly, when in all probability they could have easily intervened and tried to control the violence. This wasn't the first time that India had been a witness to an 'organized political massacre'[203]. A huge number of Sikhs were systematically hunted down and killed in the aftermath of the killing of Indira Gandhi in 1984[204]. But in the cases of Ayodhya and Godhra, the violence during and after the events was unprecedented and much bigger in magnitude. In the aftermath of the demolition

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202   On the morning of February 27, 2002 an argument broke out between passengers on the train *Sabarmati Express* and vendors on the railway station in Godhra. A large number of these passengers were returning after performing a religious ceremony at the disputed religious site in Ayodhya. As a result of the argument, under uncertain circumstances, 4 carriages of the train were set on fire. A majority of the casualties were women and children. The riots that took place in Gujarat later on are widely considered to be a reaction to this incident.

203   Gyanendra Pandey, *Routine violence: nations, fragments, histories*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 187-188.

204   Indira Gandhi was killed by her Sikh bodyguards on October 31, 1984 in an act of revenge. The Sikh bodyguards, like a number of other Sikhs, considered Gandhi responsible for the desecration of the Golden Temple in Amritsar by the Indian Army who marched into the temple to curb the secessionist movement for a Sikh homeland *Khalistan*, led by the rebel Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale.

of the Babri mosque, riots had spread out to other parts of the country and they were to be followed by a series of bomb blasts orchestrated by terrorists who claimed it to be an act of revenge. In the case of Godhra, though the actual violence was geographically contained to one part of the country, its repercussions were felt far and wide and continue to shape the political discourse even today. Besides, there is also a religious interconnection between the events in Ayodhya and Godhra – the passengers on the Sabarmati Express were returning from Ayodhya after performing a religious ceremony at the disputed site. This visit to a highly sensitive sight and the rhetoric surrounding it could, in all probability, be one of the possible explanations for the disgruntled and heated exchange between the passengers and the vendors on the Godhra station before the attack, which many believe – despite lack of evidence – was pre-planned[205].

In all the three cases mentioned above, there is ample evidence suggesting that members of political parties – including the Congress and BJP – were a part of the mob and inciting the mob with provocative speeches. These cases decidedly changed the way Indian society and eventually the Indian polity has evolved and the idea of who is an Indian has drastically changed. They have also influenced, to a very large extent, the relationship between the state and the minorities. Coming back to the film analysis part of this chapter, I will repeatedly refer to one of the aforesaid events –the Godhra riots in 2002.

The texture of this film is very unique for a variety of reasons. Firstly, the film is an adaptation of a book which gives the entire narrative a preformed framework. Though the filmmaker exercises his artistic freedom in order to change certain traits of the characters or change the course of the narrative to an extent in decisive ways, the film narrative stays true, more or less, to the text narrative it is based upon. Additionally, it is very interesting to see how the concept of *Renascence* makes an appearance yet again even in the context of this film. The events that actually took place between

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205   The reason behind the attacks, the exact sequence of the events and the exact cause of the fire continue to be unclear.

2001 and 2002 in Gujarat are reproduced and recontextualised within a defined framework when they appear as a part of the text narrative. The texture of the narrative, while building up on recurring common thematic strands in other films like increasing populism, an intense questioning surrounding the issue of belonging, etc., attains its unique texture by focusing on the earthquake in Bhuj and the Godhra riots which contributed significantly to the social dynamics and responses by the state to both these events. The textual narrative, which already has a layer of reference to real events, is then reproduced and reframed (by changing some characters, changing the storyline) by the filmmaker and presented as a film. The multiple layers of referencing and reproduction of the different facets of a reality, which are all connected to a baseline of certain facts, makes the texture of this narrative very interesting.

What is also unique to this film is the fact that the concept of Text is relevant at two separate levels. While the textual narrative, in the form a book, defines the scope of the narrative in terms of the contexts it presents, the medial adaptation of the same narrative, in the form of a film, focuses more on the visual contextualising of the same contexts. To be more specific, the textual narrative may present the reader with knowledge about the contexts, by placing the narrative in focus in the contextual framework, while a filmmaker, who continues to focus on the narrative, has different tools at his disposal to optimise the visualisation of the contexts. For instance, in the book, while the author can describe at length with exposition that a part of the narrative is taking place in a part of the city which is predominantly inhabited by Muslims, the filmmaker can employ different tools in order to communicate this message without any of the characters actually speaking about it. This diversification of textual representation (book and film) combined with the knowledge of the viewer, gives the narrative a special quality. Besides, the narrative is rife with a number of intermedial references arising from the two different mediums that present the same narrative. Fukuyama talks about the dichotomy that per-

sists in such a case by roping in two German terms of *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*. While he talks about these concepts in terms of untranslatability of identities, the explanation offered can be used to understand the phenomenon of translatability of a narrative between mediums as well.

> The distinction between experience and lived experience has its roots in the difference between the German words *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*, which preoccupied a number of thinkers in the nineteenth century. *Erfahrung* referred to experiences that could be shared, as when people witnessed chemistry experiments in different laboratories. *Erlebnis* (which incorporates the word Leben, or "life"), by contrast, meant the subjective perception of experiences, which might not necessarily be shareable. The writer Walter Benjamin argued in a 1939 essay that modern life constituted a series of "shock experiences" that prevented individuals from seeing their lives as a whole and made it hard to convert *Erlebnis* into *Erfahrung*.[206]

Building up on the argument that Fukuyama suggests here, one could also say that while a literary text offers the audience – in this case, the readers – an opportunity to exploit the *Erfahrung* as postulated in a book and convert it into an *Erlebnis* while understanding the material being presented, a film on the other hand, offers the audience – the viewers – a chance to be a part of a visual *Erlebnis*, subject to the filmmaker's interpretation and which could then be translated into an *Erfahrung*, since the filmmaker's subjective perception of a given narrative is then open to being shared and witnessed. This dialectical process of translating an *Erlebnis* into an *Erfahrung* and vice versa gives the narrative a special quality, a special texture.

Coming back to the film, the title of the film *Kai Po Che* is a phrase, a victory cry traditionally used during Kite Fights in Gujarat during the

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206   Francis Fukuyama, *Identity: The demand for dignity and the politics of resentment*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), 109.

Hindu Festival of *Makara Sankranti*. *Makara Sankranti* is a festival that is in sync with the solar calendar and is celebrated to praise the Sun god when the sun enters *Makara* (Capricorn), thus signifying the end of winter. The festival is celebrated in various ways in different parts of India – in Gujarat one of the most known ways to celebrate this festival is kite flying contests. The winner of this contest usually shouts *Kai Po Che* to his opponent once he has cut off the opponents' kite. In a metaphorical sense, combining the significance of *Makara Sankranti* (or *Uttarayana* as it is referred to in Gujarat) and the context of the usage of the term *Kai Po Che*, one could draw the inference that this narrative suggests a new beginning after a long dark, cold phase and signifying victory of good over the evil.

As in the case of *RDB*, the figure of the Hero is yet again represented by not just one protagonist, but by the four main protagonists who alternately move into the forefront to drive the narrative. It is very interesting to see how the characters in this *Figurenensemble* evolve in tandem with each other, more as a response to each other than to oneself (as was the case in *RDB*). The fact that the narrative is linear doesn't matter in this regard since at a metalevel, the narrative can also be considered to be non-linear to a certain extent, as it evolves as a chain of reactions, responses and these reactions, responses don't have a logical chronology. They evolve more as a result of the way a particular trait in a particular character responds to a particular situation. For instance, one of the probable logical steps that could have followed the sequence where Ishaan encounters Ali and considers coaching him, would have been that Omkar and Govind dissuade him saying that Ali is a Muslim and that he may not fit well into the group which is predominantly Hindu boys. Instead, Ishaan's passion for the sport responds to Ali's sport prowess rather than Ishaan being Hindu responding to Ali being a Muslim. Due to the passion about sport being far greater than the passion for religion (among all three of them at that point), Ali is accepted into the fold. Another instance is the sequence where Ishaan comes to the relief camp with a group of Muslims. Had Ali and Omkar been the central figures instead of Ishaan and Omkar, the nature of the

conflict would have been different. It would have probably even led to a permanent bitterness in Ali's mind about Hindus (since they insisted that he is different and not an Indian because he is a Muslim) and altered his perception about what it meant to be an Indian. But since Ishaan played the central role in this sequence, the character of Ali felt safe and guarded and it did not lead him to vilifying all Hindus and develop a hostility towards them. As the narrative later reveals, he has indeed continued his association with Govind, another Hindu who protected him and probably made him feel like he belonged to India. This probably even contributed to his decision to play for India (he could have chosen not to play for India as well) and impress on Omkar's mind a wider definition of what it means to be an Indian. Examples like this are abundant in the film, which is otherwise largely a linear narrative in terms of chronology. As a result of this switching between the four main protagonists, the interrogation into the journey of the Hero also follows the progress of all the four protagonists over the course of the narrative.

Limited awareness of the problem/Ordinary world (0:00:45): The beginning of the film, through its non-linear narrative, starts in flashback. It starts with Omkar leaving the prison and Govind waiting outside to receive him. His presence there makes his connection to Omkar's past evident. The narrative progresses to a flashback into the memory of Omkar Shastri and his friendship with Ishaan Bhat and Govind, three young men somewhere in Gujarat, all belonging to middle class families. The opening sequence of the film takes us back to a timeframe around the year 2000 and plays in a middle-class Hindu neighbourhood. Ishaan comes across as a stubborn, angry young man who probably has a background of being a sportsman. He is shown to be a big cricket fan and a staunch supporter of the Indian cricket team. Omkar is his trustworthy lieutenant – at the beginning and for a long time into the film, it seems that he doesn't have his own opinions. He is content in supporting Ishaan in his thought processes, offering him legitimisation and support whenever he needs it. Govind, on the other hand, is an aspirational, very focussed character with a fine acumen for

business and wanting to make it big someday. While the Ishaan and Omkar have no particular plans about their future, about how to become financially stable and independent, Govind is already offering private tuition and has a business plan in place that could eventually help them in becoming financially independent. This sequence also introduces the audience to the societal setup the boys come from – Ishaan from a well-to-do middle-class family, Omkar from the family of a priest and Govind seems to be the sole breadwinner in his middle-class family.

At the beginning of the film, all three young men have a very narrow world view and aren't in tune with what is happening around them in terms of socio-political awareness. Govind is primarily concerned about starting a small business and becoming successful at it, Ishaan doesn't seem to have any major goals in life at this stage and Omkar's only trait that is visible at this stage is that he is extremely loyal to Ishaan and would do anything to support him and show his solidarity. The characters of these three young men hit a chord with the audience since they could well be representing a wider section of Indian youth coming from middle class families in India: having had the chance to a decent education, some are aspirational young people whose immediate concerns are how to earn a decent living and become successful while some are undecided about how they should go about planning a future.

The montage of images in this sequence also introduces the audience to the topics, including sports and possibly a focus on cricket, that will come up over the course of the film – to begin with, after the initial skirmish between Ishaan and his dad, the image that comes up is that of a temple, followed by a dialogue between Omkar and his father, probably a priest. The next bit introduces another character into the mix – an uncle of Omkars' and an aspiring political leader, Bittoo. He is a member of the political party *Bharatiya Janaheet Sangh*, a play on the name *Bharatiya Jana Sangh*. This hints us to a probability of the narrative having something to do with *Hindutva* and the politics of Hindu identity. The song *Shubharambh* – signifying new beginnings is sung partly in Gujarati making it abundantly

clear where the narrative is geographically placed. These three broad topics give the narrative a contextual, local and topical framework. Over the course of the film, a series of other topics come up that grant this particular narrative its specific texture. Since the structure of the narrative is largely linear in terms of time (barring the moment of flashback at the beginning and back to the present towards the end), it allows us to understand the narrative in a systematic, chronological manner.

Increased awareness, need for change/ call to adventure (0:09:20): Following a tiff with Ishaan's father and his eventual refusal to invest any money in their business venture, the three young men are now forced to get their act together and figure out a way to independently start their business. As they go down this road, they start taking note of their surroundings in a more astute manner since they are now out of their safety net. For instance, when they interact with Omkar's uncle Bittoo for the first time and he offers to pay up the deposit for the shop, it becomes evident to Omkar that Bittoo expects him to join his political party at some point. Till this stage all the three characters are shown to be particularly unaware of their socio-political contexts; especially Omkar has very few ideas about the kind of politics that his uncle is associated with. Though the changes that are being introduced in their lives are challenging to the protagonists, it is also perceived by them as an adventure they have set out on. An evident sense of pride and happiness is visible when they prepare the grounds and the shop before the opening. Up until this sequence, the character of Ali hasn't been introduced yet and the three friends are the central characters of the narrative so far. The introduction of Ali brings in a fourth character which will eventually develop and become central to the narrative while also adding an element of challenge and adventure to the narrative, quite literally, when Ishaan finds himself challenged by Ali's proficiency in cricket.

The cinematography of the two sequences depicting the first two stages in the Hero's journey is very interesting. The framing of the sequence where Omkar is stepping out from the prison is a metaphor for him crossing threshold, for being confronted with and then starting to come to terms

with reality, with the world that awaits him outside. The presence of Govind in this sequence, waiting for him on the other side, establishes the fact that the two figures know each other from the time before Omkar went to prison. He seems to be Omkar's connection to the past and evidently also to the present – connecting both of them. As they move back in time and take the audience along with them, we are introduced to a different world. The setup of this world is such that an Indian audience would be able to associate it with a middle-class household. The beginning of the film is cinematographically interesting as well. For instance, Omkar sitting at Ishaan's feet signifies his loyalty to Ishaan. The over-the-shoulder shot from Ishaan's father looking down on Govind signifies his condescension towards the trio – primarily because they are not working and don't seem to have any idea what they want to do with their lives. In the sequence when Ishaan is sitting on a bench on the playground and Ali hits the ball only to be caught by Ishaan, the ball is filmed coming down from above, as if it were falling from the sky, representing a divine intervention. The shot seems to be suggesting that Ishaan should continue his engagement with cricket and involve this boy in it, which in turn could help all of them find a way from their current state of confusion. The moment when Ali collapses on the pitch and becomes unconscious is the moment from which point on the three men assume the function of being Ali's guardians – at least temporarily. The doctor offers a possible explanation to Ishaan about Ali's talent, saying it could be because Ali is hyper-reflexive and it seems that he isn't getting enough suitable nutrition. His appearance and a hint to lack of nutrition points towards his family's poor financial background. When Ali recovers from his bout of unconsciousness, he is shown to be sitting together with Omkar next to a wall with two pictures of the Hindu Goddess *Durga*, while Omkar watches over him in the absence of Ishaan (IMG. 29). The goddess Durga is a warrior goddess and symbolises the victory of good over evil. The appearance of this image in this sequence, combined with the co-existence of Omkar and Ali in such proximity, signifies the protective role that Omkar seems to have assumed, at least for

the time being, when it comes to Ali. This image represents the possibility of a peaceful, mutually respectful co-existence of people from two communities, just as envisioned in the Indian understanding of secularism. The segregation of spaces based on the religion of the majority starts becoming a regular feature later in the film. The moment when the shop is inaugurated and Govind goes up the stairs and enters the shop, the camera works from behind creating the illusion that Govind is going up, which in a metaphorical manner is indeed true, since from this point on, the real ascension of the three into the societal order and also in the narrative – for good or for bad – starts. This moment is also a crossing the threshold of sorts since they are now crossing over into an unknown territory – in terms of their business and also in terms of how this crossing over will turn out to be a life-changing moment. The fact that Govind and Omkar are at the forefront and Ishaan at the back, could also be considered as a hint of the impending doom that befalls Ishaan at some point leading to him not being a part of the narrative anymore. This moment of ascension, seemingly unimportant, in fact connects three different time frames within the narrative – the beginning sequence with Omkar and Govind, the moment in the present where Ishaan takes a backseat placing Govind and Omkar in the foreground and a further point in the future, when Ishaan dies. The concept of future is as tricky in *KPC* as it was in *RDB* since the audience has moved back in time during the opening sequence, the future portrayed in the film, namely Ishaan's absence (because of death, which only becomes clear later), is actually a thing of the past for the audience.

Fear or resistance to change/ refusal of the call (0:30:57): This is one of the first decisive moments in the film. In this sequence, the conflict potential is referred to for the first time when Ishaan, Omkar and Govind visit Ali's house for the first time and Ali's father finds out that Omkar is not only the son of a priest in a Hindu temple but also the nephew of the politician Bittoo Joshi. Ali's father is initially reluctant to send Ali for training to 'Bittoo Joshi's cronies' when Govind makes it amply clear that they don't follow a particular policy of discriminating against Muslims since children

from all backgrounds come to the academy for training. Omkar seems to have taken some offense at this when Ali's father brings up his family affiliations, but let's go of it since it seems to be of utmost importance to Ishaan to be able to get Ali on board.

Once Ali has been introduced into the story line, the process of his character evolution allows the audience to become familiar with different aspects of his background. To begin with, Ali comes from a Muslim family – evident through his clothes. Some of the most significant of social realities that are portrayed in this sequence bring to the fore issues surrounding the societal, financial status of minorities in the society, in this case the Muslims. Indicators like Ali's father saying that cricket is a game for the rich, the portrayal of a house in shambles and in need of repair, are powerful statements about the societal standing of Ali's family. At a certain point in this scene, Govind is shown to be convincing the other two that investing in a shop space in an upcoming mall would be the smartest thing to do since that is where the future lies, pointing towards a growing Indian economy and the prospect of a promising future.

The sequence when Bittoo comes to visit the shop, shows off his gun and Ishaan picks it up playfully and ends up pointing an unloaded gun towards Bittoo says a lot more than it appears. Ishaan and Govind both aren't comfortable with the politics that Bittoo practises as well as the kind of influence Bittoo has on Omkar. Ishaan pointing a gun at Bittoo represents this utter disapproval of Bittoo – especially by Ishaan. This disapproval isn't limited to the person but to what he represents. Topics which were more at a generalised level earlier, are now presented with nuance – a booming Indian economy, a huge disparity between the rich and poor, partly also dependant on religious and caste affiliations and rise of right-wing politics in Gujarat. The acutely detailed and accurate depiction of the ground realities in real-time in the film is also noteworthy – while the Indian economy was in a good shape around this time, the disparity between the rich and the poor was becoming wider and lastly, with the rise of the

BJP in Gujarat post 1995[207], the local politics in Gujarat had also started evolving in a different way. In hindsight, Narendra Modi entering the political arena actively post 2001 and his image of being an efficient Chief Minister of Gujarat – in spite of allegations against him for being complicit during the Godhra Riots – paved the way for him becoming a well-known, national leader who is an outspoken advocate of the Hindutva ideology.

Overcoming fear/ meeting the mentor (0:33:20): This is a point where Ali starts becoming an important part of the narrative. Ali's entry into the lives of three young Hindu boys is interesting because it juxtaposes the contrasts between the two communities that they represent. Their engagement with each other exposes the fault lines in the society that they are living in. In the sequence when Ali comes for coaching to Ishaan's academy, one can see Ali crossing the border literally. He enters a compound whose walls adorn *Stotras* (verses) in Sanskrit, one of them dedicated to the god *Hanuman*, an important figure in *Ramayana*. The walled compound, with a marked entrance literally signifies the non-accessibility of it for 'outsiders' (IMG. 30). If we were to talk in Herder's terms, the two spheres representing two cultures are not just existing next to each other, there is a crossing over from one into the other taking place, there is an interaction which is causing disruptions in the both the spheres which will be felt eventually. What is very interesting here is the ambivalent nature of the relationship between Ishaan and Ali. Though logically, one could argue that Ishaan is Ali's mentor, at a meta-level Ali could also be looked upon at Ishaan's mentor. While Ishaan helps Ali work on his cricket skills, Ali in an indirect manner is impacting Ishaan's understanding of culture. Their interactions, in fact, are laying the ground for a humane and tolerant attitude for an otherwise very unpredictable and immature Ishaan. The ambivalence of their relationship also makes the narrative very engaging because at the end of the film, both of them have achieved the goals through the other person – Ishaan has made his dream of playing at an international level come true

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207   For the first time in the history of State Assembly elections, BJP secured a whopping 121 seats in 1995, enabling them to form a government in Gujarat.

through Ali, while Ali, through the unfortunate death of Ishaan, has contributed to Omkar's thoughts about religious intolerance, to the debate if Hindus and Muslims can be friends and coexist, if Muslims can be considered to be Indians as well. Ishaan assuming the role of Ali's mentor also discloses his *Want* of coaching a talented young boy like Ali and aid him in achieving success while living his own dream through his protégé.

An interesting wordplay here is the name of the academy and the shop that the three boys have started – it is called Sabarmati Sports Club. Sabarmati is a river in Gujarat and in the context of this narrative serves a dual function. Firstly, it reminds us of the Sabarmati Ashram that was one of the primary residences of Mahatma Gandhi when he was not travelling, the other one being in Wardha in Maharashtra. Through what can be considered as a reference to Gandhi's teachings of tolerance, the choice of the name Sabarmati for the academy signifies its non-religious and welcoming character – irrespective of caste, creed or religion. The presence of Ali in this predominantly Hindu locality, in this academy named after Gandhi's abode is a medial representation of the values that the name and space represent. Additionally, the train predominantly carrying Hindu pilgrims returning from Ayodhya, that was burnt during the Godhra riots in 2002, was also called the Sabarmati express. Though at this stage it is still not clear if the carnage will be a part of the narrative (the time frame isn't clear as yet), the connection to the word play on Sabarmati and how it came to represent two very contrasting ideas within the film – one of a non-discriminative and inclusive space and the other representing extreme violence based on religious affiliations – is hard to miss. Once Ali has become a part of the narrative, we can see how the three young men are bonding with this young boy, even taking him on as a protégé. While Ishaan looks after grooming him for cricket and takes him under his wings, Govind takes him on in his tuition classes and Omkar is shown helping with the nutrition of the boy.

Committing to change/ crossing the threshold (0:35:09): Ali has now become an integral part of the narrative and most of the storyline evolves around

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how the three men have integrated Ali into their lives – from taking charge of his studies to taking charge of his sports career and coaching. The commitment mentioned here is more in terms of moving on from a world of familiarity and passiveness to a more dynamic world and uncertainties.

Experimenting with the new conditions/ tests, allies, enemies (0:39:17): Though this phase isn't as well demarcated as the other phases, small gestures within the setup of the film make this experimentation visible. The narrative in itself is now experimenting with the new conditions that have been introduced into it – like changing the setup from a co-existence of two diverse religious communities it moves to more of an intermingling between members of these communities represented by Ali and the other three protagonists. Smaller pointers like Bittoo Joshi not being happy with the choice of the real estate broker Mr. Sheikh (evident from his surname, a Muslim) and instead suggesting choosing a certain Mr. Shah (because he is a Hindu and hence, more trustworthy) are now setting the context for the impending changes. Another small, yet interesting event happens around this stage when Ali is mocked by the rest of the boys and then yelled at by Ishaan without having a chance to explain himself. In this particular scene, the other young boys use particularly derogatory terms to address Ali – possibly also referring to him being a Muslim and making it evident that it will be hard for him to fit into this group of majority Hindus (unless he proves his calibre, which he eventually does). Though there is no discrimination being practised by Govind, Omkar or Ishaan against Ali at this stage, it is evident that some of the other young boys aren't as kind to him. They mock him by using derogatory terms like *Lengachaap* (*Lenga* meaning a particular kind of pyjama which is a bit shorter than ankle length, *chaap* meaning imprinted – basically the term referring to person wearing a particular kind of pyjama making it evident that he is Muslim). They also proceed to loosen the strings of his pyjama while he is getting ready to play, making him a target of their mockery. Though this short sequence can be classified as juvenile behaviour of young boys – irrespective of where they come from – it definitely points to deep-seated prejudices against members of a

perceived 'lower class', either financially or in terms of religion, or as is my analysis in this case, a mixture of both. It suggests a consciousness about one's social status and a sense of entitlement arising out of it which is then used as a means to hurt the dignity of someone else, perceived to be at a lower rung. The conflict results in Ali getting warned off by Ishaan without Ali having a chance to explain himself. When Ali doesn't turn up for the practise sessions in the days to come, Ishaan apologetically goes to Ali's home and tries to convince him and his father that he returns to practise.

A close bond is shown forming between the two, which in turn is also contributing to a more balanced understanding of each other – not just as two individuals, Ali and Ishaan, but also as Ali, a Muslim and Ishaan, a Hindu. Whether it is Ali taking part in Diwali celebrations, or Ishaan waiting for Ali outside a mosque – these sequences are brief, highly representative and symbolic, since they portray a certain kind of tolerance and respect towards the *Other*. In recent years, the debates surrounding exactly this kind of portrayal – Hindu and Muslim children socialising – have reached a bizarre new level[208] and though they haven't reached magnanimous proportions yet, the number of people thinking on these lines has certainly increased.

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208   In March 2019, an advertisement for the detergent powder Surf Excel in India showed a small girl in a white T-shirt riding a bicycle and urging kids from her neighbourhood to throw colour water balloons on her on the eve of Holi. As she rides her bicycle through the lane, kids throw balloons on her, spattering colour all over. Once they run out of balloons, she signals her friend to come out. The friend turns out to be a Muslim boy who is wearing an impeccably white suit, along with a skull cap. She offers him a ride on her bicycle and drops him at the nearby mosque for his prayers. The ad ends with the brand's popular tagline, "Daag achche hain"(Stains are good).While a section of social media lauded the company for its message of peace and love between the two communities, Surf Excel has faced incessant backlash from another section. Calls to boycott the detergent emerged following tweets that said that ad promoted love jihad and that the ad shows that the Muslim prayers are more important than a Hindu festival. Some users also asked Surf Excel to make an ad on Muharram where a Muslim boy is shown protecting a Hindu girl on her way to a temple. The advertisement can be found under https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zq7mN8oi8ds.

Preparing for major change/ approach (50:31): At this stage in the film, roughly half-way into the narrative, the audience is now familiar with the dynamics of the group and the society they live in and their family backgrounds and the interconnectedness of these two. Though there is no particular marker signifying that the protagonist has prepared himself, and the people around him, for a big change, the entire narrative up until now has been doing it persistently. It has exposed the protagonists to different cultural and socio-political contexts (middle-class young men from a majoritarian religious grouping being exposed to how members of the minority in their neighbourhood and city are living), to different cultural and religious spaces, practises (celebrating Diwali and Sankranti together, Ishaan picking up Ali from the mosque, etc.) and most importantly, has made them aware of the diversity of the society that they live in. Whether they find it good or bad is another question – but the way the narrative is woven, the protagonists themselves, through their own actions and responses to situations, have fulfilled the function of preparing each other for the impending changes.

It has become pretty evident by now, that Ishaan will take up the role of Ali's protector if it comes to that, that Omkar is increasingly coming under the influence of his uncle and starting to get involved with the politics of religion, that Govind in general is the kind of person who is not only business-minded but is also a very sensible, sensitive and rational, who at no cost will support the kind of politics Bittoo Joshi stands for. The pointers in the film make it amply clear that the protagonists themselves are struggling hard with rising to these challenges and learning from it. Ali's appearance in some shots has also changed now – from wearing a skull cap, a *salwar kameez,* he has moved to wearing T-shirt and trousers. The most important symbol signifying his religious affiliation – the skull cap – has started to disappear occasionally. This kind of adjustment at a physical level can only take place if the protagonist is comfortable with an internal adjustment to his new surroundings. If he wanted, he could have held on to his religious identity and attire, especially since he had been made fun of

based on it. Instead, he chooses to ignore it and put his faith in Ishaan and focus on the bigger goal.

Big change with feeling of life and death/ Ordeal, death and rebirth (0:55:01): As the narrative progresses, one can also notice the change in Omkar's character – he is starting to feel disgruntled about Ali's presence in their lives, since he has become the centre of attention for Ishaan. The portrayal of the earthquake in the film (in reality a reference to the earthquake in Bhuj in 2001) is the event that paves the way for the climax in the film that is yet to become clear. This particular sequence portrays a series of smaller scenes - depicting the destruction as a result of the earthquake, the personal disappointment that is in store for the protagonists since the real-estate space they had paid up for is destroyed by the earthquake. In short, this stage can be considered to be one of the turning points in the film. The cinematography in this sequence is very symbolic. For instance, just after the earthquake has subsided, Govind is on his way to look at the construction site where they had invested money. On his way, he crosses a bridge which is shown to be deeply cracked (IMG. 31). A bridge, as a leitmotif and true to its literal meaning, is something that represents bringing together of two elements, combining them, joining them. Considering the plot of the narrative, the bridge with deep cracks, not only represents the impending doom – spelling out the falling out between the two communities – it also represents the ties that existed between the two groups up until this point and the fault lines in the society being exposed. It also signifies an impending fall out between the friends – especially Omi and Ishaan. The pictorial representation of the bridge developing cracks kind of 240radesh the prophecy it has been referring to, laying the fault lines bare. In the aftermath of the earthquake when Ishaan visits Ali and sees the condition his family is in, he believes he can get some help for them in the face of a natural calamity. He is shown leading a group of people, visibly Muslim, to a relief camp being run by Bittoo's political party. The volunteers refuse to help Muslims citing the reason that 'a lot of our own people need help and we only have limited resources'. What may sound like

a fairly harmless stance (limited resources and need to safeguard the well-being of their community), starts becoming problematic when the volunteers clearly define the *Own* and the *Other* based on religious lines – the Hindus as *Own* and the Muslims as the *Other*. What is noticeable here is how, even in the face of natural disasters, which doesn't discriminate based on religions, the religious borders persist when it comes to getting help. The discrimination practised by the State authorities, aid agencies and the volunteers on-ground in granting aid to Muslim victims may have been represented in the film in a brief sequence, but it shows the attitudes and demarcations between *Own* and *Other* in a realistic fashion[209]. If a state is secular in nature and has the responsibility to protect and respect the dignity of every community living in it, then it needs to take a moment and introspect. On a meta-level this can be understood as a commentary on the envisioned nature of what the Indian state and nationalism during the Independence struggle represented vs. what the reality is. This is a recurring theme in all the three films chosen and will be addressed in depth in the conclusion.

This, the moment when Ishaan and Omkar's different standpoints leading to a showdown, is also the moment when the characters are reborn. Omkar and Ishaan, who are the best of friends and seemed inseparable at the beginning of the narrative, have now taken on new traits to their characters – Ishaan, who in the first place was oblivious to the socio-political contexts around him, is now reborn on seeing the plight of Ali's and other families in the face of a natural calamity. His character has evolved to be that of a pragmatic humanist who seems to lay more emphasis on the humane aspect of things than the religious one. Omkar, on the other hand, who is as oblivious as Ishaan to his surroundings in the beginning, has been increasingly influenced by his uncle, while distancing himself from Ishaan. His character is still not as pronouncedly evolved as that of Ishaan, but the earthquake and the aftermath are certainly turning points in his character

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209   Human Rights Watch, April 2002, Vol. 14, No. 3, 58, accessed on March 23, 2020 under https://www.hrw.org/reports/2002/india/gujarat.pdf

evolution. As Ishaan and Ali continue to bond, Ishaan realises that Ali's family feels that they are not safe in India. His father keeps insisting that Ali should hang out with people like himself – basically Muslim boys. While addressing the delicate and sensitive (even contentious) issue of the societal fabric just before the Godhra riots, this sequence also allows us to have a peek at the bigger idea, the *Want* that the character of Ishaan is trying to come to terms with. His *Want* is strongly rooted in the sense of all human beings are equal, one can't put a price tag on a life, nor can someone's loyalty/patriotism be questioned because of his/her religious affiliation.

Accepting the consequences of new life/ Reward, seizing the sword (1:01:07): Though this stage and the stage that follows are visible only in subtle ways, they contribute to the way the narrative develops from this stage onwards. The main protagonists have accepted the consequences of the choices that they have made – Ishaan having chosen to stand up for Ali and getting into a fight with Omkar about it, Omkar undergoing a process of recalibration of his thoughts concerning Ali – initially out of personal jealousy, for Ali being the reason why Ishaan picked up a fight with him. Ishaan, is on a journey of discovering himself, discovering a different side to his persona. This humane side knows no religion and no business – he just sees people in distress, who need help and protection and tries to device means and ways to help them. In one such incident, he takes away a substantial amount of cash from the shop in order to help Ali and his family without informing the other two leading to a heated discussion. Yet again, Omkar confronts Ishaan asking him if he is unable to see how many of their *Own* people are still desperately in need of help and how can it be that Ishaan only sees the needs of Ali, the logical *Other*. It is very interesting to see how the personal turns political soon as the story moves forward. The character of Govind moves into the background here for a bit while Ishaan and Omkar assume the main role alternately.

New challenge and rededications/ the road back **(1:08:13)**: Out of guilt that they owe money to Bittoo, Govind insists on Omkar joining the election campaign for Bittoo. Omkar starts becoming increasingly involved in the

religion-based politics of the party. As described in the Hero's journey by Vogler, the protagonists have dedicated themselves completely to the new chosen paths. In this sequence, once Ali starts playing for the club and displays his talent in full force, it seems that Ali being a Muslim becomes inconsequential in the bigger scheme of things – especially to the other young boys who were picking on him earlier. He is not necessarily *Other* anymore. Though this slight change may seem to be a trivial observation, it, in fact, points to a very common human tendency. People are usually capable of co-existing with other people – irrespective of caste, religion. A symbolic reference in this sequence is through the medium of the election campaign slogan of Bittoo – *Gujarat 243radesh daldal main, mukti hai yajna main* (roughly translated – Gujarat has become a marshland, the only way to achieve freedom from this is through the religious sacrifice). The reference to *daldal* or marshlands indirectly refers to the flower that blossoms in the marshlands – the lotus. The lotus is the election symbol of the BJP, yet again proving that the reference to BJP throughout the film isn't just coincidence. This sequence also shows Bittoo losing the elections, while his party wins in the entire State (also a reference to the BJP's win in Gujarat in 2002), leaving him and Omkar bitter towards his opponent and effectively also towards Ali's father, Ali and in general the Muslims. Another noticeable thing here is that the candidate a lot of Muslims seem to be supporting isn't Muslim himself, but a Hindu with probably more secular credentials than those of Bittoo. The colour scheme of this scene is very significant as well – the space that the opposition candidate Subodh Mehta is placed in, is coloured in green referring to the religious affiliations of the Muslim audience being addressed there (IMG. 32) while the spaces dominated by the Hindutva party are predominantly red and orange – the preferred colour of the branch of politics they represent (IMG. 33). The usage of colour to separate physical spaces while referring to the religion they represent, the ideologies they associate themselves with is a very interesting medium to talk about the politics of colour and the space and is absolutely in tune with the realities on ground.

Final attempt, last minute dangers/ resurrection (1:32:50): As the narrative approaches the climax, the tension about what comes next is palpable. Omkar's parents agree to go on the pilgrimage to Ayodhya on his insistence – to a town that has a very contentious, bloody and violent history in the context of modern India and its relationship with the largest minority population i.e. the Muslims. This pilgrimage of devout Hindu pilgrims took place in reality in February 2002[210] and so did the train carnage and the riots that followed.

In the context of the narrative, by now we are familiar with the political leanings and understanding of the socio-political context of all the three figures. So, when the train compartment carrying Hindu passengers is set to fire, one can predict the response that is about to emanate from the different characters in the story. As the narrative progresses, the second major turning point appears in the form of the riots in Gujarat. Without naming the place where the actual burning of the train takes place, other references like Sabarmati express, journey to Ayodhya point to the fact that it is in fact referring to the Godhra riots. Omkar realises that his parents, who joined this tour on his behest, have died. As he revels in his sorrow and seeks solace, his uncle Bittoo stokes his anxieties and asks him to seek revenge for the death of his parents on the people who killed them. Bittoo stokes religious passions of his followers, provokes Omkar to seek revenge. Omkar plainly rejects any kind of communication with his friends that would stop him from seeking the revenge for the death of his parents, for which he also carries a certain amount of guilt – for had it not been for

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210 On the behest of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, a number of devout Hindu pilgrims (*Karsevaks*) had gone to Ayodhya to participate in a religious ceremony on the contented site of the Babri Mosque. A few compartments of the train *Sabarmati Express* carrying these passengers back to Gujarat were burnt down on the morning of February 27, 2002 leading to series of riots between the Hindu and the Muslim communities – especially in Gujarat. Narendra Modi, the chief minister of the state then and India's prime minister since 2014 had been accused of indirect participation in the events through inaction of the state apparatus to protect the minorities. He was acquitted of all the charges but continues to be considered as a perpetrator and enabler by academicians, number of politicians and intellectuals.

him, his parents would probably still be alive. On seeing the escalating situation around him, Ishaan goes back to playing the protector to Ali, this time in an even more sensitive time. Govind, having experienced Omkar's reluctance to think in a sensible manner, goes to assist Ishaan since Ishaan is scared. This is for the first time over the course of the entire narrative that Ishaan displays vulnerability. The moment when Omkar sets out with his uncle towards a Muslim minority area to seek revenge, is when the personal becomes political for him. His personal sense of loss assumes a political nature and drives the wedge between *Own* and the *Other* further. The family of Ali, whom Omkar has met at earlier instances, is now the face of the *Other* that needs to be persecuted in order to seek revenge for the loss of the *Own*. Curiously enough, the *Other* here also includes Ishaan since he is protecting Ali. Ironically, earlier on, Omkar asks Ishaan if he will accompany him on the journey to Ayodhya and Ishaan respond saying he will go wherever Omkar asks him to. As luck would have it, Ishaan's fate is sealed by Omkar – but not because he agrees to go where Omkar wants him to go somewhere, but because of his own choice of being in the same space as Ali. The sequence ends with Omkar shooting Ishaan dead. In continuance with the symbolism of the film (the election symbol of the party that Bittoo and Omkar represent is that of a *Yajna*), the final offering – in the form of Ishaan – has been made, albeit in the presence of a fire. The shot shows Omkar staring down at Ishaan initially and then also at Govind and Ali (IMG. 34 – IMG. 36). The brilliance of this shot lies in the fact that it portrays the assumed moral upper hand, the right to seek revenge by placing Omkar above the victims, but his own shock at having killed his best friend, supersedes this supposition. His parents are dead as a result of his insistence, he has shot his friend dead, his other friend who is alive is utterly disgusted by him and scared of the hate and violence his friend is capable of. In spite of Ali being a Muslim, he is capable of mourning Ishaan's loss, while Omkar, himself a Hindu is responsible for his death. Another significance of this shot has is that it can be compared with the opening shot in the flashback – Omkar is shown sitting at Ishaan's feet whereas now Ishaan

is literally at Omkar's mercy, Omkar thus having the upper hand. In its own way, the narrative comes full circle and moves back to the present. The killing of Ishaan at the hands of Omkar makes the context of Omkar leaving the prison after serving a sentence clear.

Mastery/ Return with Elixir (1:52:35): The flashback ends with the death of Ishaan and transports the viewer back to the future/ present. This time around, Govind is present to lend Omkar a supporting shoulder. In the context of this narrative, this is a significant stage since all the protagonists have managed to resolve the conflicts – at a personal level as well in the broader context of the narrative. Ishaan, as mentioned earlier, through his death has resolved the conflict he was a part of – namely that of putting humanity and professional (in this case – sporting) excellence, loyalty and protecting the weak above anything else. In consistence with the Hindu philosophy, Ishaan is considered to be reborn as the child of Govind and Vidya (Ishaan's sister). The reincarnation of Ishaan so to say, can be considered as a sign that Ishaan continues to exist in spirit. It is now up to Omkar to decide whether he wants to love Ishaan as much as he did before or hold a grudge against him for choosing to die while protecting a Muslim boy. Omkar on the other hand, who slowly and steadily grew apart from his friends and got involved in the religious conflict – also due to a number of personal reasons – has resolved the conflict in a very different manner. He has served a prison sentence for his criminal act and also seems to be realising the extent and the impact of his actions. The conflict that he is a part of can be considered completely resolved when he is shown to be sitting in the stadium, full of regret and watching Ali play a match and meeting the other Ishaan, Govind's son, for the first time. Govind has resolved the conflict for himself in a way that he continues to represent Ali and, as is evident at the beginning of the film, students across the spectrum of the society. Most importantly, he seems to have raised his son with an inclusive idea of India, as is evident when his son hands over the Indian flag to Omkar to cheer on Ali during the India versus Australia match. The most important conflict that is resolved at this stage is the one that Ali has

been a part of all along – his loyalty, his belonging, his allegiance to India because he is a Muslim being questioned. Despite having seen utter hatred, violence and blood, Ali seems to continue having faith in the society around him and eventually represents them. The people, who at one point categorised him to be the *Other*, are the ones whose accusations of disloyalty, etc. have been defeated – especially Omkar's. Ali, the warrior, has made his mark and contribution in defining what it means to be 'Indian'. To further highlight this point, he is shown representing India against an external opponent – the Australian cricket team – probably reminding all those in the audience of the kind of country they live in: a secular state which is supposed to treat all its citizens, irrespective of their caste, creed, class and religion, equally and respectfully. It is the prerogative of the state to ensure that every citizen is equal in the eye of the state and the polity.

The film ends with Omkar watching Ali representing India in international cricket – hitting home the point that Ali continues to consider himself an Indian and is representing his country irrespective of his religious affiliation. The ending of the film which shows Ali representing India, in spite of his religion, resonates with a wider audience since it questions the premise of right-wing Hindutva, which advocates that the Holy Land and the Fatherland of the Muslims will always be different and their loyalties will always lie with the Holy Land and people of 'their' brethren, rather than with their country. The fact that it resonates with a sizeable part of the audience is based on the reality that players, who happen to be Muslims, have represented India at international level, especially in cricket. In the case of an international match against another country, the Indian team then evokes the idea of an old kind of nationalism – that of uniting against an external opponent. A rise in nationalist, patriotic sentiments – not comparable to the rise of religious nationalism right now – has repeatedly been experienced in India, though sometimes it has also led to problems[211]. This

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211   During particularly contentious matches like India vs. Pakistan, there have been instances when sometimes some members belonging to the Muslim minority have celebrated Pakistan's win over India and been targeted for it.

line of questioning and debating the loyalties of public personalities, especially second or third generation immigrants, has been catching up in Western countries in the past years as well. As they move into powerful positions and represent their countries at an international level, and religion no longer plays the most decisive role. Similarly, their presence as representatives of their respective countries has not gone well with right-wing political establishments who, more than often, highlight the religious and ethnic 'origins' of these personalities and claiming that they experience a conflict of loyalties.

As already mentioned above in the context of the mentor, in my opinion, Ali and Ishaan both play the role of the mentor to each other and contribute in aiding the other in achieving the goal they had set out to achieve. Ali fulfils Ishaan's dream of playing for India, Ishaan – through his sacrifice – aids Ali in establishing that Ali is as Indian as anyone else, despite critics relegating him as a Muslim and hence incompatible with a Hindu majoritarian society. After all, it was Ishaan – a member of the Hindu majority – who saved his life.

SEQUENCE ANALYSIS: OMKAR'S TRANSFORMATION (1:36:18 – 1:39:36) (IMG. 37.1-IMG. 37.17)

For a sequence analysis in KPC, I have chosen a sequence that is a key moment where one of the stages in Omi's journey of identity evolution can be distinctly seen. The sequence has been shot by Anay Goswamy. It is in this sequence that the so far underlying political currents are then looked at through a prism of the personal – the political becomes extremely personal. Since it is Omi's journey that is of interest to me, I will focus on sections of this sequence that are directly connected to him.
The opening shots of this sequence (IMG. 37.1 – IMG.37.3) are extreme wide shots that make Omi's car look small. The car is large enough to be noticeable, yet small enough to tell us that the car, the person sitting inside are smaller elements of a bigger plot. However, as the camera zooms in

and brings the car into the focus of the frame, it helps in drawing attention to the protagonists inside the car.

In the following image (IMG. 37.4), we see Omi through the rear-view mirror inside the car. The image is shot in such a manner that one sees Omi in an extreme closeup through a mid-shot – there is enough distance to the rear-view mirror but Omi can be seen fairly closely through it, so much so that one rarely sees his entire face. The extreme closeup is usually employed to highlight the individual features of the subject and make it appear threatening. For instance, in this sequence, the audience continues to see the saffron anointment on Omi's forehead, a distinctly religious marker for Hindus. The rear-view mirror as a tool has been employed here cleverly – a rear-view mirror is used by a driver to see rearward and drive safe. In a metaphorical sense pertaining to this context, the rear-view could have been an opportunity for Omi to look back at his past together with Ishaan and Govind. But since Omi never looks into the mirror directly, it becomes clear that he is increasingly moving away from his common past with them. The audience on the other hand is looking into the rear-view mirror – they are familiar with the past that they have been a witness to so far while also getting a glimpse of Omi's present.

The camera rests on the garland briefly after this (IMG. 37.5) – an object which features heavily in Hindu rituals. The shot also draws our attention to a date 27th February 2002. The mention of the date, combined together with the garlands which are used to pay respects to the dead in Hindu religion, is a direct reference to the deaths that happened during the Godhra riots. The next two shots are images of a television news telecast (IMG. 37.6 and IMG. 37.7). The first image (IMG. 37.6) is a closeup of the screen whereas the second image (IMG.37.7) is captured while zooming out from the scenes being shown on the television screen to an audience sitting in front of the it (IMG. 37.8). The images of the news telecast give away a lot of finer details that set the context of the upcoming sequence – the details about the train attack in Godhra with the details of the event

unfolded (carriages were locked from outside etc.), the number of casualties aided with strong visuals of the destruction live from the site are captured in these two images. IMG. 37.8, a wide shot captured from above, portrays the orange rage – the image composition through an interplay of light, the curtains appear to be reddish orange. This, together with the political undertones of the scene, is no doubt a precursor of a Hindu backlash about to unfold.

The next shot (IMG. 37.9) shows Omi crying as his uncle tries to calm him down. The shot is taken from a closeup angle, yet from a side that shows us the right side of his face. The right side of the brain is usually considered to the be the origin of emotions and emotional responses. For the next image in the sequence (IMG. 37.10), the camera zooms out and focuses on Omi's uncle, the leader of the political party. In this capture, we see the left side of his face – the left side of the brain being considered responsible for its analytical and rational skills. The combination of these two images where the emotional hurt and pain and an ensuing wish for revenge, emerging from Omi which is then rationalised and substantiated with a call for violence by his uncle is one of the highlights of this sequence. The next image (IMG. 37.11) is an extra wide shot of the temple premises, eerily empty compared to earlier images of the same premises in the film, drawing attention to the fact that this is a silence before the storm. Once Ishaan and Govind reach the party office where Omi is, they are greeted by a mob gathering. This group of individuals is being addressed by Omi's uncle and is being incited to avenge the deaths of the Hindus who were killed (IMG. 37.12 and IMG. 37.13). The warmer colour tones as opposed to the rest of the film, combined together with the sequence being filmed inside a house with dark corners in both these wide shots adds to the darkness of the plot. The following shot (IMG.37.14) is a reflection of Omi and Ishaan in the glass on the table also reflecting the insignia of the party as well as the ceiling that bears clear lines, dividing the frame into dark and light. A wide shot at that, the reflection in the glass signifies the innermost deliberations between the two men as well as the distance that

has started to set in between the two men on the background of the unfolding religious tensions. Omi is placed in the darker part of the frame, Ishaan partially in the lighter part with his head in the darker part. Omi's placement in the dark, together with his reflection in the glass, is a sign of his internal upheavals leading him to moving over to the darker side. Ishaan's portrayal on the other hand, split between darkness and light, is a sign for Ishaan gradually fading away into the dark – a precursor for looming death.

In the following image (IMG. 37.15) Ishaan and Govind are shown trying to console Omi. This image is a mid-shot angle and shows all the three protagonists in a single frame. The power dynamic between them changes this point on in an irreversible manner. As Govind and Ishaan try to calm Omi and tell him to leave with them since they fear a backlash in the coming, Omi responds glaringly and asks them if the either of their mother has been killed (IMG. 37.16). This closeup shot has been shot from an over-the-shoulder angle and places the protagonist in the middle of a very frame that has political insignia present in the background. This, combined with Omi's reference to his dead mother, highlights how the political is increasingly becoming personal. Though the outcome of the upcoming ordeal isn't clear as yet, the changing equations and hints about the things that are about to unfold are abundantly present. For instance, in the case of this shot, Omi is looking up to Govind while Ishaan is placed at the background. The interplay of these changing camera angles and the image composition throughout the sequence is a direct commentary on the changing dynamic between the three protagonists. The sequence ends with Omi's uncle telling Govind and Ishaan to leave Omi alone. Since he is approaching them from behind, in this mid shot (IMG. 37. 17), he appears to be at a lower level than Govind and Ishaan – a clear reference to Govind and Ishaan having the moral upper ground. Additionally, he is also standing in the middle of both of them – dividing the frame and can be interpreted as a reference to the divisive role he is about to take on.

When we look at how the narrative has evolved, we can consider the events happening in Godhra and the riots that followed as a major cultural disruption, in the sense Goody refers to them. The kind of impact the riots in Godhra had on the fabric of the Indian society, kickstarted a process of an entire *Kulturnation* – that of the minority community of Muslims – feeling alienated to a large extent from the mainstream. This kind of *Renascence* may not necessarily be a positive one, but it happened, nonetheless. It was, in fact, a continuation of the radical alienation process that started in 1992 with the demolition of the Babri Mosque and also entailed a process of 'disenchantment of the world' in the words of Goody. Interestingly enough, the 'disenchantment of the world' wasn't only happening with the Muslim minority community; it was also happening with the Hindu majority community since the majority of the political establishment in the country, who considers the positions they occupy as entitlement and not as a means of serving people, had failed to address genuine concerns of the majority population. This led to them feeling equally disappointed and alienated from the political mainstream which seemed to address the concerns of the select few entities like the business community, the upper caste Hindus and the urban population. This sense of feeling alienated led to them choosing to move away from a centrist, tolerant political position to a more right-wing radical position – a phenomenon a tad too familiar in today's socio-political context. The USA is experiencing this disenchantment of the majority population, a middle-class, working class population voting for Trump who claims to put their concerns before anything else. Germany is seeing this drastic form of disenchantment in the form of people often rejecting most of the mainstream *Volksparteien* like the CDU, SPD, FDP and instead voting for the AfD and supporting *PEGIDA*. Britain is experiencing a political debacle with Brexit. Last but not least, the BJP in India has received an even bigger mandate in the 2019 elections as compared to the 2014 elections and enjoys an absolute majority in the lower house of the Indian parliament (*Loksabha*) while also securing a majority,

together with its allies, in the upper house of the Indian parliament (*Rajyasabha*).

As far as the cultural understandings of the protagonists is concerned, all of them undergo a tremendous change in their identity structures and effectively also their understandings of culture. At the beginning of the film, all the four main characters – Ishaan, Omkar, Govind and Ali – seem to have a closed understanding of culture. This closed understanding of culture at the outset is not because of an outright rejection of other cultures but is a result of lack of exposure to the *Other* in a society where *Interculturality* as a model for culture exists. As the narrative develops, they are exposed to a very distinguishable, marked *Other*. The three Hindu friends are exposed to a Muslim boy and vice-versa. Their cultural understandings undergo a drastic transformation from this point onwards as Ishaan, Govind and Ali cautiously approach the *Other* and eventually accept its presence in their lives and start interacting with it. Their cultural perception changes from closed to open and eventually to an extensive understanding of culture, which enables them to make the boundary lines between the most evident divides like caste, religion irrelevant and allow the identities to become fluid. Omkar, on the other hand, is still undecided. His character is standing at a threshold from where it can go in either directions. He can either chose to engage with this *Other* and see where it leads, or he can choose not to engage with it and stand firm on the cultural boundaries he has drawn for himself in spite of being aware of the things that exist beyond this boundary. Considering his responses to a number of situations in the film, it becomes clear that he has chosen to stand firm at the boundaries that existed at the beginning of the film and possibly even make them more concrete. He moves back to a closed understanding of culture from the threshold point and reaches a turning point in the narrative when the personal becomes the political and he is seeking revenge. Ultimately, after having served a term in the prison and lost a friend, he revisits his position and is shown being open to the possibility of interacting with the *Other*. The way the evolution of the narrative allows the figures

to develop and mature about their understandings of culture, allowing all of them the space to experiment with the *Other*, truly fits into the idea of a *Rhizome* – not only in terms of the evolution of the characters and their identities but also in terms of the non-linearity in the chronology of responses to events.

When we consider the allotted identities here, the observations vary to a certain extent from the observations made in the case of *RDB*. The socially allotted identities in the context here are more rigid since the social interactions between the protagonists are taking place in spaces which are not politically neutral like a University or more specifically as is the case in *RDB*, on the canvas of history. The allotted social identities are supported by a physical separation of spaces where Muslims and Hindus live. Having said that, the sport of cricket offers Ishaan, Govind and Ali (and the audience) a neutral space to reconsider and revisit their own positions on the relation between religion, nation and representation as well as the motivation to step out of the socially allotted identities like Hindus, Muslims, etc. in order to reorganise themselves in the context of a bigger grouping – that of cricket lovers. The love for a sport may not be considered to be an important parameter when social identities are negotiated and allotted in India, but in the case of this narrative, this invisible parameter plays a decisive role in helping some of the protagonists redefine their identity by shifting the focus to their common love for cricket. In the case of Omkar, the identity altercation is an equally complicated process because he tries to hold on to his identity of being a Hindu first – initially in the face of confusion about finding himself, later in the face of his fear of losing his best friends to an *outsider* Ali and lastly, in the face of his personal loss of his parents. The conflict between Ishaan, Govind, Ali vs. Omkar is insightful because the former is able to rise beyond their socially allotted identities and find a common ground in the realm of a sport, while Omkar upholds his socially allocated identity – that of being a 'Hindu first'. Omkar finds it difficult to cope with the process of identity transformation since he is unable to understand how his friends were able to move away from their

'Hindu first' identity and allow a non-political, non-allotted trait like love for cricket influence their identity transformations. In my opinion, *KPC* is a great example of how complex topics like transculturality, the identity conflicts and the process of identities becoming fluid as well as a small peek into how the topic of politics of colour and their ramifications in public spaces can be represented efficiently on-screen.

4.1.3   Secular Nationalism: *Newton* (2017)

Newton is a black comedy directed by Amit Masurkar and was released in 2017. The film was critically acclaimed and was India's official entry in the category of Best Foreign Language Film for the 90th Academy Awards. It narrates the story of Newton in the context of the current state of the Indian democracy, what democracy means to different sections of the Indian population from the perspective of an idealistic bureaucrat, using the genre of black humour. The narrative also stands out because of Newton's idealism and his understanding of Indian Nationalism as secular nationalism, which leaves out the role of caste, religion and gender in the relationship between the State and an individual.

The storyline is unique in many ways – firstly, it focuses on the extreme ambivalence in the understanding of the concept of Democracy, while simultaneously also addressing additional challenges a democratic setup possibly faces in a diverse country like India. To begin with, the correlation between Democracy and Diversity is very interesting. While Democracy can be simply explained as a political setup where the majority rules – a Government by the people, of the people, for the people, diversity
adds an additional dimension to this concept. Diversity is irrespective of the majority/minority discourse and stands for itself. That a diverse cross-section of the population always finds representation in a democratic setup is not necessarily a given. This particular paradox in the Indian democratic setup is one of its major flaws and is well-represented in *Newton*. The narrative focuses on a national election for the Lower House of Parliament,

the *Loksabha,* and how this election is being conducted in a remote province somewhere in the deep forests of Central India which is populated by Adivasis (indigenous population). The central part of India, as portrayed in the film (and also to a large extent, in reality) has a huge presence of the army, police and para-military forces to combat Maoists and Naxalites[212]. Additionally, in the context of this thesis, the film offers interesting insights into the workings, ironies and paradoxes of Indian democracy and allows us to interrogate the connection between Democracy and Nationalism.

A democratic setup has its own paradoxes when juxtaposed with nationalism. Though a democratic setup offers the people a chance to choose their own representatives through the principle of universal suffrage, this doesn't necessarily mean that the diverse minorities get a proportional representation in the democratic system. Though there have been systematic efforts in India to address this problem through affirmative action, an underrepresentation of the marginalised communities in politics continues to be a problem. So, even if the concept of the Nation is theoretically an inclusive one that enables citizen participation, it doesn't necessarily represent a wide cross section of citizens and their interests. Through the character of Newton, the film celebrates an envisaged idea of the Indian state – that of a flourishing cultural diversity in a political construct of a nation while also focusing on the ground realities concerning the notion of an inclusive, diverse Indian state. The narrative of the film plays on this exact paradox and brings out its nuances. The texture of the narrative, similar to some other narratives being considered under the category of nationalism, maintains its uniqueness through multiple aspects. Firstly, the film narrative places a protagonist with Ambedkarite leanings (and probably even Dalit, though it is never made clear), with an unwavering faith in the Indian democracy and state apparatus responsible for free and fair elections at the

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212　The Maoist-Naxalite insurgency in India is an ongoing conflict between the Government of India and rebel forces, affecting huge areas of land, largely in Central India. The Naxalites are far-left radical communists who have been fighting the Indian Government for better rights and living conditions for the Tribal population in India, and probably even freedom from the Indian state.

centre of the narrative. The protagonist here is not presented as a victim of the oppressive societal systems like caste, but of his unwavering faith in the democratic setup and the state. Secondly, though the narrative has hints suggesting the existence of the Adivasis as a *Kulturnation* in their own regard, the narrative doesn't vehemently propagate the creation of a Nation state based on this nor does it suggest an exclusion or rejection of other communities based on their ethnicity; instead the narrative demands a respect for diversity, for the traditions of the Adivasis. The narrative is also unique because of the choice of satire to narrate a story otherwise steeped in realism, presenting the realities and fates of real people.

The opening sequence of the film is a collage of many things. Firstly, it introduces the audience to the problem it intends to touch upon in this film while providing them with definitions as laid down/used by the Indian state to describe a particular group of people. It brings in terms like Chhattisgarh, a state in Central India while referring to the Maoists/Naxalites and the nature of their struggle against the Indian state. The first visual shown in the film is that of an election campaign – it is colourful, loud and full of promises (IMG. 38). However briefly, these few seconds touch upon several decisive and key issues that set the context of the film. One of the candidates is seen delivering an emotionally charged speech to his audience, promising to bring 'Development' (laptop in the right hand, cell phone in the left) to them. The idea of development that he proposes to his audience tells us a lot about (a) what is understood by development in India, what indicators signify development for a large part of the population and (b) the aspirations of a middle-class people for having a better life and what symbolises better life. The concept of development briefly refers to a digital revolution that India has undergone in the past few years by availability of cheap smart phones, coupled with cheap mobile data while basic and infrastructural issues like access to medical services, equality and economic prosperity - that are considered as indicators of a developed society, continue to be missing in many parts in the country. In the context of the narrative, we are focusing on a semi-urban and rural area.

While material possessions like laptops and mobile phones may signify development for the people in the semi-urban area (in spite of a lack of access to basic amenities), for the people living in the heart of the forest, basic amenities like access to medical and health services, equity in access to resources, access to a fair market where they can get a fair price for their work, are indicators of development. It is clear from the speech of the contestant that it is the first kind of development he is trying to sell to his voters while in reality, it is in fact the second kind of development that is necessary. Secondly, this sequence also focuses on how unrealistic the nature of election promises is. No political party can possibly ensure the procurement of a mobile phone and a laptop for every young voter if voted into office. This thematic strand addressing consumerism and how it is used by political parties to mislead voters and digress from real issues at hand is a recurring theme throughout the film. It portrays the kind of discourse that is common during elections in India. The ignorance and disconnect between a wide range of politicians and their voters on actual issues, combined with the futility and unrealistic nature of the promises made during an election campaign and how these issues contribute to a disillusionment about being a part of a democratic setup and questioning its legitimacy are addressed at a later point in the film. The candidate is then shown to be shot dead by the Maoists/Naxalites who have appealed to the tribal people to disavow the elections and who don't consider it to be a legitimate way for representing the concerns of the tribal people. This killing represents the disconnect and the dissent the film intends to address.

Following this brief introduction to the setting of the narrative, the next sequence introduces us to a young man named *Nutan Kumar* aka *Newton*. He is shown sitting in his home, presumably in a lower middle-class locality. The aesthetics of this shot (IMG. 39) is worth noting – on the left side of the image is a blue panelled wall, the one on the right is light orange in colour. In this highly political film, which is also about the elections in

2014, the colours serve a specific function – the blue represents the political movement led by Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar213, demanding equality for Dalits in the Indian society (his photo is shown in the next sequence), while the orange symbolises right-wing Hindutva. Logically, the colour symbolising Hindutva is on the right and the colour symbolising an equal, open society is on the left. Through his positioning in the film, it is quite clear that Newton is politically inclined to the left. The presence of Ambedkar's poster in the image also suggests that the protagonist has Ambedkarite leanings and that he is a firm believer of the Indian constitution. In the following image (IMG. 40), Newton is shown sitting inside the room, as seen from the outside. Through a brilliantly planned shot, the iron bars on the window (which have a protective function) create the illusion of Newton (alongside Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar), being behind bars. This image and the thoughts that it evokes are particularly symbolic since they refer to the continued outcaste/ marginalising of Dalits (or Depressed Classes) within the Indian setup. The sequence that follows shows a power-cut and how Newton is the one who restores the power in the unit where he lives by repairing a minor defect in the fuse. This metaphorical plunging into darkness, then the restoration of power, represented by light, already puts Newton on a pedestal, attributing heroic qualities to him and hinting at heroic deeds he may do in order to free the depressed classes.

As the narrative evolves, we find out that Newton is a government employee and reserve election officer, who gets a chance to conduct elections in a small constituency with merely 72 constituents. We also find out that Newton is, in fact, a name is he has chosen for himself once he grew up and that his original name is Nutan Kumar (New for *Nu*, ton for *tan*). *Nutan* in Hindi means new and is usually a name for a female child, hence his resolve to change the name. It is also no coincidence that he chooses the

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213   Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar was a Dalit politician and is a very important figure in the history of modern India. In addition to being the architect of the Indian constitution, he was also a freedom fighter and a champion of the cause of abolition of the Caste system and the practice of Untouchability.

name Newton to be his new name, since the name represents a number of traits that make him the person he is – his curiosity for the unknown and the new, a bend of mind to conduct critical questioning, his persistent efforts to make something work and possibly representing some of the ideals of Sir Isaac Newton, who he named himself after. Newton's conception of the universe was used by a number of Western philosophers during the Enlightenment Era in order to argue for a universe based on natural and rational, logical laws. All in all, Newton seems to have some traits inspired by his namesake – the most important being a critical questioning of what is happening in his surroundings.

This brief introduction, in terms of the topics it touches upon, is not brief after all. The topics raised at this early juncture in the film are topics like caste and lower classes, the flaws of a democracy, developmental issues, etc. that keep reappearing at opportune times in the narrative and set the broader context of the film. The interconnectedness of these issues, within the context of the narrative, is a particularly unique feature that grants the film its unique *Texture*. A series of sub-topics like the role of law-enforcement agencies, the aspect of gender, etc. keep appearing at different junctures, establishing connections to the broader framework set out by the topics just mentioned, making the weave of this narrative very unique.

As opposed to the other films so far, this film has one central character which poses as the Hero during the entire narrative. The evolution that his character undergoes over the course of the film can be investigated within the chosen theoretical framework, since his attitude towards the meaning of a democracy, nation and nationalism, undergoes a paradigm shift and this can be considered as a pointer for the change in his identity construct. Additionally, while the structure of the narrative is linear making it easy to follow the evolution of the character in a chronological manner, the evolution isn't necessarily a chronological process. Over the course of the film, some secondary characters like Aatma Singh and Malko play a decisive role in altering Newton's understanding and perception of the ideal relationship between State and its citizens, while basing their own observations on

ground and experienced realities. This works well in the given context, since Newton and Aatma Singh represent two different sides of the same spectrum – how the Indian state sees conflict zones and deals with them. Newton and Aatma Singh represent two different approaches – one of resorting to violence as an answer to violence while the other is of responding to violence by trying to bring more people within the democratic system in order to empower them to fight the system from within. For instance, while Newton believes in convincing people to participate in elections, inform them about the benefits of participating in this exercise, Aatma Singh believes in resorting to violence to get the people to come and elect. Singh acts on the orders of a senior officer, who is entertaining a foreign delegation of journalists, and not because of an actual interest in getting people involved in the election process. Considering this background, as we look at Newton's journey over the course of the film, there will be instances where characters like Aatma Singh may move into the foreground and Newton may not be at the centre of a particular sequence. Towards the end though, it will be the evolution of Newton's character that will be of prime importance.

Limited Awareness of the problem/ Ordinary world (0:00:40): As mentioned before, the opening sequence of the film sets the broader thematic tone for the film. The protagonist's placement in a particular space in the frame (blue walls, frame of Dr. Ambedkar), which clearly signifies his political leanings, also gives us a rough background about the person. After covering a plethora of topics in the opening sequence, the narrative starts exploring the subjects one by one, which it has already introduced at the beginning. One of the first topics is the nature of the Indian elections, the massive scale of the exercise and the criminal record of a number of candidates and even elected members of the parliament. Newton, along with a number of other officers, is participating in a workshop that is being held to train officers for the election. The convener of this workshop is a firm believer in Indian democracy but well aware of its flaws. He consciously refers to those flaws while highlighting the importance of a democratic setup. He

says that it is very important to get more people to participate in the election process if one hopes to address the problem of under-representation and thereby address a series of conflicts in this particular zone. The convener also serves as a figure who inspires Newton and reaffirms his faith in democracy in spite of its flaws. Following this, a sequence shows Newton being set up by his parents to meet a girl for the purpose of marriage – an 'arranged marriage', as it is usually referred to in the Indian subcontinent. His ideas about marriage, the concept of dowry, his insistence on a girl being educated and most importantly, of being of marriageable age is widely different from his parents' opinion. It shows that Newton is an open-minded, progressive, liberal person who is open to change and most importantly, ready to drive the change, and make a difference. This bend of mind, of wanting to be the change himself than waiting for someone else to bring it about, is evident during the course of the entire narrative.

Increased awareness, need for change/ Call to Adventure (0:04:31): The preparatory workshop for the upcoming elections and his brush with arranged marriage, followed by a difficult conversation with his parents, are the two central events in the narrative that prepare Newton and in turn, the audience for the lack of an in-depth understanding of the systems. Problems like extensive violence or the prevalent custom of marrying off a girl before she reaches a legally marriageable age, are problems to which Newton's attention is drawn and they remind him of an increased need for awareness about these problems. When a designated officer, who is supposed to officiate the election in a small constituency backs off because of a multitude of reasons (most importantly violence), Newton readily volunteers to take over the responsibility of being the election officer in that area. This setting out on an adventure will change his outlook and understanding of the system he represents forever. As he arrives in the remote area, the nature of the adventure and the challenges he could probably face, becomes clearer.

Firstly, it is a constituency seeing elections being held for the first time, which is a reference to the lack of knowledge about the process of elections in this part. Secondly, though Newton is aware of the presence of

the police, military and para-military forces in this highly conflict-ridden zone, his actual encounter with them exposes his lack of knowledge about the way they conduct business in these areas. During his first encounter with one of the officers, who refers to this region as Pakistan, immediately signifying the intense nature of hostility the armed forces face and also themselves practise while dealing with the population here. Though this region is geographically not in Pakistan, nor does it bear any kind of resemblance to the country or to the nature of the conflict between India and Pakistan, the intensity of the hostility (which is mutual) and the violence, allows the comparison to be feasible. Secondly, during this conversation, the officer refers to other areas where the Indian state faces hostility across the country. He describes this phenomenon by saying these are areas where people salute to different flags other than that of India. To this, the associate election officer responds by saying *Jhande aur Dande se Desh banta hai* (flags and floggings make a country). Newton is baffled by these comments. This seemingly friendly banter between the election officials and the officer also sets the tone of the narrative and how it will evolve over the course of the film – namely Newton's reluctance to acknowledge the complexity of this area, the people as enemy territory and the forces' insistence on them being in a hostile territory.

Fear or resistance to change/ Refusal of the call (0:22:00): In this case, the refusal of the call doesn't appear to take place in the classical sense. During Newton's first interaction with the senior officer Assistant Commandant Aatma Singh, the audience realises that the commandant is used to having his way and is slightly surprised by Newton's persistence. Aatma Singh tries to impress upon Newton the futility of holding an election in this volatile province and informs him that there is no need for any of the election officers to venture out to set up an election booth and conduct elections. He tries to dissuade Newton by saying that he and his soldiers will go inside the hostile territory and secure votes. How they will secure the said votes, is unclear and left to the audience's imagination. To make his point, he also

tries to intimidate Newton by trying to establish a certain sense of superiority by highlighting his experience of working in conflict zones like Manipur and Srinagar and how elections are supposed to be held in these regions. In his opinion the voters are not concerned about the election because they are illiterate and also because the rebels have appealed to people to boycott the election. All in all, he is trying really hard to convince Newton about how his insistence on conducting this election is unnecessary, irrelevant and could potentially turn violent. This kind of pressure can be considered as an external manoeuvre expecting Newton to refuse the call for the adventure by giving in to a fear-inciting narrative. Newton though, refuses to give in to this pressure and fear and insists on going ahead with his plans. This change of roles marks a decisive shift in comparison to the other films since the refusal of the call stems from an external factor while the protagonist himself doesn't give in to this pressure. Newton's refusal to give in to the pressure that Aatma Singh is trying to put on him is a starting point in a series of further instances of him defying any sort of external pressure while continuing to do what he thinks is the right thing to do. Additionally, one could also say that Newton's unwavering faith in democracy and hence his struggle in holding free and fair elections stems from the fact that he idolises Ambedkar, the father of the Indian constitution.

Overcoming fear/ meeting the Mentor (0:25:10): Newton rises to the challenge and asks Aatma Singh to put down his claims in writing so that he can submit them to the election commission, the supervising body, citing inability of the security forces to provide sufficient support in order to conduct an election. In this moment, Aatma Singh realises that he will have to give in to Newton's demands and informs his team about their next steps before stepping out. Everyone is asked to put on bullet-proof vests – continuing the efforts to intimidate Newton and his colleagues. In one of the first major turning points in the narrative, the character of his BLO (Booth Level Officer) Malko Netam is introduced. Newton's interaction with her and her knowledge of the area, her familiarity with the local context makes

her an indispensable asset. She will play his mentor over the course of the narrative and continue to provide him priceless insights and perspectives and most importantly counternarratives to the dominant narratives about her people.

If one were to scratch beneath the surface, this narrative also holds the potential of boasting of one more mentor – Aatma Singh. His character is of particular interest since in certain situations he plays the role of an Antagonist while in some others, he takes over the role of a Mentor. Although his character is shown in negative or at the least in an ambivalent light, his character serves the function of balancing out the narrative. Without going into the debate of whether it is right or wrong at this stage, Aatma Singh fulfills the function of bringing in some balance and perspective in the narrative. He is representing the side of the state and the armed forces, who are shouldering the responsibility of maintaining peace and order in this conflict-ridden area.

Committing to change/ crossing the threshold (0:26:10): The narrative has by now set out the most important thematic contexts that will provide a special texture to the film. The narrative and audience are now ready to move on to the most important part of the narrative, which is focusing on the elections that are to be conducted in the constituency. Though the crossing of the threshold isn't particularly visible, the peculiarity of this phase is that it shows Newton, a member of the general public and representing them, standing up against the state, represented by the security forces. Newton's character experiences a constant back and forth over the course of the narrative. During moments like him confronting Aatma Singh and insisting on Malko going along with them, despite Aatma Singh's warnings about her being a 'local' (implying she could be connected to the Naxalites), Newton is representing his own free will. It is the will of a person who has very concrete ideas about the inclusive nature of the Indian democracy, however unrealistic they may be. His response is also based on his experience of how the security forces don't consider these people to be trustworthy and hence second-class citizens. On the other hand, in instances where

he is the chief election officer and in-charge of ensuring a smooth conducting of elections, he is representing the Indian Nation state which has vested in him the authority to conduct free and fair elections. A constant change in roles, between being an individual and being a representative of the state, is also aiding in influencing Newton's understanding of complex issues and his responses to them. They are based on his individual understanding of the issue and are representative of the rhizomatic nature of his character, which is undergoing a tremendous change. This evolution in his personality, which is taking place as a response to the situations he has been in and moulding his reaction patterns is representative of how an identity complex changes and evolves in response to the surroundings the protagonist is placed in.

Experimenting with the new conditions/ Tests, Allies, Enemies (0:30:00): This is an interesting juncture in the film since it is a phase that portrays a number of realisations for Newton. One of the first few things that Newton realises is that the security forces, represented by the character of Asst. Commandant Aatma Singh, are probably neither his ally nor his enemy – they are just one side of the narrative. They seem to be insisting on doing things the way they are used to, trying to consistently intimidate him by insisting that no one can understand the things in sensitive areas like Kohima, Imphal and Srinagar the way they do. In Aatma Singh's eyes, they are the ones who carry the responsibility of keeping India safe. On the other hand, they are also responsible for carrying out the orders of the executive and the state while aiding the election officers and ensuring their safety. It is a clever juxtaposition – on the one hand we have an idealistic Newton who is uncompromising, sometimes to the extent of being 'arrogant about his ideals and his honesty', as the convenor of the election workshop would have put it. On the other hand, Aatma Singh, the officer in charge, who Newton doesn't seem to like, makes it amply clear that they too are doing their responsibility in protecting the country by putting their lives at stake. It highlights a very sensitive topic of the role of the Security Forces in a Nation State and their reluctance from getting involved in the day-to-day

affairs of the state. It also focuses on a very sensitive and interesting discussion about the role of diverse elements like Newton and Aatma Singh – both representing a system – to protect a Nation, a political entity that is demarcated by borders and a number of internal dissidents, which are earmarked as the *Other*. This sequence also focuses on the discussion about the flaws of this system which largely seems to work by knowing the right people in the right positions. When Newton, along with his entourage arrives at the site where the elections will be held, he realises that the allotted space may not be the best for conducting the elections. He is unwilling to be creative and insists on playing by the book. The venue in question is an abandoned school building, an apt site that represents a multitude of things. Though the usage of school buildings during elections in India is a common phenomenon, the site holds a special significance in the context of this film. To begin with, the school building looks like an abandoned site, which probably was burnt down. The building has the campaign slogan for state-run education programmes painted all over it. While a state-run school represents access to education for the masses, its abandonment represents a series of problems like fear of terror and utter poverty which dissuade parents from sending their children to school as they can instead help them earn money. Later, Newton discovers some anti-state texts/poetry scribbled on the walls of this burned-down school. When he asks Malko if the Maoist rebels had anything to do with it, she responds by saying that this was simply a reaction to an action – presumably by the security forces – in which they seemed to have burned down a village. As a response to this, the Maoist rebels choose to burn down a school, a building that represents the state, education or some form of modernity. Once again, Malko draws his attention to the apathy of the system and comments that no one is really bothered if the elections take place in this constituency or not, referring to the unattractiveness of this particular group of voters. They are neither wealthy nor influential and hence of no interest for the politicians or the State. In real terms, the States' interest flares up predominantly when it comes to securing access to the natural resources that are

abundant in this region or in the context of this film, when it comes to showing off how inclusive and vibrant the Indian democracy indeed is. She also speaks about the utter discontent and dissent among the population for the apathy and inability of the polity to take their issues seriously and act upon it. Initially, it looks like no one may turn up for the election. It is representative not only of the distrustful and dissentious nature of the people in this area but also of the fear of the rebellious Naxalites who have asked the villagers to stay away from the elections (as one of the villagers discloses later).

Preparing for major change/ Approach (0:59:41): The slow pace of the narrative changes at this point when Aatma Singh's senior, the DIG (Deputy Inspector General) for the area calls him up to inform him that he intends on visiting the constituency and the election booth with a group of foreign journalists to highlight the inclusive nature of the Indian elections. The narrative starts developing rapidly after this stage since Aatma Singh realises that he really has no option but to aid Newton in conducting the elections efficiently and needs to mobilise the villagers so that they participate in the election. This also marks a perverse attitude of the machinery towards the citizens it is supposed to be representing. The state apparatus, represented by Aatma Singh and the DIG, don't seem to be concerned about low or no voter turnout in this constituency, as much as they are concerned about how the foreign press will respond to it. Since the authorities want to portray the far reaching success of the Indian elections, the biggest democratic exercise (in sheer numbers) in modern times, they are motivated to mobilise people and not because they consider it their duty. It is all about the portrayal of a successful democracy rather than being one.

Big change with feeling of life and death/ Ordeal, Death and Rebirth (1:01:01): This part of the narrative, for which we have been prepared in the earlier sequence, portrays a forceful enlisting of the Adivasis for them to come and vote since it is now a matter of prestige in front of the international

community about how elections in India take place successfully at the lowest level. This sequence focuses on the most obvious depiction of how power equations work in India: on the one hand, it focuses on how the state can actually use power to mobilise people, while on other, it shows a crass sense of entitlement that the soldiers seem to have as they extract local alcohol and food from the Adivasis by using intimidation tactics and violence. A key moment in this sequence is the killing of chicken to be consumed as food by the soldiers. The symbolic murder of a living being at this stage represents disregard of basic human rights and dignity. The chicken represents the helplessness of the Adivasis because they are poor and non-influential. The sequence also highlights how the Adivasis are rendered voiceless – the whole narrative is about what Newton, Aatma Singh, and Deputy Inspector General want, what the press wishes to see, what the government wants to project and what the politicians want them to do. So far into the film, there's no instance of an Adivasi clearly expressing what he/she wants. The irony of the situation is further highlighted by a very hegemonic, patronising understanding of how democracy works – where the state and the polity seem to know better about what is good for its citizens. This particular kind of nationalism and twisted form of democracy doesn't offer any real space for the issues that concern the underprivileged, nor for them to be represented in a way that they can actually address the issues and conflicts they face at a day-to-day level.

Accepting consequences of new life/ Reward, Seizing the sword (1:06:21): This stage in the Hero's journey focuses on what he can actively do to bring about the change he/she envisages. The ignorance and unawareness on both sides has become crystal clear by now. On one hand, there is Newton's ignorance, stemming from a very unrealistic understanding of politics in this part of the country, his ignorance to their realities, traditions, concerns and issues. On the other hand, the Adivasis' ignorance about the system, the country they live in (largely also because of lack of support and interest of the state) becomes evident. Once Newton becomes aware of the Adivasis' ignorance about the system due to a variety of reasons, he takes it

upon himself to educate them about their rights as Indian citizens. The voters are confused about what this 'outsider' wants from them since, for the first time, someone is actually taking the efforts of talking to them like citizens and equals. An important point at this stage is when Malko, who so far has represented the State by being a part of the system, unexpectedly, switches the side and speaks for her *own* people, the Adivasis. She expresses their wish of being left alone – by the state and the rebels. She expresses this wish while helping Newton to understand more about how the Adivasis understand politics and how they have their own systems, while also trying to find out what they really want. Her stance is totally unexpected for Newton since, till this point on, he has considered her to be on his side, not representing the *Other*. Once she assumes the role of speaking for her *own* people, she automatically distances herself from the prevalent perception about her being a representative of the system. Though this contentious moment is resolved quickly, it hangs in the air like a bitter aftertaste in the rest of the film, since the audience is now aware of the actual aspirations of people living in conflict areas, experiencing the threat of terror from the state and the rebels perpetually and how they simply aspire for a sense of normalcy. This point serves as an important function in the narrative since from this point on, irrespective of the elections and the voter turnout, the audience is equipped with the knowledge of how futile the whole exercise and in no way does it represent the aspirations of the people.

New challenge and rededication/ the road back (1:09:55): At this juncture in the narrative, the sequence portrays a number of challenges presenting themselves and an increasing awareness in Newton about the nuanced nature of these challenges. As the DIG is on his way to visit the election booth, he can be heard saying 'Despite such stark contrasts, India's democracy truly runs deep', which is a highly contentious statement for reasons I have already cited. Another interesting aspect here is the power equation between the DIG and Aatma Singh and how hierarchical this power ladder is. It becomes evident when the DIG, who has just turned up on the scene

primarily for publicity, steals the limelight from Aatma Singh who has actually been instrumental in maintaining the safety of this polling booth and the officers. The sequence where rhetorical questions are asked to the local voters is an insightful paradox that the film has been trying to address all along. The journalists ask the DIG if the locals are being forced to vote, whether they feel safe coming into the village that has been destroyed, whether the state is forcing locals to take up arms against the Naxals, whether the accusations are true that the state actually intends to clear the forests and hand them over to mining companies. In an attempt to circumvent any responsibility, the DIG asks the reporters to pose the same questions to the villagers. This may create an illusion that he is letting the locals speak for themselves while it actually represents a pertinent power dynamic between the security forces and local population. The answers to these questions, when posed by a person of the stature of a DIG, will never be close to reality. Secondly, since the audience has already been privy to the real conditions on the ground, they are familiar with the answers to these questions. Another interesting aspect to this particular sequence is the role of the media. Rather than asking the people directly about how they feel about these issues, they predominantly choose to pose these questions to the police, representing the state. This can be interpreted as a comment by the filmmaker on the dynamics between the media and the state, as well as an inherent ignorance about the issues of the people. This sequence is also important from a slightly different viewpoint since it happens in this sequence for the first time, that Aatma Singh, for once, can be seen speaking about his own concerns. These concerns are primarily addressing his and his troops' safety, since, at the end of the day, they are here at orders of a government that miles away in Delhi and instructs them to fight their battles, without much concern for their lives.

Another powerful image in this sequence is the image where the soldier is standing outside the election booth (IMG. 41). It is symbolic of Newton's faith in democracy. It represents a difficult relationship between the Armed Forces and the Legislative, the Executive and the Judiciary. In spite

of the difficult challenges they are tackling, the security forces have largely stayed away from matters of the executive and India has always been a democracy (with the notable exception of the Emergency period) – albeit a flawed one, but never a military state. The DIG, who is visiting the constituency with the foreign delegation of journalists, is bewildered at Newton's commitment to the election exercise. When Newton tries to suggest that things haven't run as smoothly as it may seem, the DIG asks him if there has been violence, fake voting, booth capturing suggesting that these is the degrees of problems, even failure that they were expecting. When Malko notices how Newton's growing impatience with the system and the unfair treatment meted out to the Adivasis, she tells him that the situation has always been like this as far as she can remember, and tries to reassure him by saying, "No good work can be done in a day". She commends Newton for his commitment and work but makes him aware that this situation has always been the same, and if he really intends to bring change, then he will have to stay persistent and work on it committedly over a longer duration, without getting deterred by the inefficiency or disinterest from the state – especially in a democratic setup. Loknath, one of Newton's team members, makes an interesting observation when he comments on the effects of consumerism and how it can kill revolutions because people just want better lives (represented here by consumerism) at the end of the day. It can also be considered to be a reference to one of the scenes at the beginning of the film, depicting the election campaign when the candidate is shown to be appealing to his voters to vote for him by luring them into the promise of free mobile phones and laptops. On the one hand, these electronic gadgets represent economic development, chance for the marginalised to climb the social order. On the other, they also represent the false lure that one could easily get trapped in, namely, that a political leader, who is promising his voters material gains, will in all probability not deliver on the actual issues that could sustainably and meaningfully change the lives of marginalised people.

A powerful image that is recurring in this sequence is that of Newton sitting in front of a blackboard (IMG. 42). It symbolises how much he stands to learn about the system he represents and the people the system claims to represent. The positioning of Newton in this sequence, with his back towards the blackboard, also symbolises the ignorance that exists in him as a representative of the state, despite the fact that there is so much to learn and that there is an urgent need to critically look at their own approach. The sequence ends with Aatma Singh approaching Newton with a plate of food, appearing to be a kind gesture of friendship.

Final Attempt, last minute dangers/ Resurrection (1:23:55): The sequence that follows portrays an attack on the polling booth which is being termed as an ambush by the Naxalite rebels to protest against the state and the elections. The assumption that the attack could have been orchestrated by the rebels evokes memories among the audience of familiar instances – especially in India where insurgent and anti-state elements, including hostile political parties, have boycotted elections, have either directly resorted to violence or supported it in order to express their utter displeasure at the elections. For them, successful elections represent the conformity to the Indian state and legitimising its presence. With this real-life reference to the rejection of electoral procedure, it briefly appears that Newton and his team, as well as Aatma Singh and his men, have tried their best to do their job and it is the insurgent Naxalites who have endangered the sensitive relationship between the state and the local population. The police and the officers were trying to ensure a fair electoral procedure, after all. The imagery of an empty, dishevelled election booth represents an endangered democracy. As Malko leaves the group to head back, she speaks about the power of people coming together and hints at Newton to listen to his sixth sense. She seems to be suggesting that something may be fishy about the ambush and the approach of the security forces and that he should think about it too. As Newton insists that the soldiers accompanying them check with the troops left behind if everything is ok, it becomes evident that the ambush, in fact, was staged. It appears that the principle motive of holding

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an election in this part was to gain publicity and praise at an international level for ensuring safe elections in the remotest pockets in India and that once this motive has been served, no one seems to be interested in ensuring that the election booths remain open. Newton, being an upright officer, considers the elections as serious business and decides to return to the polling station, literally running back with the electronic voting machine in his hand. As the soldier's corner him and pin him down, the ideals of a democratic Indian state seem to be in danger – yet again. This brief instance makes us critically question the other instances I referred to earlier and introspect if those were indeed instances of successful elections in disturbed regions or were they merely staged as successful elections.

Master/Return with Elixir (1:30:50): As the film progresses, Newton is held captive by the soldiers and is made to surrender as he is escorted back to the rest of his colleagues. When the entourage is approached by four people who have come down to vote, in a decisive moment, Newton compromises and prioritises his principles, picks up a gun and sets up a voting booth in the middle of a jungle – even if it is only for four voters. When he confronts Aatma Singh about the staged ambush, yet again, Aatma Singh expresses his frustration at losing young soldiers because of lack of appropriate gear. The conversation highlights an important aspect that is inherent to all kinds of debates that surround the abstract idea of India and Indian nationalism. Newton and Aatma Singh – both have a unique responsibility towards the state. While Newton is in charge of ensuring safe and fair elections, of upholding democratic principles, Aatma Singh is responsible for protecting the state and its citizens, the sovereignty of India, sometimes even at the cost of his soldiers' lives. While they both fight in their own flawed ways and try to fulfil the duty they are assigned, the bigger question is, who are they fighting for? Going by the tone of their conversations, they are both aware of the flawed nature of their jobs and given a chance, would probably try to do things differently (Newton could probably become an activist, Aatma Singh a rogue, bitter ex-army man). Instead, they choose to continue to be a part of the system and tackle its flaws on

their own, sometimes in illogical ways. All this while, Newton holds the soldiers, including Aatma Singh, at gunpoint symbolising a different power equation – the police and armed forces being held hostage by a low-level clerk officiating an election. As the clock strikes three, his duty time is over and he surrenders to the soldiers, only to be beaten up again. As the film moves forward in time, Malko comes to visit Newton after six months in his office. On seeing his neck injury, she appears concerned and enquires if everything was alright after she left. Without giving away too much information right away, Newton just says that it was a 'Reaction to his actions'.

This last sequence encapsulates some aspects of Indian life – very true to reality, in my opinion, and provides answers to some key questions in a broader context that were posed during the course of the film. These are questions concerning the ideals and the current status of Indian democracy, of how the Indian nation state understands itself and the kind of people they represent or don't, the highly volatile relationship between the state and dissidents, state vs. minorities and the classic conflict between idealism vs. reality. It addresses the issue of power equations on different levels – between Newton and the soldiers, between the Adivasis and the soldiers, between the Adivasis and Newton. When Newton runs away with the voting machine and soldiers follow him, eventually pinning him down, the audience is tempted into thinking that this could lead to a tragic ending to the story – Newton in captivity, closing of the election day and in some ways, defeat of the democracy because of police intervention. Then suddenly, in a bizarre change of events, when Newton musters up the courage to hold the soldiers at gunpoint, though only for a brief moment, to ensure that the four Adivasis can exercise their right to vote, it symbolises a higher positioning of the democratic principle in the Indian context, placing it above the security forces. Towards the end, as Newton is recaptured by the soldiers and subjected to violence injuring his neck, it points at how, in spite of the pre-eminence of upholding democratic principles in the Indian context, in reality, it is a very idealistic concept. The agencies tasked with

this work face other problems on-ground and can wander away from their primary task. This sequence depicts a physical capture and defeat of Newton, but in ideology, he has won this fight. In spite of his own tragic experiences, his indomitable spirit and faith in the system and firm belief in *being the change,* has helped him continue to be a part of the system. This final act, of being resilient, can be considered as a moment of resurrection in a way that Vogler refers to in the context of the Hero's journey.

SEQUENCE ANALYSIS: A PROCESS OF LEARNING AND UNLEARNING
(1:06:21 – 1:09:55)
(IMG. 45.1-IMG. 45.19)

The chosen sequence focuses on the process of elections and has been shot by Swapnil Sonawane. It starts with a shot of Newton, Malko and the rest of the team standing on the curb of the building where the elections are being held (IMG. 45.1). The shot is a mid-shot and focuses on the dynamics between Newton, his team and the rest of the villagers. To begin with, the image puts Newton in the centre of the frame and the rest of the members from his team in the background. Through their physical traits as well as the framing, Newton appears to be bigger and prominent in this frame, a hint for how important his role will be in the upcoming sequence. The people who are listening to him are barely visible with the back of their heads. The camera zooms out briefly allowing the viewers to take in more details about the composition of this image and draws attention to a multitude of contexts. The placement of the actors in this image is also significant. Newton and his colleagues, as agents of the state, are placed in front of the abandoned public-school building. Other elements like the election candidates list, the slogan of an adult literacy campaign run by the Government of India (IMG.45.2) are representative of a variety of roles that the state has played in the context of this narrative so far. On the other hand, the local people, standing at a level lower than that of Newton and his colleagues are looking up to them (IMG. 45.3). They have little power

over what the state does. The literacy program, the election are instruments that have been introduced to their lives by the Indian state and they are not powerful enough to reject them.

While the narrative is progressing, in the parallel, there is a brief appearance of Aatma Singh in the frame (IMG. 45.4). In this extreme wide shot, he is shown sitting beyond a fence. Though a part of his team is a part of the earlier and a following image (IMG. 45.3 and IMG. 45.5), standing on the periphery, the fact that he is their commanding officer and is out of the frame draws the audiences' attention to the fact that the organisation he represents, namely the armed forces, is allowed to be present to oversee the proceedings of the election but aren't allowed to be directly a part of it.

In the next over the shoulder shot focusing on Newton, he is shown sitting in front of a blackboard, with his back towards it. The shot is captured through an angle over Malko's shoulder (IMG. 45.6). The colour composition of this image is specific – Newton is wearing a white shirt contrasted with the blackboard and Malko is wearing a red coloured dress. The black and white colour scheme represents two things: first is Newton's propensity to look at things in a binary manner in terms of right or wrong and his inability to often understand the complexity of things which don't allow them to be classified as right or wrong. Secondly, the leitmotif of a blank blackboard represents how much Newton is yet to learn. The colour red grants this image a specific political context since red represents a communist political ideology which has been adopted by the Naxalites active in this region and locates the broader narrative in this clash of political ideologies – the democratic Indian state and the local resistance movement.
The next two images (IMG. 45.7 - IMG. 45.8) are both mid-shot images and show us the process of casting a ballot in process. Mid shot is a perfect choice of a camera angle for this since the focus here isn't so much on the individual – which could be achieved by choosing a closeup shot or a wide shot to draw attention to the broader context; the choice of a mid-shot as much as on the process of election.

The next seven images (IMG. 45.9 – IMG. 45.15) show Newton and one of the voters, Sukku, exchanging confused looks. All the images are mid-shot images, the choice of the angle being justifiable through the balanced act of drawing attention to the individual confusion about the election process. Had it been a purely wide shot, the focus would have been on the election as a whole; had it been a closeup shot, it would have addressed the emotions of person in the image. The mid shot helps us in seeing the emotions – confusion in this case – on the background of the elections. The confusion, rather a lack of knowledge, is also amply represented by the presence of elements like a whitewashed wall, an empty blackboard. In the images IMG. 45.9, IMG. 45.11 and IMG. 45.14, Sukku is standing in front of a whitewashed blackboard and behind a cardboard voting booth. These images represent the interplay between black, white and red as well. The whitewashed blackboard represents the imposition of a particular viewpoint on the local people not leaving them with much space to voluntarily learn (which could have been represented with some writings on the blackboard rather than just plainly whitewashing them) while the red of Sukku's turban represents the political ideology at play. The sequence with these alternating images of Sukku and Newton with a similar, yet a distinct background highlights the different approaches both these actors represent – one's unwillingness to learn, his ignorance, the other being forced to learn something that is not a voluntary choice.

On finding out that Sukku or the rest of the people present aren't familiar with the principle of voting, they are all again summoned outside with the intention of explaining the electoral process. The images IMG. 45.16 and IMG. 45.17 make it clear that they have been degraded even a step further than earlier – now they are shown sitting on the ground as opposed to standing in the earlier image. This change in their position is strongly connected with how Newton and the others, representatives of the State see them – as the primitive people who don't seem to understand the most basic principles of elections. While IMG. 45.16 is a mid-shot, taken from a side angle, IMG. 45.17 is a wide angle shot. Both these images

allow the viewers to look at the specific dynamic of how the community as a whole is being treated – not just in the context of a state vs. community context, but in the broader societal context as well. In the next shot, we can see Newton, Malko and Loknath explaining how an election works to the community. In addition to the very evident power dynamic created through standing and sitting of the chosen figures, a number of other small elements also contribute to making a point about the status of each of these individual stakeholders. Newton, Malko, Loknath are shown wearing ID cards (IMG. 45.18), the soldiers can be identified through their military garbs, the tribal community on the other hand, in this particular sequence, is shown without their voter IDs. This takes away their individual identity and shows them as the people who are subjects of the state (or as in this case – its representatives) and not as individuals. In another image, Loknath is shown holding a mock-up of the ballot paper and explaining what the ballot paper means and how they should vote for the 'right' candidate. On being asked by some people what they would get out of this voting, if there will be money involved, Newton is shocked and responds that there is no money involved in this process (contradictory to what is shown as a part of the election campaign at the beginning of the film) and that by voting they can ensure development, access to social justice etc. for the region. Through the context in which the images and this sequence are placed, it can be read that it is a visual representation of the States' (or its representatives') responsibility to 'democratize' these people in order to make them aware of their rights, ideas like justice etc. while sometimes blatantly disregarding their actual needs. In the last image of the sequence (IMG. 45.19), we see Shambhoo, a member of the election staff, sitting inside the polling booth with his back towards three windows. Each window shows a different view. The first window on the left behind Shambhoo looks out at a half constructed (or remaining half of a) house. The window in the middle looks out at the burnt remainders of another house while the one on the extreme right looks out at the gathering of people outside – Newton and the locals, accompanied by the Army. The chairs in front of the last two

windows are unoccupied. Shambhoo sitting with his back to these outside scenes while sitting inside an election booth represents the apathy and disinterest exhibited by the State (and its representatives) towards real issues and needs like infrastructure, education of the locals, despite constantly referring to them continuously as things that can be achieved by participating in the elections.

To sum up, the film awakens a kind of cynicism in the audience and confronts them with uncomfortable realities. Firstly, the film beautifully comments on the inherent flaws and nature of Indian democracy and poses a series of questions about belonging, about apathy of the state apparatus and politics to issues of marginalised communities, about appropriate representation. Secondly, it also looks at the very sensitive, complicated relationship between the state as a democratic setup and the armed forces, along with other law enforcement agencies. Thirdly, it also comments on contemporary socio-political contexts. Considering that the film came out in 2017, a lot of political references in the film are a commentary on the 2014 general elections that were conducted in India. While the film is rife with references to the *Ramayana* (the largest election, *Dandakaranya*, Loknath bringing up his faith in *Ram* and the *Ramayana* a few times) and political rhetoric that was propagated by the BJP during their election campaign, it also directly comments on the current state of politics in India. The film, through its portrayal of state-sanctioned (however indirect, state being represented by the soldiers) violence against minorities, dissidents (dissent is evident through some people's lack of interest in voting), comments on how a seemingly democratic setup has major undercurrents of violence and dissent in reality, that it may not be as democratic as it seems after all. The propagation of violence manifests itself at multiple levels – majority vs. minority (religious, political, social etc.), gender dynamics and state vs. citizens.

In addition to *Newton* being a political satire on contemporary Indian political setup, the character of Newton, also stands for a variety of polit-

ical conflicts. Most importantly, in the context of the inquiry here, the character of Newton undergoes a huge change over the course of the film and experiences a transformation – an evolution of his identity. His evolution takes place at three different levels a) an educated individual representing his own free will and idealism, b) an individual representing a marginalised community (though his caste affiliation is never directly addressed, it can be gleaned from the opening shots), and c) an individual representing the Indian state in his role of an election officer. Newton assumes the described three roles under different circumstances and represents three different levels to his persona. A fluid movement between the three different roles his persona is assigned within the narrative is a wonderful example of how a rhizomatic identity structure works. None of these roles are competing with each other nor are they systematically and hierarchically organised. Though their occurrence or their addition to Newton's portfolio of identities has largely been chronological, it doesn't necessarily mean that these roles have a hierarchical order that influences the way Newton responds to a particular situation. To focus on a concrete example – when Newton responds to the soldiers resorting to violence against the local tribal people, one may argue that he is primarily doing so due to his own biographical detail of belonging to a minority community. Though this may be true to some extent, this response wouldn't have been possible if he hadn't received higher education (which is the case in a lot of families belonging to lower castes in India) and hadn't been in a position of being an election officer (since this is also one of the reasons why the soldiers have to take his anger seriously and respond). This instance proves that without the evolution of his personality over the course of his lifetime, and the time bound narrative presented to us in the film, some of the given aspects of his personality (like his caste and class affiliation), it wouldn't have been possible for Newton to become the person that he is, when we get to know him as the audience. While this film evidently addresses the issue of identities and ideas about nationalism, it addresses the issue of cultural conflicts at a more subtle level.

One of the primary aims of this inquiry is to look at different and evolving understandings of culture which in turn have an immediate impact on the life of an individual and how he perceives himself, what he thinks his rightful place is and how the society perceives him in the wake of this changing understanding. The questions and discourses surrounding the issue of nationalism are in fact, intricately interwoven with bigger cultural discussions that deal with questions of belonging. A variant of nationalism that focuses on the betterment and upliftment of only a particular religious group or caste is an indicator of the dominant cultural discourse, of who is considered as *Own* and who is an *Outsider*. Looking at *Newton*, the film portrays a clash between various ideas of nationalism as represented by different protagonists in the film. The first variant of secular nationalism is represented by Newton. This variant is very idealistic in nature and unrealistic in the Indian context. Newton believes in it strongly and considers the written word (in the context of the film, the election manual; at a meta-level, the Indian constitution) to be true. His idea of nationalism is inclusive, tolerant and based on equality and considers democracy to be an instrument of negotiation between the two parties privy to a Nation – the state and an individual citizen. We see this thought-process manifesting itself in many contexts through the film. The second variant of nationalism portrayed in the film, more ambivalent in nature, is represented by Aatma Singh. Principally, this variant is *d'accord* with the variant of a composite cultural nationalism which has a major influence on the Indian social fabric. In practise though, their own personal views and experiences (for e.g., of having dealt with terrorists in other parts of the country), contribute to how they view nationalism. This leads to them demarcating and distancing themselves from local people, referring to the territory as an enemy territory and by default marking the local people as enemies and legitimising the use of violence and power against them. The third variant that is indirectly being represented here is that of Depressed Classes/ Dalit Nationalism as formulated by Pathak and probably, by far, one of the most under-represented variants in Bollywood. Over the course

of the film it becomes abundantly evident that the tribal people have their own culture and unique traditions. They neither showcase a strong sense of belonging to the Indian Nation state, that Newton represents, nor are they vehement and violent in their rejection of it. They are simply representative of the depressed marginalised, classes who would be happy and satisfied if their way of life was respected. Theirs' is a small, fairly homogenous setup – a *Kulturnation* of the tribal people, if you may. The film brings out different nuances of these ideas in a very reflected, balanced manner and exposes the flaws of the Indian democratic setup by portraying an imminent conflict between these contesting ideas of nationalism. While the film doesn't reject the notion of a secular nationalism, it certainly exposes a huge area which has a scope for improvement. It also implies that in case the state, as a political construct, were to fail in finding a common middle ground, offering benefits to the marginalised, ensuring the upholding of a democratic setup while also revisiting the role the security forces play during internal conflicts, it would lead to a catastrophic scenario, in which all the stakeholders would be at loggerheads. When we extend this inquiry to the protagonist, we can safely say that Newton's personality is rooted in a multicultural setup and has an 'open understanding of culture' as postulated by Carmen Ulrich. Over the course of the film, he is exposed to a range of new cultural contexts, references and subjected to new experiences, leading him to revisit his own idea of culture. In Welsch's words, Newton begins to look at culture as not just a descriptive concept but also as something that needs to be looked at, at an operative level. In concrete terms, just being aware of the existence of communities with a different cultural background isn't enough; it is necessary to understand how belonging to a particular community with a different cultural background than one's own background impacts day-to-day lives. It involves understanding the nature of the conflicts this community may face as result of them being *different* than the majority and also of them being economically backward, their problems and their ways of life. As a result of this exposure, the character of Newton matures. He evolves while undergoing some changes and

learning new things. As he evolves, his understanding of culture also undergoes a transformation and it becomes more extensive and inclusive in nature. His understanding of India, a political construct he represents, is not necessarily restricted to a co-existence of diverse cultural entities anymore but has moved on extensively. An Indian to his mind now isn't just someone who represents one particular cultural denomination or a particular set of beliefs but it is a vast cultural space with various aspects and nuances and representative of diverse identities as his own, that of people like Aatma Singh and Loknath as well as the likes of Malko and the Tribals – all fitting into a space of being an Indian. This film reveals the various facets of a very diverse cultural setup like the one that exists in India and its very ambivalent nature: ranging from sometimes being ignorant, even spiteful of the *Other,* to a peaceful and tolerant yet distanced co-existence, to an intricate social fabric that is interwoven and interspersed with multitude of influences from different cultures, languages and religions.

As far as the aspect of the allotted social identities and its impact on a protagonist, his/her understanding of culture is concerned, the film is surprisingly ambivalent. The narrative of the film focuses on multiple individual attempts as different people try to break free from their allotted social identities. But the manner in which these attempts are portrayed bring to fore a very integral aspect which makes clear that the people, who are trying to break free of their allotted identities, are not looking at defying or rejecting them entirely. Instead, they are looking for ways to make those identities count, while responding to new impulses that would influence and expand their identities. The allotted social identities, as well as the personal beliefs and experiences together, serve as a reference point that has a huge influence on the protagonist as he adjusts himself to the new surroundings and responds to new impulses. Newton, for instance, is not interested in breaking free of his identity of an idealistic election officer; instead, he is interested in making this identity count by taking his responsibility seriously. Neither can he leave out the influence of Ambedkar and his own faith in the constitution. As a result of the juxtaposition of these two very

different aspects of identities, Newton becomes aware of the gaps between reality and idealism and is inspired to understand newer aspects of the realities on-ground. This understanding would then help him bridge the gap between idealism and reality, while also simultaneously bringing about a change in his identity construct in multiple ways. Similarly, the Adivasis are not looking to reject their allotted identity as tribals. But their experience of being a member of the tribal community has formed their opinions of the *Other*, leading them to harbour the wish of being treated as equal citizens, whose concerns are considered to be important by the polity and are not treated like enemies by the security forces. If we consider the visual of the rhizome, the narrative of the film shows a different aspect in the evolution of the identity construct which focuses on the making and extending of the existing connections and not necessarily on an aggressive breaking off of some of the connections. The film highlights that in some remote parts in rural India, modernity, along with its progressive values like democracy, gender rights etc. and technological advancement are yet to make its presence felt. Since the people are not familiar with this outside world, they are still to make up their minds about rejecting the cultural influences the world brings with it or taking them on. Their lack of knowledge about what is expected from them as citizens, what are their duties, what and how they can benefit by participating in elections and Newton addressing these issues for them, is only the beginning. The film makes it evident that this and many such similar communities may not be resentful and dismissive of ideas of development as long as there is a way to find a middle-ground and address their developmental issues. It also highlights the fact that resorting to violence as a response to their concerns about the Indian Nation state may prove to be harmful and problematic in the long run. This portrayal leaves an open question: would they be more accepting or dismissive of new cultures and cultural ideas?

4.2 Identity conflicts and evolution of the Indian society

The Indian society has undergone tremendous changes since the mid-1980s. These changes were not only restricted to economic impacts (prosperity, growing disparity between the poor and the rich) after 1990 but also became equally noticeable in the socio-cultural spectrum. We have already addressed the issue of rising religious nationalism in this time frame in the earlier section. Here, we shall look at some other conflicts that started emerging and becoming prominent around the same time.

As a result of sustained exposure to Western education and value systems, which were progressive in some respects like gender and equality, sections of the Indian society started undergoing a process of evolution. This evolution was in the form of an increased awareness about the issues of the marginalised people – among themselves as well as among other classes of the society – in the form of increased demand for gender equality. These subtle changes also started to make their presence known on-screen through television serials and films. Films from the early 1990s mirrored some of the cultural clashes in the form of a cultural chaos – the protagonists, in spite of their exposure to modern education, thoughts and lifestyle, were shown to be reluctant in letting go of their conservative, traditional thought processes and ask uncomfortable questions about existent societal hierarchies, out of fear of being disavowed. As the millennials generation, who were born in the mid-1980s, started coming of age after a prolonged exposure to both clashing cultural ideals (conservative, traditional vs. progressive, modern), their thought processes started being reflected in films. They started asking questions about the disparities and discrimination in the society based on caste, religion and gender, while also acknowledging that a new version of modernity, adapted to the Indian context, was needed. An imported cultural model would not work in the Indian context if one were to address these very India-specific complex issues.

One needed to start deliberating on Indian modernity – a modern, progressive approach, tailored to the Indian context, to fight the problems ensuing from gender, caste, religion-based discrimination.

Anthony Giddens highlights some of the most important markers of modernity in a society.

> Portrayed in more detail, it is associated with (1) a certain set of attitudes towards the world, the idea of the world as open to transformation by human intervention; (2) a complex of economic institutions, especially industrial production and a market economy; (3) a certain range of political institutions, including the nation-state and mass democracy. Largely as a result of these characteristics, modernity is vastly more dynamic than any previous type of social order. It is a society – more technically, a complex of institutions – which unlike any preceding culture, lives in the future rather than in the past.[214]

If we consider these markers, especially the first one, it is easy to understand the problems that the Indian society is facing. As the Indian society was increasingly being confronted with the questions of modernity that demanded a willingness to transform, including bringing about changes concerning treatment of the marginalised, equality, etc., it resisted these changes and transformations. Once it started responding to these conflicts in a constructive manner, a rift between the conservative and traditional and the progressive and modern started becoming increasingly visible. The modernisation conflicts in Indian society are located at this point – between elements in the society, which are open to transformation and critically revisit prevalent positions on issues like gender, sexuality and caste

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214   Anthony Giddens, "Interview 4" in *Conversations with Anthony Giddens. Making sense of Modernity*, ed. Anthony Giddens and Christopher Piersen, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), 94-95, Kindle.

system etc. and the rest of the society, which is still resisting this transformation. While the former group is focussed on a reassessment of the past in order to build a viable and equal future, the latter is focussed on upholding the past and hindering any transformation. The conflicts emerging here don't necessarily focus on issues of technological and infrastructural advancement, they rather focus on the openness in a society to transformation by human intervention.

All the films chosen here focus on one or more conflicts arising at this intersection. *Swades* looks at modernisation conflicts focusing on equality of gender and caste, while also allowing the biographical details of the protagonist to play an important role in making the conflict prominent. *Parched* focuses on the problematic perceptions of a woman's identity in rural India and how the local society is very resistant to reassess and reconsider their position on this issue. *Article 15* highlights the issue of caste and also considers an intersectional pattern of violence when Dalit girls are raped and murdered. These films can be considered to be accurate representations of the conflicts in the Indian society. An inquiry into understanding the conflicts presented in them would help us understand the nature and nuances of conflicts the Indian society is facing today.

4.2.1   Modernisation conflicts: *Swades* (2004)

Swades is a film by director Ashutosh Gowarikar from the year 2004. The film focuses on the journey of Mohan Bhargava, a scientist working for NASA and his soul-searching journey which leads him to India, his country of origin and the place where he spent a substantial part of his childhood. The narrative of this film is unique in many ways – primarily because it focuses on the soul-searching journey of Mohan and his pursuit for home. There had been a few films before the release of *Swades*, but their focus usually lay on either a love story interwoven with a background of NRI and clash of cultures (like *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge*) or the focus would be on

cultural and moral issues like gender equality (in films like *Monsoon Wedding* or *Bend it like Beckham*). *Swades*, on the other hand, mainly focussed on the individual journey of Mohan and looked at issues like modernisation conflicts and surrounding issues in the Indian society through his lens, while also ensuring that they don't vanish into the background. *Swades* was one of the first films that addressed the sense of longing for a homeland in a grassroot realistic manner, without glorifying or romanticising either one of the countries the protagonist is situated in (as opposed to an earlier romanticism about the homeland in films like *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge, Aa Ab Laut Chalein, Pardes* etc.).

The plot of the film is seemingly simple – it is a story of a first generation, highly educated and successful immigrant to the USA from India, Mohan Bhargava, who feels painfully lonely in the country he now calls home. To resolve this issue of utter loneliness, he is looking for ways and means to bring a bit of his *own* home – an old lady, Kaveri Amma, who raised him – to the USA. In his perception, this would resolve his problems and help him restore some sense of belonging, familiarity and safety, effectively helping him bring some kind of normalcy to his life in the USA. The film portrays his journey to India as he sets out with a simple aim of taking Kaveri Amma back with him, only to decide in the end that he would be the one moving back to India. Though the plot seems to be very simple, but the way the filmmaker has dealt with the narrative and translated it onscreen, is what has made this film stand apart.

For an initial understanding of the narrative, it is absolutely important to become familiar with the multitude of topics that will come up over the course of the film. First and foremost, the film is named *Swades* – which translates as 'My country' (*Swa-* mine, *Des-* country). The choice of this title not only gives away the main plot line of ones' search for a homeland but also evokes a sense of familiarity among the Indian diaspora, who can

be presumed to be familiar with the concept of *Swadeshi*[215] which influenced the Independence movement significantly. The filmmaker paraphrases the concept of this sentiment and adapts it according to the challenges and realities of the times we live in. He seems to be referring to the all-too-pertinent question of a phenomenon popularly known as 'brain drain' and seems to be suggesting that in today's times, one could look at the intellectual engagement of the Indian diaspora in the places they live as a loss of specific variant of wealth, and that this wealth should/could also be used for the betterment of the Indian society. Maya Ranganathan in her essay *Towards a more inclusive Indian identity*[216] places the time of the film's release in a more political context, commenting on the diaspora status of being *Other* and getting rid of this *Otherness* in order to become national.

> A superficial reading of the film *Swades* brings to light the ways in which the 'other' could shed his 'otherness' to become a national. Yet, what is significant is that in this age of migrations and technological advancements that are shrinking physical distances and in a political climate when the Indian nation-state is offering dual citizenship for Indian migrants to the West, the film advocates return of the migrant to the homeland to make a significant contribution to the country's development and sets it up as a hallmark of Indian identity. Even if the film, steering away from the stereotypical image of the Indian migrant as one to be shunned, portrays the Indian migrant as a person to be wooed back to the country, it continues to valorise 'Indian traditions' and reinforces a highly problematic

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215   The *Swadeshi* movement was primarily an economic boycott of British goods and focussed on doing things locally, producing goods locally and it contributed heavily to the emerging discourse of Indian Nationalism in the pre-independence period.

216   Maya Ranganathan, *Towards a more inclusive Indian identity in National Identities*, (Vol. 12, Nr. 1, Routledge Taylor and Francis, 2010), accessed on March 23, 2020 under researchgate.net/publication/232827201_Towards_a_more_inclusive_Indian_identity_A_case_study_of_the_Bollywood_film_Swades.

and essentialised notion of Indianness. […] The film was released on 17 December 2004 within a year of the passing of the Dual Citizenship Act in Parliament, although it is not clear if it was indeed inspired by it. According to the then Deputy Prime Minister L. K. Advani, the main aim of the Dual Citizenship Act was to attract Indians abroad to contribute 'to the cause of India's development' which precisely is the storyline of Swades.[217]

Though the film doesn't necessarily valorise a 'highly problematic and essentialised notion of Indianness' in my eyes, the connection between the representation of the politics associated with the issue of trying to attract more Indians to contribute and the timing of the release of the film, cannot be overlooked. It also cannot be a mere coincidence that the film is named *Swades*, making the differentiation between *Own* and *Other* clear. Looking beyond the time of the release and the political setup in India at that given point, the filmmaker has portrayed the inner conflicts of the figure of Mohan and has also objectively questioned the 'Indian traditions' that Ranganathan believes have been valorised in the film.

Gowarikar portrays his appeal to Indians abroad as well as those with aspirations to go abroad through two figures – Mohan and Mela Ram. Mohan is already living in the States, contributing to a NASA Program, representing a perfectly integrated diaspora Indian. Towards the end of the film, when his friend expresses his utter frustration at Mohan and not being able to understand why he would want to move back to India, Mohan responds by saying that he would now like to contribute to a similar project, but while working out of India, from an Indian space agency. Mela Ram, on the other hand, is someone who has been living in rural India for most of his adult life and has a dream to make it big in America. Towards the end though, when Mohan offers to sponsor him and invite him to the USA, he responds by saying that he would like to stay back and contribute to the

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217   Ibid., 46-47.

betterment of the society he is a part of. While one figure decides to give up his successful, prosperous life in the USA and move back, the other one refuses to go there in spite of having waited for a chance to do so for a long time and decides to stay on and contribute locally. The filmmaker has managed to bring out the duality of this issue in a very beautiful manner, while also adapting it to the current times. This is evident from the opening sequence where Mohan is showed interacting with journalists and commenting that his work, the project would not only help the betterment of the USA but also help other countries across the world. As mentioned before, the filmmaker clearly makes the audience aware of the problems that exist and the things that need to be critically worked upon and doesn't glorify Mohan for his decision of returning (which, theoretically, could have been possible by belittling the other secondary Indian figure of Vinod).

The film strikes a chord with the audience, particularly with the Indian diaspora based abroad since it addresses the feeling of a loss of a home. At the same time, Gowarikar cleverly avoids the trap of going over the top with romanticism about the life in India by showing Mohan's characters' inadaptability at times and him getting frustrated at things that don't work out the way he is used to, or for not being able to understand the context and implications of a lot of things happening around him, since the country that he left behind years ago, has changed in some aspects and then not at all in some other. This very raw form of realism could also have been one of the multiple reasons why the film performed better abroad than it did in India, as it resonated more with the diaspora audience, who face similar issues (of being unable to identify themselves with what is happening around them and understand it, of getting frustrated with the way things work in India and then inherently compare it with the way they are used to getting things done etc.), than it did with the audience within India. Additionally, he has also experimented with the concept of Indian modernity in the film by using festivals, along with their significance and appeal to the audience, by presenting a modern, liberal Indian woman who still

wears Indian clothes and highlighting the point that modernity doesn't necessarily mean getting rid of Indian cultural heritage and traits.

The nomenclature that the filmmaker has chosen, even in terms of the characters, is also worth taking a look at. The main character is named Mohan, one of the many names that are used to refer to Krishna in Hindu mythology. The female lead is named Gita, which is a reference to the *Bhagvadgita*, one of the most sacred texts in Hinduism. The *Bhagvadgita* is a conversation between *Krishna* and *Arjuna* (one of the main protagonists in the Indian epic of *Mahabharata*) in which *Arjuna* is facing a series of dilemmas as he faces his cousins and members of family on the battlefield and is concerned about the massive destruction of life and property that this war may cause. He turns to *Krishna* for guidance. *Krishna* advises him to follow his *Dharma* through selfless action. Considering the correlation between *Krishna* and the *Bhagvadgita* and the message that he conveys through this, one can see this relationship being replicated in the film. Mohan's character has been assigned a dual role: while he reflects upon the problems that a large section of the Indian diaspora faces, he is also the one who is trying to find solutions to those problems in an indirect dialogue with the audience. In short, he, his world view and the conversations he is having with people around him – all of this is representative of the dialogue and the deliberations that happens, according to Hindu mythology, between Krishna and Arjuna. Gita, on the other hand, seems to be conveying the message that the *Bhagvadgita* preaches – that of following one's *Dharma* through selfless action, *Karma*[218]. *Karma*, in this case, is being committed to work towards the betterment of people in need, in a selfless manner. It would be problematic here to say for the betterment of his own people, since the definition of *Own* in Mohan's context can be very elusive. Considering Mohan's familiar ties in India, his *Own* could automatically be understood as well-to-do, upper caste, Brahmin members of the society. Instead, he is encouraged and chooses to work for the betterment of the

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218   Michele Desmarais: *Karma and Film in The Continuum Companion to Religion and Film*, ed. William Blizek, (London/ New York: Continuum, 2009), 285.

downtrodden, backward and marginalised groups in the Indian society, with development being his primary concern – a concern that goes well beyond caste and class boundaries. Kaveri Amma is another central character in this narrative who has been given the name of an important river in India. The combination of her name and the revering reference to her by using Amma as a suffix, Amma signifying a motherly figure, signifies the metaphorical character ascribed to her. To Mohan, she represents India, his Motherland (the notion of a country being feminine, motherly in nature in the Indian context) and it is, in fact, in his search for her, that he emotionally comes closer to his motherland. The complex relationship between the 3 central figures and the metaphorical contexts that they individually represent become clearer during the process of the film analysis. Suvadip Sinha comments on the leitmotif of a motherly figure in Hindi films and the syntagmatic relationship between a mother and a motherland. Furthermore, while looking at *Swades* he adds,

> In diaspora narratives too the syntagmatic connection made between the mother and the motherland is prevalent. The desire to return to the location of origin, the motherland, is ostensibly connected to the desire, an Oedipal one, to be back with the mother. This representational endeavor is all the more prominent in the case of India where there has been a conceptual projection of the nation as mother through the figure of Mother India. The mother-as-nation and nation-as-mother axes of substitution, as reproduced in the diaspora narratives, not only operate within the oedipal narrative of trauma, they also aim to transform the homeland into an organic, a priori being. While Mohan's quest for his foster mother does subscribe somewhat to the patrilineal quest for oedipal space of reconciliation, by displacing the biological mother the film's narrative introduces a degree to slippage which prevents us from bracketing Swades with other oedipal narratives of diasporic return. The use of the figure of surrogate mother, a trope that comes

from the story of Krishna, one of the millions of Hindu gods, actually fits into the popular usage of elements borrowed from the Indian epic, the Mahabharata, in the narration of nationness. In the epic, Krishna is estranged from his parents, Vasudeva and Devaki, right after his birth. He is subsequently raised by his foster parents, Yasoda and Nanda. Although he later finds out his biological mother, he maintains a stronger emotional bond with Yasoda. In the epic too, as Krishna becomes occupied with his work, he fails to keep in touch with the woman who raised him. There is an elaborate episode in Mahabharata, where Krishna, much like the hero of our film, realizes his mistake and returns to his childhood home to re-connect with his foster mother. The filmmaker uses the trope of the foster mother, because this figure does emerge as an already displaced object of an oedipalic desire. Mohan's relationship with his foster mother cannot be legitimised by any originary bond; rather, it is a bond that finds its authenticity in a past of prolonged association and care and, a responsibility towards a future that does not need familial recognition.[219]

Gita is well-educated and has chosen to stay on in the village, suggesting a kind of selflessness on her behalf. She has also been ascribed the function of being the mentor to the figure of Mohan, along with the character of Kaveri Amma who steps in in times of confusion. They both ultimately aid him in achieving his goal of following his *Dharma* and working selflessly for people when he brings the villagers together and successfully implements the project of energy generation in the village.

Additionally, the name Mohan can also be considered to be a reference to Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi or Gandhiji – a reference made clear

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219   Suvadip Sinha, "Return of the Native: Swades and the rethinking of the diaspora" in *South Asian popular culture*, (Vol. 10, Nr. 2, Routledge Taylor and Francis, 2012), 188-189.

through the presence of the book *Bapu Kuti*[220] in one of the sequences at the beginning of the film. This book focuses on life at *Bapu Kuti* (or Bapu's hut) at *Sewagram* in Vardha in rural Maharashtra. Among the many things Gandhi advocated, empowerment of villages was probably one of the causes he vehemently supported since he believed that the majority of India lived in villages (and continues to do so even today). The villages needed (and need) to be empowered if the country wanted to make any substantial progress. This narrative lays a strong emphasis on this very aspect of empowering a village, of bringing development, education to people at the grass-root level in order to achieve a bigger goal of development of the country.

To understand the texture that defines the quality of the narrative of *Swades*, it is necessary to identify and understand the series of issues that the film is trying to address. One of the primary topics that the narrative addresses in the film is the sense of a loss of a home. It is not a quantifiable feeling and also not a feeling that is easy to identify. At the same time, the film also looks at the dichotomous nature of this kind of relationship that any migrant has towards his/her place of origin. While on the one hand, they experience an overwhelming sense of a loss of a home, on the other, they are unable to relate to how the contexts back home start becoming increasingly unfamiliar and unfathomable to them the longer they stay away. A person who left India in the 1980s carries an image of India, fixed and placed in that timeframe while increasingly experiencing the sense of loss of a homeland. Two things can happen at this juncture. The strong sense of a loss may drive a group of people either to hold on to this image that they carry with them very strongly, so much so that they may sometimes come across as more traditional and conservative than some people in India itself. Or it can encourage them to look for new cultural connections, while they try to make this new, unfamiliar place home. This process

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220   Rajni Bakshi, *Bapu Kuti: Journeys in rediscovery of Gandhi*, (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1998).

of opening oneself to new cultural influences can actually lead to an evolution of one's identity construct in a rhizomatic pattern, allowing different identities to respond to different situations. To cite a concrete example in the film – if Mohan had belonged to the first group of people that I mentioned, he probably would've found it easy to blend in with the local village community and come to terms with their rigid caste barriers and its implications on the day-to-day lives. Mohan, though, seems to belong to the second group. His identity has evolved over a period of time and has taken on new influences. His professional context – that of being a scientist – isn't a mere coincidence either. It involves a critical bend of mind, to question things that are not logical or rational and this aspect is one of the most profound, new characteristics that Mohan's persona has developed. As a result of this process of evolution, he finds it difficult, in spite of his familiarity with certain realities of ways of life in India like the caste system, to just accept them as a way of life. He questions the legitimacy of these systems, their purpose and faces criticism from the villagers. The narrative of this film is interwoven with references to resistance to modernisation and conflicts arising out of it, *Heimweh*[221] that members of the Indian diaspora often feel, but at the same time a sense of being foreign in their own country when they find themselves in the middle of conflicts similar to the one mentioned in the film. This unique mix of the issues, focusing on the journey of Mohan and his eventual return to India, gives the narrative a very rich texture since it brings out varied aspects of modernisation conflicts in the Indian society – be it the level of infrastructural, technological advancement highlighted by the lack of consistent supply of electricity or then the conflicts arising at a societal level because of caste, gender, and class.

While the broader contexts of the narrative are set by these topics – namely search of a homeland for a member of the Indian diaspora and modernisation conflicts in the Indian society – there are finer thematic

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221 *Heimweh* is a German concept that refers to strong sense of longing one feels towards their homeland.

strands that are interwoven with finesse in the fabric of this narrative. Modernisation, as a term, is very vast and all-encompassing. But how does a modernisation conflict in India manifest itself? It manifests itself in a variety of ways, represented by the finer thematic strands I just mentioned. They focus on issues of caste and gender divide in rural India, on issues of technological modernisation and last but not least, also on the issue of vast rural-urban divide that exists in India. The film continues to be absolutely relevant even today, 15 years after its release since only little has changed in terms of the modernisation conflicts that exist in the Indian society. The manifestation of this conflict, concretely in terms of a film narrative, is representative of the Indian society today. A wide cross section of people – predominantly consisting of upper caste, well-educated people like Mohan, Gita and Dadaji, educated people like Nivaran as well as lower caste people like Mela Ram, who for different reasons believe in principles like equality, access to education and livelihood, while on the other hand there are people like members of the *Grampanchayat*[222], who don't respond well when their beliefs, traditions and existing power equations are challenged and dismiss the logical reasoning of the other side as *Western influences* and accuse them of wanting to destroy glorious Indian traditions. The modernisation conflict primarily manifests itself in a space between these two groups of people as they clash on the mentioned issues. This scenario is very close to ground realities in India even today, as two groups in the Indian society increasingly find themselves being at loggerheads over discussions surrounding topics like gender equality and discrimination against minorities (caste, religion, ethnic minorities). It is also worth noting that while the narrative focuses on a strong sense of longing for a homeland that a member of the diaspora feels, there is also another subtle level that comments on the lack of a homeland for members of the marginalised

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222   *Grampanchayat* is a form of local government found at the village level in the Indian subcontinent. *Gram* means a village*, Panch* means five and *Yat* means an assembly. A *Grampanchayat* is an assembly of five elected representatives at the village level whose main function is to address the issues of local governance at the village level. A *Grampanchayat* is headed by a *Sarpanch.*

communities, where they could probably feel that they belong, that they are safe and their interests protected. One could say that towards the end of the story, both these parties have successfully completed their journey and found their homelands – Mohan achieves this by moving back to India whereas the marginalised communities take first steps towards achieving the goal of being considered a part of the society after having been included in the mainstream, through a successful run of Mohan's experiment.

Before I get into the analysis of Mohan's journey, it is important to look into the classical *Need* vs. *Want* conflict that this film beautifully portrays. In the beginning, it is Mohan's simple *Want* to find Kaveri Amma and get her to the USA to live with him. Over the course of the narrative though, his journey evolves in such a fashion that a stronger, bigger *Need* is unravelled – a *Need* to find a way back to his motherland, that is hidden behind his *Want* of finding his way back to a motherly figure in his life, that of Kaveri Amma. Her character is a metaphor for a lost homeland (a motherland in this context) and on his journey to find her, to bring her back in his life, he invariably discovers the bigger context of his *Want* – that it is not merely Kaveri Amma that he has been missing or in search of, but, in fact, it is what she represents, namely a space, that offers him a feeling of belonging and a purpose. It is not just his longing for a motherly figure and a sense of responsibility he feels towards her, it is also his yet-to-be-discovered sense of responsibility towards his motherland. Hidden behind this individual *Want* and *Need*, is one of the bigger conflicts – the issue of *Foreign* and *Own*. This conflict focuses on a broader discourse on the issue of belonging, of who is to be considered to be *Foreign* and *Outsider* and who is to be considered as someone who belongs and is their *Own*. The conflict manifests itself in various ways, at different levels, targeting different people – ranging from Mohan being termed as an outsider, who should behave like an outsider and leave when the time comes, to the case of Haridas who is considered to be an outcast by the villagers, since he dared to switch professions. Both of them, by virtue of their birth in a particular caste and class are automatically placed in a particular stratum of the society. Even

then, paradoxically enough, they feel alienated by the people they considered their own, people and society they thought they belonged to. Mohan feels alienated for of a variety of reasons. Though he chooses to maintain a distance from his local context initially, eventually he tries to mingle and understand the complex issues that influence the day-to-day lives of the people he finds himself amidst. When he tries to discuss with people around him about the way things are and question the reasons behind them, he is made aware of the fact that he is a guest and should behave like one. This kind of labelling that casts him in the category of a guest is difficult for him to understand. The interesting thing here is the dialectics that emerges and holds true, at least for a while, is between what he thinks about his position and what people around him think of his position. While in the beginning he insists on maintaining a distance (physical as well as emotional) to the contexts he finds himself amidst, at some point he is ready to cross over and behave like one of them. On the other hand, while the people around him find his behaviour odd initially, since they consider him to be one of their own, they choose to make him aware of his true place – that of a guest – once he is ready to be one of them. Though this conflict is eventually resolved by him finally crossing over the boundaries set out by the local community, this consistent change in the understanding of who belongs and why, is typically rhizomatic in nature and adds to the unique texture of the narrative. Mohan's case is a classic dilemma that a large number of people with a migration background, in this context an Indian background and face. Growing up with the idea of being an Indian is very different than actually experiencing being an Indian among Indians. The Indian community in other countries is very diverse and the factors that help them bond are very different than the factors that would count in India. While a person like Mohan may be able to bond with Indians from a different, probably lower caste in the USA, without raising many questions, a similar attempt in India is bound to raise questions about caste, religion, language, etc. Haridas, on the other hand, is alienated because of

the situation he is trapped in. Because he chooses to take on a new profession that goes well beyond what his caste affiliation would allow him to do, the local community decides to alienate him. Though both the figures experience alienation, its nature is very different and so are its impacts. While there are no immediate consequences for Mohan, through the alienation that he faces besides a sense of overwhelm at an emotional level, the alienation that Haridas is put through has immediate effects on his ability to earn a livelihood. Interestingly, Mohan's engagement with the alienation of Haridas/ Birsa from the society they are a part of, is a key experience that helps him make up his mind to engage with his own alienation, to make an effort to understand the sensitive nature of the issue and engage with it.

Swades has one primary character that assumes an important central position in the narrative – Mohan. It is through his journey, physical as well emotional, that we are introduced to the broader conflict and brought closer to the intricate conflicts he is experiencing at an individual level. The interrogation in the Hero's journey helps in unravelling how the broader conflicts surrounding issues of modernisation, search of a homeland etc. present themselves through the personal journey of Mohan.

Limited awareness of the problem/ Ordinary world (0:00:39): The film begins with a press conference at NASA and introduces us to the main character in the film, Mohan Bhargava. The opening sequence also sets out one of the broader themes of the film – the life of a successful young Indian man living in the United States – success being measured by his professional stature of being a scientist at a world-renowned organisation like NASA and a visibly high standard of living. This sense of Mohan being successful and hence, presumably happy, is an illusion that is shattered in the immediate aftermath of the introduction. Despite his successful life in the USA, Mohan seems to be unhappy and disturbed. As Mohan remembers his parents on a day of momentous professional achievements, Mohan's internal unrest becomes visible as he puts his pain in words – of missing a sense of home and belonging. A message on the answering machine that his request

for citizenship has been accepted sets the ball rolling and unravels a complex emotional process. On the one hand, he wants to make this new place his home, wants to belong and be an American, but on the other, he is unable to commit himself to it. He is unable to understand his confusion besides longing for Kaveri Amma, a motherly figure – a foster mother if you may – from his past. Kaveri Amma seems to be his only connection to his past, his childhood, a space and time that represented safety and happiness for him. Kaveri Amma represents a mother for Mohan, someone who rekindles a sense of belonging and safety in him. Talking in terms of *catalyst*, his longing for Kaveri Amma is the catalyst that contributes to him making up his mind and set out to achieve the goal of getting her back into his life. This set of complex memories, that he associates with Kaveri Amma, are also his only possible connection to his Motherland. Her figure metaphorically also represents his longing for a Motherland, though at this point it is yet to become clear what the bigger context of the narrative is. Corresponding to the description of this phase, Mohan is just one of the many Indians living in the USA, part of an ordinary world. At the same time, it also becomes clear that his lack of awareness about ground realities in India (or rather anything concerning India really), stems from the fact that he hasn't been to India for longer than a decade and that he was a child/teenager during the time he spent in India.

Increased awareness, need for change/ call to adventure (0:11:35): As a response to the catalyst, Mohan sets out on a seemingly easy journey – to find and persuade Kaveri Amma to move to the USA and live with him. His journey to India goes hand-in-hand with his inner journey, as he increasingly gets exposed to a lot of things in India. His trip to India is a trip to the Unknown, with neither any concrete indicators about where he would find Kaveri Amma nor about the kind of journey that will follow. In spite of these uncertainties – some evident and clear, some unclear at this stage, he chooses to set out on the journey, nonetheless.

Fear or resistance to change/ refusal of the call (0:14:05): His arrival in New Delhi is marred by the first hurdle he faces on his journey – he is unable

to locate Kaveri Amma at her last known location to him. What he is given though, is an address where he may be able to find her. The journey that is necessitated by his goal and his want to find Kaveri Amma is also a means to address the bigger *Need* in the context of this narrative – of not only finding Kaveri Amma but also discovering India. The parallel development of the two journeys – one which leads towards the fulfilment of a *Want* and by virtue of which, a journey that leads the Hero to address the bigger *Need* is a speciality of this film and contribute to its unique texture. There is a series of hurdles that could have deterred Mohan from giving up his quest for Kaveri Amma and going back to the USA. Instead, when unable to find Kaveri Amma at the address he has, he decides to go to Charanpur. Yet again, his attempt could have failed because of Gita who gives him wrong directions on purpose. But due to a coincidental meeting with an ascetic on the way, he manages to alter his path and continues on the journey. The meeting with the ascetic is symbolic too, since he actually helps Mohan go on the right path. Had Mohan continued on the wrong path, at some point, he would have either given up and returned to Delhi and eventually to the USA, probably a bit more miserable than before, effectively giving up on his goal. Due to his meeting with the ascetic, he corrects course and is back on the right path. In the narrative, the phase of refusal to change and meet the mentor are intricately interconnected and more fluid, compared to the other films. The meeting with the ascetic can be considered as a fleeting interaction with a mentor.

Overcoming fear/ meeting the mentor (0:29:35): This particular phase is very fluid in Mohan's evolution. Despite the presence of figures like Kaveri Amma, Gita, Dada Ji – people who eventually take over the function of a mentor to Mohan as the narrative progresses, there are still indicators at this stage that point towards Mohan's reluctance to gel in with his surroundings. The demarcation of spaces representing the *Own* and *Other* is very concrete at this stage – the space inside the caravan is his comfort zone, a space that represents comfort and safety for him. This phase, that of having clear demarcations, suggests a transitional phase, since it is these

Indian surroundings that he has come looking for. Though at this stage, he is yet to be fully aware of the nature of his *Need* and is focussed primarily on his interaction with Kaveri Amma and convincing her to go to the USA with him. He doesn't deem it to be important just as yet to let his guard down and allow the demarcation of these spaces to become more fluid. What is also interesting is the choice of the physical spaces that suggest a certain kind of ignorance and the need to change this. Be it a bookstore at the beginning of the film or then the school in this sequence – it is a conscious effort on the part of the filmmaker to physically place Mohan in spaces which symbolise learning. Gita's presence in both these sequences is also a clear reference to the role of the mentor that has been ascribed to her. Gita assumes the role of Mohan's mentor in a clearer way after this stage. She's not an antagonist but more of a teacher/mentor who is introducing Mohan to nuanced aspects of the issues he thinks he understands and has solutions for them. Kaveri Amma assumes the role of a passive mentor. In more instances than one, she facilitates an experience for Mohan, which in the long run decidedly alters the way he looks at India, the way he responds to the issues at hand, the way he perceives them and eventually leading him to discover his *Need*. Both his mentors, Kaveri and Gita, take it upon themselves to introduce him to the local contexts. His first tour through the village and a visit to the *Grampanchayat* makes him and the audience aware of the multitude of issues that will come up over the course of the narrative – from lack of infrastructure to reluctance to sending children to school and access to education in general. An underlying issue of caste becomes clearer as the nature of the problem unravels. This phase also cleverly portrays a gradual disappearance of the distance between Mohan and his surroundings. The distance between the two is maintained by the usage of a simple prop like a camera in Mohan's hand, which clearly marks the observer and the observed. Nonetheless, the fact that the observer is interested in the things he is observing, his keenness to look at them closely is a symbol of overcoming of a sense of fear.

Committing to change/ crossing the threshold (0:46:30): The act of crossing the threshold starts becoming visible through small indicators – from a subtle change of using a local form of greeting like *Jai Ram Ji Ki* to a more physically evident crossing of the threshold in the sequence when he decides to sleep inside the house instead of sleeping in his caravan. The construction of the house is such that over the course of the narrative, every time he is about to take a step forward and do something new, he is shown crossing a threshold physically in the house by placing him in further inner, more intimate spaces within the house.

Experimenting with the new conditions/ Tests, Allies, Enemies (1:00:00): Mohan's first encounter with actually being a part of an experience comes only after he crosses the threshold and is now an active part of the plot and not just a passive observer. This experience is portrayed through him being confronted with familiar yet somehow unknown societal systems like that of an arranged marriage and the expectations that a groom's family has from a well-educated girl like Gita. When Gita rejects the marriage proposal on the grounds of missing gender equality, it leaves him perplexed and confused but inspired. During a conversation with Gita following this sequence, wherein they are discussing the intricate, complicated nature of the problems that India faces, it becomes clear to the audience that the characters of Gita and Mohan are being treated equally by the filmmaker. While the Hero is expected to do great deeds in the classical sense, his mentor is expected to perform a guiding role and set an example. Gita assumes the role of a mentor because she offers a counter-narrative to Mohan's beliefs, which he can't easily dismiss. Mohan comes across as a condescending outsider, while Gita tries to put things in perspective without denying the problems that Mohan highlights. They both are asking each other difficult questions while trying to present both sides of the argument, talking about the role of the government and pointing out the inefficiency at an administrative level. This sequence shows Gita acknowledging ground realities like the inefficiency of the state apparatus without romanticising

it. As Gita differentiates between culture, traditions and conservative be-
liefs, it becomes clear that she is in tune with the realities of her surround-
ings and isn't blindsided by her idealism. The boundaries between *Own* and
Other become increasingly fluid from this point on. A brief, yet brilliant
example is when Mohan criticises the local people's inability to accept pos-
itive criticism, a trait he considers to be characteristically Indians. He ends
up saying *tum Hindustani* (You Indians), while distancing himself from
'those' Indians. Kaveri and Gita's response to this makes him realise that
he is a part of them after all and cannot distance himself from them. He
corrects himself by changing his approach and uses the phrases *Hum Hin-
dustani* (Us Indians) instead. Though this is a very brief sequence, it marks
a very decisive departure from Mohan's standpoint so far and points at an
impending change in approach and an unravelling of several issues from a
different standpoint, as Mohan gradually changes his position and under-
stands issues from a different perspective – not necessarily that of a *For-
eigner.*

 Preparing for major change/ approach (1:08:50): This sequence clearly por-
trays Mohan preparing himself for a major change as he takes on the local,
existing societal structures and questions their legitimacy. The sequence
where he finds allies in the local villagers as he tries to help Gita in enrolling
more children to the school, changes the course of the narrative in a deci-
sive way. This is yet another example of a *Want* that the protagonist clearly
has – of wanting to help Gita, without actually being aware of the bigger
Need in this context, which is trying to ask difficult questions to the people
in the village, present his arguments and thoughts in a logical, rational man-
ner and convince them to let go of inhuman, unfair and discriminatory
traditions. The bigger *Need* is his search for a *home* – disguised under the
Want to bring about a change in the society of enrolling more school chil-
dren.

 As Mohan talks to people in the village about sending children to the
school, a complex power equation based on castes unravels. Mohan is un-
aware of just how powerful caste continues to be because his experiences

seem to never have exposed him to it. As he gets into conversations with the villagers who are refusing to send their children to school along with kids from a different caste or because they are aware that their children may not be welcome in the school because they are from a lower caste, he encounters resistance from the village elders. He is made aware of a number of things – his status of being an outsider, a guest, his lack of knowledge of how things work in India and a friendly, yet strongly worded advice to stay away from the village affairs.

A public screening of an old Indian classic film is the focus of the sequence that follows. But as luck would have it, there is a power cut. Mohan, unable to forget the hostility he has faced in the village during his efforts to get more children enrolled in a school, decides to make the most of this situation, since he has almost the entire village sitting in front of him. The aesthetics of this sequence are very interesting. The sequence is filmed in an outdoor setting, completely dark, with the exception of the screen on which the film is to be projected. This screen acts as a divisive mechanism between people from upper and lower castes – people from the higher castes sitting in front of the screen while people from the lower castes sitting on the backside of the screen (IMG. 47). As a result of a power cut, the screening of the film is interrupted. In order to pass on a message that he has been trying to convey for a while, he resorts to the usage of a number of tools available at his disposal. Firstly, he employs a metaphorical approach to the problem as he talks about stars and constellations, driving home the point that only a constellation of stars can shine bright and can fulfil the function of being a guide to those who are looking for orientation. A solitary star, without its constellation, may still shine, but that is all that there is to it. This metaphor, adapted to the local context, where he draws everyone's attention to *Ursa Major* and its appearance as a plough, appeals to the primarily agrarian community in the village. This particular interpretation of the *Ursa Major* as a plough is more of a Western tradition, in Hindu Astronomy this constellation is referred to as the *Saptarshi* (the seven sages). This different interpretation or an *Asterism* (a

pattern or group of stars subject to local interpretations; constellation is an officially designated and researched area in the sky) is also be considered as a conscious distancing of an interpretation that is steeped too much in Mythology and is loosely connected to the caste system, since the sages were usually considered to be upper caste. Secondly, he employs the help of children in this project, since they are still in an impressionable age and may be open to his ideas and act upon them. Thirdly, Mohan brings down the screen barrier during the performance of the song, *Yeh Tara Wo Tara*, and brings children on both sides together as the grown-ups watch. The message imparted through the song is about humanity being equal in the larger scheme of things, all of us being equally far from the stars and about strength in unity. He compares children with stars, with a lot of potential to glow and rid the society of darkness. He compares the different castes with colours of the rainbow, getting rids of the physical barrier between upper and lower castes temporarily. *Swades* falls in the category of those films where the songs serve a particular purpose and contribute meaningfully in taking the narrative forward in real time or portray an inner conflict of a protagonist. The song *Yeh Tara Who Tara* is one of the most decisive songs in the narrative, sending out a strong message to the villagers about Mohan's resolve. On a more personal level, Gita and Mohan now become equals fighting over who loves Kaveri Amma the most. At a meta-level, this fight is also a sign for a broader clash of ideas between Gita's variant of staying in India out of her love for her motherland and Mohan's variant of staying away from India while working for bigger causes and then periodically coming back, picking on the things that don't work and commenting about them. Gita is, by now, performing her role of a mentor in more ways than one – by challenging Mohan, by putting his knowledge about India to test and then taunting him for his apparent lack of it, only to find out that he is not as disconnected from India as she thinks.

In terms of physical spaces, Mohan has now been granted access to the innermost parts of the house and feels comfortable enough now to have a bath there, as opposed to taking a shower in his caravan, as shown

at the beginning of the film. A spiteful but interesting observation is made by Gita when she refers to Mohan as 'NRI – Non-Returning Indian' as opposed to the original nomenclature of Non-Resident Indians which refers to her problem with people falling in this category, who choose to live in a more affluent country and turn their backs to their Motherland.

Big change with feeling of life and death/ Ordeal, Death and Rebirth (1:49:00): In this phase, as Mohan sets out on a seemingly short journey on instructions of Kaveri Amma, an impending life-changing experience is on the horizon. Mohan, on the other hand, completely unaware about what awaits him, sets out on a journey that takes him across the countryside, exposing him to a number of local realities – optically as well topically – and allows him to explore various facets of it, though he doesn't understand a lot of things that he is seeing. This aspect of not knowing why things are the way they are, are a positive trait in the context of this narrative, since it allows Mohan to explore the facets of the problems faced by Haridas in a very objective and humane way. Getting to know the Haridas and his family, understanding the facts about how caste system continues to be robust and deeply ingrained in India and its impact on people like Haridas, who are trying to make an honest living and offer their children a better life. This sequence portrays all the three stages described in a Hero's journey – the ordeal being the experience of listening to Haridas's story, the death being a final loss of trust in the old societal equations in place and rebirth being the moment that arrives with the dawn which makes him acutely aware of the surroundings he is living in and making his resolve stronger to do something about the issue at hand. As is common in a lot of films, the narrative employs the play between night and dawn, in order to mark the arrival of a change. Another image that points to an impending change is the small boat with which Mohan is travelling, setting sail as it acts as a metaphor for new winds, of an impending change. Another recurring motive that we have also observed in the other films chosen here is that of a gauged window – the motive of the window representing a sense of being trapped while being a part of the context. His train journey is the decisive journey

that brings him close to the land where he was born, made evident through the brief sequence where he drinks out of an earthen pot. Another significant yet brief observation is about the leitmotif of a train – in one of the earlier sequences at the beginning, the train is a mere background criss-crossing through the hinterlands, highlighting Mohan's distance to the reality as opposed to now when he is travelling on the train. In spite of being able to identify with the contexts, Mohan's objectivity and rational approach is not compromised. This sentiment is beautifully composed in the image where he is inside the train, looking down at the boy selling water to him (IMG. 51 – IMG. 52). This looking down, though partially representative of a power equation, is more significant because the construction of this image puts Mohan in a position where he has a *Birds-Eye* view and helps him maintain a certain distance, objectivity to the plot. The image composition changes significantly from this point onwards: it now largely focuses on showing Mohan as someone who belongs, someone who is one of the many Indians being shown as opposed to his location earlier on in a clearly demarcated space, which made him an outsider.

Accepting consequences of new life/ Reward, Seizing the sword (2:05:45): At this stage in the narrative, the figure of the main protagonist has realised that he is a part of the bigger narrative and has a decisive role to play in order to achieve a bigger *Need*. In case of this film, it is Mohan who has realised that he needs to now act upon things he has seen, experienced and heard so far. This moment is well represented by the festival of *Dussehra* – marking the victory of goodness over evil. According to the popular belief in North India, it is widely believed that it is on this day that the main protagonist of the epic *Ramayana*, *Ram* achieves victory over *Ravana* and kills him. This story is widely presented through extremely popular theatrical performances known as *Ramlila* (stories of *Ram*) across North India. The filmmaker employs the usage of this performance to mark the festival of *Dussehra*, signifying the end of dark times and the beginning of a new era. This new beginning is shown through a temporary, yet decisive change in the physical appearance of Mohan wherein he dresses traditionally as well

as during a discussion (which soon enough assumes the nature of a confrontation) between Mohan and the village community. This discussion starts out of curiosity of the villagers about Mohan's life in the USA, about the kind of systems that exist there, about societal structures there and more importantly, if the American society also experiences discrimination against minorities. Interestingly enough, this question is posed by Fatima Bi, herself a Muslim woman belonging to a significantly large minority group in India, just like the group of African Americans in the USA. While replying to these questions, Mohan acknowledges that his life in the USA, the society is far from perfect and that they have their own set of problems, just like any other country around the world. According to him, what sets them apart is their openness to criticism and competition, an openness to work on themselves and bring about changes, improvements. He plays the role of a person with a voice of reason while holding a mirror in front of the local community, while quashing their claims of cultural superiority mentioning that all countries and cultures have their own set of specific problems. Mohan makes statements like he doesn't believe India is the biggest and the best country in the world (which seem blasphemous and disrespectful to the village elders) while focusing on the fact that it has the potential to be a better place, probably even the best. The fact that this conversation takes place in a school is symbolic of new things that need to be learnt and the need for cultivating a critical attitude among people, and to look at their own realities in a critical manner and not simply attributing problematic issues to tradition, and lastly, the role education should play in one's life. In the context of *Dussehra*, Mohan assumes the role of Ram, of the virtuous man who does the right thing by trying to create awareness among the villagers about issues like education, by asking them critical questions about their notions of good and bad, right and wrong, while referring concretely to class and caste. He appeals to them to listen to their inner voice of reason and points out that is up to them to allow the goodness in their minds to win, to destroy the social evil of caste, the *Ravana*, on this auspicious occasion.

New challenge and rededication/ the road back (2:23:15): While Mohan has addressed some of the grave problems that are present at the local level, the bigger challenge looming on the horizon is that of modernisation in the broader sense of the term. This means not only addressing issues like caste discrimination and gender equality, but also working on the creation of basic infrastructure. In short, this stage focuses on the challenge of discovering an Indian variant of modernity, which understands and addresses the specific contexts in India and goes beyond just technological and infrastructural advancement. As the issue of power cuts is a phenomenon that often occurs in Charanpur, Mohan decides to try and make the village self-sufficient in terms of its energy needs. He literally decides to bring light into their lives. In a meta context, he introduces the village to modernity. Though the plot sounds a lot like it follows the classical theme of Hollywood productions of an American Hero coming to the rescue of the world, guiding them on to the correct path, what sets this narrative apart is the fact that the filmmaker has brilliantly employed checks and balances in the narrative, which make it amply evident that had it not been for figures like Gita or Kaveri Amma and their valuable input, the American (rather America-educated) hero wouldn't have been in a position to rise up to the occasion and perform the task he is meant to. To cite a concrete example, at an earlier stage when Mohan is questioning the state's apathy towards the plight of the villagers and their inability to provide for them, Gita defends the state. She says that the state can't do everything and that people need to do their bit and contribute to the betterment of the system. This conversation reveals aspects that will eventually become central issues over the course of the film – like efforts at becoming self-sufficient in electricity. Mohan is influenced by Gita's thought-process and starts aiding her in bringing about the change both of them are willing to see. This new challenge provides him with a broader goal, namely, to try and make the village self-sufficient for its energy needs, while also offering him a constructive way to address his problem. In order to achieve this goal, it is

necessary that the whole village come together, work as one and not let the caste differences be a hindrance.

The visuals of this sequence show this experiment to be working. The villagers start working together as a team, becoming stronger as every member of the community contributes to the project, based on their expertise. The absence of women in this scene is noteworthy since it also draws our attention to the gender disparity, which has been a consistent topic throughout the film. This sequence focuses on the visual representation of the problems that have been discussed extensively before and employs a brilliant use of a series of metaphors to point at them. The moment when Mohan clears the mulch in the water tank is a metaphor for him clearing the mulch in the thought-process of the people who have been opposing him or any kind of progressive thoughts. The success of the experiment to produce electricity locally is representative of progress and modernity. The light shining on the face of an old lady (IMG. 56), evidently from a lower caste (because of her clothing and the dilapidated state of her house) represents an impending change for women and members of the lower castes, leading the old traditions into a new world. Importantly, it doesn't talk about abandoning the old for the new but advocates an amalgamation of various influences. It is also evident that the old lady has cataract which can be considered as symbol for compromised vision. Just like cataract is a treatable condition, so is her social backwardness. The arrival of electricity and subsequently of light in her house suggest the beginning of change. The visuals chosen to represent all these issues are particularly strong, since every single visual combines the vast range of issues it represents. This sequence ends with the experiment being successful and the village having access to electricity, coinciding with the onset of Diwali – a festival representing the arrival of new times, a dawn after a dark phase.

Final attempt, last minute dangers/ Resurrection (2:42:25): This sequence begins with the death of Dadaji, an elderly figure and a teacher, who at some decisive junctures, has played the role of a mentor, not just to Mohan but also to Gita and the children. On his deathbed, he reminds Mohan about

his call for duty, saying that there are bigger things he is meant to do. It can also be interpreted as the old making way for the new where Dadaji passes on the baton to Mohan to continue his work. As he is being cremated, the leitmotif of the fire represents a kind of resurrection as is represented in Hinduism. The fire also represents something divine, binding (any vow taken in the presence of a fire is considered auspicious and binding in Hinduism) and it is in the presence of this, that one can feel that Mohan is making up his mind, that he is in conflict with himself about his impending decision. When he decides to go back to the USA, he shall be returning as a new and different person. At this stage, he is yet to become aware of his true calling though the process has been set in motion. His parting exchange with Mela Ram puts him on a path of thinking about the futility of all his knowledge, his work and his choice to live in the USA because the people in his homeland cannot profit from it. He has experienced how his knowledge and competence can be used for the betterment of the people at a grassroot level, He is acutely aware, that though his work at NASA will contribute to a better understanding of weather patterns, it won't give him a chance to address inequalities in the Indian society, which he thinks should be urgently addressed. In a very interesting turn of events, when Mohan decides to return to the USA, in spite of everything he has just experienced in India, seen the scope and the potential for the work that needs to be done, it appears that Mohan's *Want* – of persuading Kaveri Amma to move to the USA with him remains unfulfilled and that he is yet to become aware of the bigger *Need*. Gita, on the other hand, fulfilling her function of being rational and selfless, decides to let Mohan drift away and stay put where she is, though she has a chance to move to the USA with Mohan. As a parting gift, she gives Mohan a box representing India that will remind him of home – small things that represent the Indian culture Mohan is so conflicted about. On the one hand, he is finding it difficult to accept everything that is happening around him under the garb of culture; on the other, he is aware of the fact that there are progressive people like Gita, who if allowed to evolve and lead, have the potential of changing

those problematic contexts in a decisive way. As he takes the gift and drives away, the figure of Gita becoming distant and visible in the mirror, represents Mohan's attempt to distance himself from this context. This stage of the protagonist distancing himself is absolutely necessary for the protagonist to be able to draw his own conclusions, to be able to realise what the bigger *Need* is.

Only on his return to the USA does Mohan realise the changes he has gone through, the evolution his identity has undergone. This time, he experiences a sense of longing, of wanting which is not just connected to Kaveri Amma anymore. It is now connected to more people and issues he thinks he can tackle. The flashback moments portrayed in the song *Ye jo des hai tera, Swades hai tera* (This country of yours, it is your homeland) are representative of the feelings and emotional turmoil he is going through and probable solutions that could end this turmoil – ranging from being close to the people he loves to the issues he has now gotten familiar with and things he can contribute to meaningfully, in order to resolve those issues. It is a flashback that remind him of his own evolution as a person, as he begins to understand the finer nuances of issues surrounding caste, class, poverty, gender, lack of technological advancement, etc. This awareness that is slowly dawning on him, about the responsibility that he needs to and can shoulder helps in making his resolve grow stronger.

Mastery/ Return with Elixir (3:03:00): The launch of the space mission is the first step towards a return to India for Mohan. It brings a chapter in his life to a successful end, allowing him to make a transition to India. The image of soaring upwards, towards light, towards a bigger goal is representative of Mohan's emotions. As he takes the final step and returns to India, the evolution of his identity begins. Returning to the place that has been beckoning him to come back, the sequence ends with a round of traditional Indian wrestling and Mohan winning it. This final sequence is on the bank of a river, representative of Kaveri and symbolises an end of a journey for Mohan who set out to look for Kaveri, a motherly figure and also his search for a homeland, his motherland. With this final journey

leading him to return to his motherland, the protagonist not only addressed his *Want* of being closer to Kaveri Amma, but also the bigger *Need* that was always there in the background – that of rediscovering a connection with his Motherland.

SEQUENCE ANALYSIS: MOHAN'S AWAKENING (1:50:41- 2:02:10)
(IMG. 60.1 – IMG. 60.2)

The chosen sequence for analysis here, shot by Mahesh Aney, starts in the middle of the song *Saanwariya Saanwariya*. The song combines two elements – Geeta confessing her love for Mohan on the one hand, Mohan's journey together with Melaram to the tenant's house on the other. Since it is Mohan's journey that is the focus of this analysis, I will focus only on the second element in the song and continue the analysis as the sequence progresses to portraying Mohan's interactions with the tenant Haridas and the thoughts that have been brought afore as a result of those interactions. In this analysis, I will restrict myself to the image composition and the camera work and how they have contributed in making the changing thoughts, attitudes visible.

The first image, a wide-shot, shows Mohan and Melaram in the first leg of their journey as they travel in a crowded train compartment (IMG. 60.1). While Mohan is reminiscing about Geeta, he has been placed in a crowded space and his body language shows that he is stifled as he is trying to hold his own and trying to hold on to the familiar – represented by the FedEx package in his hands. The next image is an extreme wide shot and shows Mohan standing on a boat. He is standing with his hands folded and his back towards the rest of the people on the boat (IMG. 60.2 and IMG. 60.3). Though the extreme wide shot is meant to show him as a small part of the bigger picture, his body language and the image composition make him stand out. He has been placed standing at the further end of the boat at an elevated position. The other people shown in this image, including

Melaram, are either standing at a lower level making them appear smaller as compared to Mohan or sitting, including the ones at the edge of the boat appear smaller since they are sitting though in reality they are sitting at an elevation. Mohan's body language, combined together with these different elements of the image composition make him appear isolated and distanced from the rest of the setting. It is also a direct reference to how he still continues to feel different and sees himself in a position to lead a change.

Haridas greets Mohan and Melaram outside his house on their arrival and invites them to come inside (IMG. 60.4). The wide shot image helps in setting the context of the upcoming interaction – inside and around the house of poverty stricken Haridas. As Haridas invites them in, there is still a noticeable physical distance between Mohan and him and the gap is often filled by Melaram (IMG. 60.5) – almost as if Mohan is hiding behind Melaram. As they sit down to eat, the subtle change in the power dynamic between them is portrayed. Mohan and Melaram are shown sitting down for a meal while Haridas is towering over them making the both of them look up to him (IMG. 60.6). The brief change in power dynamic here is due to the simple reason that Haridas has put a meal in front of them and assumes the role of a provider in that brief moment. As the moment passes, Haridas too squats down and is shown sitting at the same level as Mohan and Melaram – the image composition portraying a conversation amongst equals (IMG. 60.7).

As Haridas starts sharing his story with Mohan, the camera angles and the variety of shots bring the changes in Mohan to the fore. These shots (IMG. 60.7 - IMG. 60.13.) are reaction shots as they portray an interaction between Mohan and Haridas. The images IMG. 60.7 - IMG. 60.11 are mid-shots, focusing on the protagonists from a little distance, but close enough to observe their body language, their facial expressions and take in the surroundings.

The changing body language, an openness coming into the conversation is visible through the progression of these images. In IMG. 60.7 for

instance, we see Haridas sitting with his hands folded across his torso and legs, a marker for the defensive position he is sitting in. In 60.8, we see him opening up a little, his body language signalising that and well in tune with the topic of the conversation as he opens up to Mohan about the challenges he faces as someone from a lower caste who is not allowed to change his profession in order to provide for his family. We see a similar opening up in Mohan's body language as well.

Post the conversation, we see Mohan and Melaram retiring for the night on traditional beds, *Chaupai*, in the backyard, under the skies (IMG. 60.14). The image, a wide shot, gives the viewer an insight into the limited means of Haridas – through the arrangements he can provide for his guests as well as the extent of meagre possessions with just one goat standing next to Mohan's bed.

The shots IMG. 60.12, IMG. 60.13 and IMG. 60.15 are closeup shots, allowing the viewer to closely observe the emotional responses, visible on the faces of the protagonists. As the conversation progresses and becomes more intimate, the camera increasingly zooms in closer to both Mohan and Haridas, allowing the audience to see their emotions – ranging from helplessness to empathy to vulnerability - from a closer perspective.

As they leave from Haridas' house the following morning, one can see a noticeable difference in how the characters are placed in the image. As opposed to the earlier image (IMG. 60.4 and IMG. 60.5) where the implied equation was Haridas, the tenant and Mohan and Melaram as messengers of the landlady, the current image (IMG.60.16 and IMG. 60.17) shows Haridas, a family man, standing together with his family and Mohan interacting with them at an eye level. The noticeable differences in the image composition continue with the onset of their return journey. In a mid-shot (IMG. 60.18), Mohan is now shown sitting down on the boat, amongst other fellow passengers, the hierarchy between them is no longer relevant. He now perceives himself as someone not only leading the change, but being a part of the change he wants to see. The things he sees are also decidedly different – whereas in the earlier setting when he was on his way

to see Haridas, he had turned his back to the realities of the people he was travelling with by just looking at towards the water and the banks of the river. In order to show his inner deliberations as well as the emotions associated with his extreme experience, a closeup shot is included at this stage (IMG. 60.19). In the following shot in the wake of his changed perspective and approach to the realities around him, he is now noticing his surroundings and the people around him – including how people are travelling with livestock on the boat (IMG. 60.20 and IMG. 60.21) – rather than isolating himself from these surroundings as seen in an earlier image (IMG. 60.2 and 60.3). The images IMG. 60.3 and IMG. 60.20 as well as IMG. 60.2 and IMG. 60.21, all of them situated with water in the background, a symbol for changing and fluidity in identities, represent the stark changes that Mohan has undergone. This sequence is a good example how one small change, which is a part of the bigger identity evolution, visible through the image composition, choice of camera angles, can be traced from the beginning to the end of this sequence.

Based on this film analysis, I would like to interrogate some of the primary research questions I have posed and which directly have a bearing on this film briefly. To begin with, the figure of Mohan, as portrayed in the film, is a figure that is easy to relate with for a huge part of the Indian American population (or even members of the Indian diaspora across the world). His feeling of being conflicted about where he belongs and his longing for India is also equally familiar. The process through which Mohan's identity evolves while taking on new influences, is visible throughout the film. This process, though portrayed in the film in a chronological manner, isn't necessarily hierarchical. In concrete terms, Mohan's identity, strictly for the purpose of argument, could be hierarchically constructed as Mohan Bhargava –> Male –> Indian –> Brahmin from Uttar Pradesh –> NRI (an Indian American in this context) –> NASA Scientist etc. This hierarchy only makes sense from the viewpoint of either an Indian or an NRI living in America. From the viewpoint of someone who is not familiar

with the Indian system or how Indian surnames give away the caste affiliations and standing of the person in a society, this hierarchy may look like Mohan Bhargava –> Male –> Indian American (so in worst case, probably an outsider) –> Educated in the USA –> NASA Scientist etc. Both the construed identities make sense though, only from an outsider's perspective. When we see Mohan's figure in the narrative, neither hierarchies make sense – from the viewpoint of the viewer or from his own viewpoint. When Mohan arrives in India, considering that he is an Indian according to one hierarchy, one would expect him to understand the contexts of what is happening around him, if not necessarily agree with them. What happens in reality though, is that his Westernised education, combined with the fact that he was too young to understand the complexities of the topics around him when he left India, intervenes and contributes decisively to framing his responses to issues like caste system, gender inequality, etc. On another count, when he receives the news that his application for citizenship has been accepted and he is now an American, one would expect him to be happy considering that he has spent most of his life in the USA and is settled there with a successful career. In this instance, it is not his American life but his lost connection with his motherland that intervenes and frames his response to this news, leaving him unsettled and longing for a homeland. His identity complex has been a rhizomatic one from the beginning of the film and spreads its expanse as it evolves over the course of the film. The evolution of the rhizomatic identity complex is noticeable across the span of the film in a way that his identity is actually turning out to be a potent mix of the things that he had learnt and seen so far, his life in the USA, his work as a scientist and the things he has realised, learnt and experienced during his stay in India. The narrative allows both these parts of his life to grow into one another in a way that Mohan not only begins to understand his own responses and the reasons behind them but also the endemic reasons behind the failure or a resistance to things in India. Let us consider the example when he encounters Haridas for the first time and is hearing his story. The American, Western educated part in Mohan's identity

is at loss of words when he sees the utter poverty Haridas is subjected to, in spite of his willingness to work. Till that point, the issue of caste system may have existed at some levels in Mohan's perception (or considering the fact that the Indian constitution has legally banned caste-based discrimination, he may have even assumed before coming to India that it doesn't influence the day-to-day lives of people anymore as it used to) but not to an extent that it would subject a poor weaver's family to abject poverty. The reality on ground, however, is different and through his interactions with the people in the village over a sustained period of time, he realises that the caste system continues to be a part of the Indian life and if one wants to respond and criticise it, and just helping out Haridas wouldn't help. He needs to think about a bigger strategy to be able address this issue.

Swades, in terms of its story, is a film that has not lost its relevance even today. If at all, its relevance has increased in today's context when one looks at the current socio-political developments in India. The only thing that has probably changed is that the correlation between the degree of education and liberal, open mindset has increasingly become bizarre and confusing. If the Indian society has made progress, in terms of their economic standing on the one hand, in terms of socio-political contexts, only a few things have changed on the other hand. That the society had concerns and problems with issues of caste, gender and religious minorities is not a new phenomenon. But in an ideal scenario, with the advent of education, with economic prosperity one would have expected the society to become slightly more liberal and open to ideas concerning equality in every aspect of life – gender, caste, religion. What has happened though, and this observation is not only limited to the Indian context, is that in spite of these developments, the political spectrum has become increasingly populist, with most of the traditional political parties failing to secure the confidence of their traditional voters. This populism manifests itself through various forms like xenophobia, Islamophobia and caste-based discrimination. This turn of events, in spite of high levels of industrialisation, economic pros-

perity and an increased interconnectedness of world affairs, is very puzzling for a lot of Indians. For a member of the Indian diaspora in the USA like Mohan, who has been exposed to a multitude of socio-political setups, cultures, ways of life, who is moving between different worlds, this trend is even more puzzling. To him, at a superficial level, it would appear that the India has made some progress on some fronts like literacy as opposed to the times in 2004. But the social indicators of a liberal society like gender equality, caste equality, protection of minorities and cordial relations between various religious communities, some of which *Swades* critically looks at, continue to be persistently problematic, or have taken a turn for the worse since the film's release in 2004. This particular, bizarre yet omnipresent development all across the world poses some pertinent questions about the phenomenon of globalization. Can we consider rising populism as a response of the various communities to globalization? Why are large parts of societies rejecting or becoming increasingly intolerant towards anything that is distinctly different, unfamiliar and hence *Other* or *Foreign*? Undoubtedly, there are definitely elements (and always have been) in the Indian society, who have held their ground and fought for these fundamental rights. But the questions remains: how are the targeted and marginalised communities responding? Is it through means of rejection and exclusion of the majoritarian influences? Are they resorting to violence to make themselves heard or are they responding in a constructive manner, looking for a dialogue with the majoritarian groups and for ways to find a middle ground?

Swades portrays Mohan's identity conflict and its evolution together with the broader cultural conflict in a very efficient manner. The key to a successful portrayal of both these conflicts lies in the fact that the filmmaker chooses an approach set in grass root realism, while abstaining from the dangers of overly romanticising either of the two contexts that the protagonist is rooted in. In spite of some criticism that the film displays an immature approach towards the problematics of caste and that these deep-seated issues cannot be merely addressed and undone by passionate

speeches[223]. The filmmaker sometimes seems to fall prey to the schematics of portraying an American educated protagonist as the saviour of a poor, conservative village (representative of a country) that needs to be civilized, that Mohan merely replaces a white man while showcasing the white man's burden of civilizing the world, but the film still works on several levels. Most importantly the filmmaker doesn't treat the lost home as a mere object of nostalgia, instead treating it as an object being subjected to critical interrogation. This new approach suggests a certain level of maturity and coming-of-age in the treatment of a topic, as sensitive and political as this one, in Bollywood films.

The character of Mohan, strictly speaking in terms of Herder's model of culture, is a character that is situated between at least two cultures from the beginning (assuming that the Indian and the American cultures are each singular entities). This would make him a person whose identity is transcultural in nature. Considering the biographical information available about Mohan, it is also evident that his sense of being homeless has two levels. One level is that of him being an orphan with no other family, a fact in his life which has decisively contributed to him feeling homeless while the second level is rooted in the first one. A lack of family amplifies his need to look for a home, to find a place and people that evoke a strong sense of belonging in him. The village community, on the other hand, where he is placed for majority of the film, has an intercultural character. Either the cultures exist in a state of conflict with each other (like the castes) or they have a peaceful coexistence without much of an interaction. Mohan, when placed in this context, is briefly overwhelmed and as he struggles with this cultural context, he starts responding to the scenario as someone who has a closed understanding of culture, refusing to acknowledge the translatability of cultures. The same reaction is reciprocated by the village community as well towards this *Outsider*. Eventually, over the course of the film,

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223   Suvadip Sinha, "Return of the Native: Swades and the rethinking of the diaspora" in *South Asian popular culture*, (Vol. 10, Nr. 2, Routledge Taylor and Francis, 2012), 187.

as the narrative develops and both the sides involved are exposed to various aspects of the beliefs they uphold (reasons behind it, the way they are practised, rational reasons behind rejection of certain beliefs, etc.), a dialogue takes place between them leading to a softening of approach on both sides. By the end of the film, one could safely say that Mohan's identity evolves in a manner that he now has an extensive understanding of culture, while also being aware of the fact that in order to work on the regressive elements in any culture, one also needs to exercise restraint and adopt a respectful approach. This will help rationally argue with people and convince them to adopt new ways. Mohan's character is now truly transcultural in nature, since he is at peace with the polyphonic nature of his own identity. He has reached the conclusion that Welsch foresees when he defines transculturality – that pragmatic feats achieved by any culture and society exist not in delimitation, but in the ability to link and undergo transition. Mohan portrays the ability to link the various strands existent in the various cultures he is interacting with over the course of the film, while also undergoing a transition himself on coming in contact with them and as a result of his intense interactions with them.

Addressing the role that allotted identities play in influencing the openness of a protagonist to *Other* cultures, is particularly interesting in the context of this film. This film presents us with multiple milieus and allows the protagonist to experiment with them. It is the Western-educated, urban identity that the society has accorded Mohan for a substantial amount of time in his life. This brings in an assumption about his openness to *Other* cultures. Mohan's openness to the *Other* stems from his own experience of being *Other* while living in the USA. If we were to leave aside a qualitative sizing up of the *Other* and abstain from labelling it Good or Bad, we also realise that Mohan's openness is specific to a particular variant of the *Other* which is at par with his own ideas and world view. So, while Mohan finds it easy to interact with people like Gita, who also represented the *Other* for him at some point, he finds it difficult to deal with the *Otherness* visible through caste system, gender inequality, etc. that is an inherent part of the

societal structure in the village. His rejection of the existent system, borders on arrogance and insulting behaviour. This rejection of the *Other* is, hence, a two-way process and is resorted to by the village community (when they reject Mohan's ideas of a liberal and equal society) as well as by Mohan (when he rejects the societal structures in the village). This rejection occurs largely because neither of the involved parties are willing to be understanding, open and accommodative about the ideas of the other – to say that they are unwilling to get down from their high horses, would be an apt description. Only when both the parties show some respect towards each other, mitigated by Kaveri Amma and Gita, is a dialogue possible, along with cultural exchange and change. So, a person, who has been allocated a social identity that represents an openness and liberal outlook, may in fact be more rigid when it comes to an openness towards his *Other*. An urban, Western-educated person, just like Mohan, by the accident of his/her birth in an urban setup is exposed to a multicultural, partially liberal society, which represents 'normal' for them. But if the society as a whole is to evolve, it can only be possible when all the concerned parties are tolerant and open enough to respectfully disagree and then agree to find a middle ground, else the danger of rejection and exclusion, also resulting into intolerance, looms on the horizon. This nuance is very important in the context of interrogating different understandings and positions on culture, since culture is always a negotiated space which is always in the process of becoming. A disrespectful and aggressive rejection of one particular thought-process, regardless of its conservative or modern nature, rules out the possibility of negotiating a space for proponents of that line of thought, in turn, giving rise to more rigid boundaries and exclusion.

4.2.2   Gender-based identity conflicts: *Parched* (2015)

> Cinema is a cultural practise where myths about women and femininity, and men and masculinity, in short, myths about sexual difference are produced, reproduced and represented.[224]

Indian cinema and not just the Bollywood films which have been considered here for interrogation, is a very influential cultural medium. They have been instrumental in creating not just the aforesaid myths about gender roles in the Indian society, but also attempted to present antithetical rolemodels to those conservative and societal stereotypes. The medium of cinema, especially in a cinema-crazy country like India, has a huge responsibility of producing, reproducing and representing a wide range of myths surrounding gender stereotyping. With notable exceptions of films from earlier times like *Sujata, Mother India* and *Aandhi* – films with strong women lead characters were and continue to be a rarity. Though the scene has been changing drastically over the past few years, with an increasing number of woman directors like Mira Nair, Leena Yadav and Meghna Gulzar, etc. choosing to change the representations of female subjectivity, a lot awaits to be done. *Parched* (2015) is one of the films in this category which fulfils all the three criteria that a film is expected to check – it produces a powerful narrative about strong women characters and indomitable spirits, while realistically representing the societal and cultural setups in which they live. More importantly, the film manages to close in the gap between the production of a myth and reproduction of the context in which the myth is situated, by allowing the female protagonists to represent the aspirations of women in rural India. In other words, the idea of strong women in rural India, conscious of their sexuality and vocal about their life choices presented in this

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224   Anneke Smelik, *And the Mirror cracked: Feminist cinema and film theory*, (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1998), 7.

film, is not merely a myth anymore. When the film ends, it becomes representative of the realities of a wider cross section of women – irrespective of rural or urban India.

Parched is one of the few powerful Hindi films in recent times that focuses on women from rural India and portrays them as main protagonists in a film. The film was directed by Leena Yadav and is the only film in this selection to be made by a woman director. It tells a story about the journey of three women: Raani, Lajjo and Bijli who have been friends since their youth and a young girl Janaki, Raani's daughter-in-law. *Swades* portrayed rural India to a certain extent but primarily, it was intricately interwoven with the life story of Mohan, roping in the issue of modernisation, Western education, etc. in the Indian society. Importantly, it showed rural India from the perspective of an *Outsider. Parched*, on the other hand, portrays rural India from the perspective of three women who are a part of the local community and takes on issues such as child marriage, status of women, domestic violence, marital rape etc. in the society that define their existence over the course of the film. The narrative primarily focuses on the interconnectedness of the lives of Raani, Lajjo and Bijli and how their individual fates evolve as they move from being subjected to and following traditional practises to actively addressing these exact issues. It chronicles how this evolution changes their respective status in their immediate society. The treatment of the plot is such that these three women together form an *Ensemblefigur.*

The primary reason behind the selection of Swades was that this film provides an excellent example of identity conflicts interwoven with broader cultural conflicts at the intersection of gender. Though there are a number of films from recent times which have strong women leads like *Margarita with a straw* (2014), *Secret Superstar* (2016) or *Lipstick under my Burkha* (2017), or *Chhapaak* (2020), which address a variety of issues ranging from gender, status of women in the society, violence against women to issues of sexuality and women expressing and experimenting with their sexuality, I strongly feel that *Parched* best suits the framework of the inquiry

here for the sole reason that the film focuses on identity conflicts in particular. While the other films that I mentioned also focus on the status of women and modernisation conflicts, etc., they are located in urban, semi-urban centres placing the narratives in different contexts. *Parched*, on the other hand, is one of the few recent films that is rooted in rural India and represents conflicts that not only concern the day-to-day lives of women in rural India but also of women in urban centres. The texture of this particular film makes it suitable for the scope of this thesis since it allows me to explore the finer details of the primary research questions I pose.

Before getting into the film analysis and looking at the Hero(ine)'s journey, it is of paramount importance to address the topics that will be addressed in the film, giving the film its unique texture. The film is yet another example of grass-root realism portraying the real time struggles of women in India, especially in rural India. Although the narrative limits itself to a small village in India, the issues that the film brings to the fore like child marriage, objectification of a woman's body and domestic violence, are issues that continue to exist in urban India as much as they do in rural India. They may be well-hidden, guarded and buried under the hustle-bustle of metropolitan cities and urban centres, but they continue to exist if one were to scratch beneath the surface. The brutal violence and abuse against women, cases of rape of girl-children and women and the recent attempts to politicise[225], even justify these cruel attempts on the lines of religion or caste are just some of the many markers that suggest the omnipresent nature and deep-rootedness of the problem in a highly patriarchal Indian society.

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225 The most recent example of a justification of rape by politicising it was observed in the rape case of Asifa Bano in 2018 in the North Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir. A number of people protested against the arrest of alleged perpetrators, all Hindu, claiming that they were being arrested out of political spite while the real perpetrators were out and about. Behind this argument, was a firm belief amongst the protestors that the Muslim nomadic communities, to which the victim belonged, were trying to alter the demographics of Jammu, where Hindus are currently the majority.

Parched, the name of the film is a pointer to the brutal, parched landscape of the desert, while at a meta-level it also addresses the parched, burnt souls of the people that belong to a conservative society and show lack of empathy for the desolate state of the women in their community. The narrative here revolves around the lives of Raani, Lajjo and Bijli, while roping in the character of Raani's daughter-in-law Janaki periodically. The names given to the lead protagonists, while usually being representative of a particular set of attributes, interestingly fulfil the function of highlighting the paradox of their realities. While the name Raani means Queen, in reality, her character is situated in a context marked by poverty, where her primary responsibilities are subservient to the demands of her mother-in-law and her adolescent son. Raani is friends with Lajjo, a young woman in the village. Lajjo is a name that originates from the highly ambivalent Sanskrit word *Lajja*, which has a range of meanings that vary from being shy and coy to modesty and is often considered to be a virtue that an ideal woman should possess, especially in conservative, patriarchal societies. A woman in possession of this virtue is often someone who is (or is forced to be) reserved in nature and chooses (or is often instructed) to not interact with men who are not members of the family, and usually follows (or is made to follow) all the religious, caste and gender barriers that are considered to be correct by her family and the society. Lajjo in the film is the exact opposite of these virtues – she is outspoken and explicit while also being abused by her husband. It is also worth mentioning that the idea of *Lajja* or *Laaj* is associated with the honour of a family in the Indian context, which necessarily is connected with the sexual exploits of a woman. A woman who slips off the traditional path of maintaining her virginity till marriage or who marries outside of her caste, class or religion is considered to bring shame to her family and community. This sentiment is often one of the most important reasons behind the horrendous practise of Honour Killings[226] that continue to exist not just in the South Asian region but also

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226   Encyclopaedia Britannica describes Honour Killings as "the murder of a woman or girl by male family members. The killers justify their actions by claiming that

in conservative, patriarchal societies across the world. Lajjo has been unable to bear a child, subjecting her to ridicule and abuse from her husband. Prolonged violence and domestic abuse play a decisive role in how her character evolves. They also plays an important role in her character being outspoken and without 'modesty', when she addresses sexuality openly, in an otherwise conservative setup. The outspokenness of her character also serves the purpose of a coping mechanism, since it helps her make jokes about her infertility (which eventually turns out to be untrue) and express and fantasizes about her sexual desires, since they are certainly not being fulfilled in her marriage.

The character of Bijli is quite different from the other two protagonists. Bijli, meaning lightning, is a dancer in a local theatre company, which finds patronage predominantly among men. Her profession is to entertain men by performing raunchy, sensual numbers and having sex with some men in exchange for money is incidental. Bijli, while extremely appealing to men during her dance performances, is despised by the women in her village and, hypocritically, by the men as well when they meet her in any other social space outside the dance tent. From the perspective of the village community, Bijli is a woman who is a bad influence and should not be allowed anywhere near them. She gets acquainted with Raani through Raani's husband and eventually, gets to know Lajjo through Raani. Bijli,

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the victim has brought dishonour upon the family name or prestige. In patriarchal societies, the activities of girls and women are closely monitored. The maintenance of a woman's virginity and "sexual purity" are considered to be the responsibility of male relatives—first her father and brothers and then her husband. Victims of honour killings usually are alleged to have engaged in "sexually immoral" actions, ranging from openly conversing with men who are not related to them to having sex outside of marriage (even if they are the victims of rape or sexual assault). However, a woman can be targeted for murder for a variety of other reasons, including refusing to enter into an arranged marriage or seeking a divorce or separation—even from an abusive husband. The mere suspicion that a woman has acted in a manner that could damage her family's name may trigger an attack; these assumptions are generally based on men's feelings and perceptions rather than on objective truth."

true to her name, strikes like a lightning at decisive junctures in the film and creates a disruption that enables a major change.

The fate of these three women is quite similar, though their social standing is varied: each represents a particular class of women who are ill-treated, disrespected, considered inauspicious and unwanted even today, especially in rural India. Raani represents the widows, Lajjo represents women who are unable to bear children (irrespective of their own biological limitations or their partner's impotency), and Bijli represents those who are dancers and/ or prostitutes. While the last group is still widely discriminated against worldwide (which does not legitimise it at all), the other two groups are better off in more progressive, liberal societies across the world, including a number of places in India. The discrimination, abuse and patriarchy that all of them face in their day-to-day lives and their longing for a loving, respectful and caring partner, serves as a binding factor and basis for their friendship.

Janaki, Raani's daughter-in-law, who is still a child, is a victim of the custom of child marriage, which is still prevalent in several parts of the world, including India, though legally it has been abolished since 1929. She is introduced in the narrative early on, when Raani goes to visit her parents along with Lajjo to take a look at the prospective bride. Janaki's father explains to Raani that he has more daughters, who he needs to marry off, since they are a burden on him and he would be eternally thankful if she would agree to take Janaki off his hands. Surprisingly, Raani, the mother of the groom, is shown buying the bride off and confirming the alliance. Janaki is incidentally one of the many names of *Sita*, the wife of the main protagonist *Ram* in the epic *Ramayana*. According to the one of the most popular versions of the *Ramayana*, penned by *Valmiki*, *Sita* is often subjected to violence, abuse, injustice, restrictions and has been subjected to numerous tests in order to prove her loyalty to her husband. Depending on how one chooses to look at it, *Sita* is also considered to be the epitome of female purity and virtue, just as *Ram* is considered to be the epitome of an ideal virtuous man, the time during his rule the golden age or the *Ramrajya*

and his kingdom, the most revered and just. As the narrative evolves, it becomes clear that Janaki is also subjected to violence, abuse, injustice, restrictions and is even subjected to a few tests. The difference between the fates of the two namesakes is that Janaki is eventually set free by Raani, who transitions into being a mother to Janaki from a mother-in-law. The narrative is woven in such a manner that each of the elder women sees a bit of their own past in Janaki – Raani remembers her struggles with her mother-in-law and the abuse by her drunk husband when she came into the household as a child bride, Lajjo sees the danger of abuse at the hands of a husband, Bijli sees the strong longing in Janaki's eyes for approval and being loved. Bijli referring to the time how she met Raani, Raani's response to the situation, how she treated Bijli more like a human being above anything else, is a precursor to the impending change that will occur in the character of Raani. It shows that though the character of Raani is capable of empathy, she chooses to exercise it only in certain situations.

Raani, Lajjo and Bijli are the protagonists in this narrative. Their personalities and identities are the ones that evolve the most. This change that we notice in their personalities is not consistent in pace and takes place in a non-linear fashion. In moments of confusion or fear, they tend to retract back to the safe zone i.e. the archaic societal and cultural norms that they have unconditionally followed so far. It is usually extreme cases of violence or helplessness that leads them to committing themselves again to a path of change. The rhizomatic nature of their journeys is visible in the film on two levels – one is at an internal level of conflict, of swaying back and forth between new ideas and old norms, the other one being the journeys that they undertake with each other, every time taking a small step forward only to return back to the old setups before finally letting go of the structures they are so firmly committed to. The different junctures in a Hero's journey exposes the various layers of these journeys for each protagonist to the audience.

Limited awareness of the problem/ Ordinary world (0:00:55): The opening sequence (IMG. 61) begins with a deserted bus stop in rural India where

some young boys are loitering. Parallel to this, a part of the same sequence takes place in a bus, again in rural India (evident from the way people are dressed) introducing us to two women with covered heads (IMG. 62). Interestingly, they are seen peeping out of the window briefly and experience a moment of freedom, one of them even letting her veil slip off (IMG. 63). It turns out that that the women are visiting another family to finalise a (child) bride for the son of one of the women (IMG. 64). Going back to the bus stop, it becomes clear that one of the women is the mother of one of the boys loitering around at the bus stop, Gulab. The brief sequence that portrays him and his friends watching porn on a cell phone (IMG. 65) represents two broad issues in the Indian context– the taboo that exists around issues of sexuality, while exploring the patriarchal nature of it and the recent cellular and data revolution in India making cellular data easily available in all nooks and corners of the country.

Gulab calls Raani on her new mobile phone to enquire about the prospective bride. When she confirms that the deal has been made and that he would be very happy with Janaki, Gulab warns her saying *mal raddi nikla to kabadi ko bech doonga* (if the purchased object turns out to be dissatisfactory, I would sell it off to a scrap dealer). Though Gulab is the one saying it, he is representative of the entire societal setup he is a part of. His attitude towards women, as it turns out over the course of the film, is extremely offensive, abusive and disrespectful since in his understanding, all that a woman is capable of and should be doing is providing sex to a man, as and when he wishes. His attitude of objectifying a woman's body is echoed by the father of the bride, his friends and presumably a large number of other men. As he continues to loiter around the bus stop along with his friends, a visibly different woman, standing out because of her appearance, her way of dressing, and most importantly, because of the fact that she is carrying books, descends from the bus only to be ridiculed by Gulab and his friends. Naobi is the wife of an educated man, Kishan, who is enabling the women in the village to earn a livelihood by putting their handicraft skills to use.

During the discussions between Raani and the mother and grand-mother of the prospective daughter-in-law, the audience starts getting familiar with what an ideal daughter-in-law is, from the perspective of a village society. Though this sequence focuses mainly on the daughter-in-law, in the broader sense, the existence of an ideal Hindu woman is traditionally dependent on her loyalty and sense of duty to the three important men, besides her family, in her life – her father, her husband and her son. While discussing the traits of an ideal Hindu woman and its cinematic representations, Indian film scholar Geetanjali Ganguli makes an important point that though the nature of the issues that constitute an ideal Hindu woman are problematic, they are anointed to be highly sacred and ennobling.

> The representation of the ideal Hindu woman as a suffering and devoted wife (*pativrata*), for whom serving her husband and husband's family (*sasural*) and putting up with humiliation at their hands is not merely ordinary duty, but a sacred obligation. Servility and humiliation in the marital home are, therefore, construed as 'ennobling' and 'worthy of praise', especially when displayed by Hindu women. [227]

Furthermore, in the eyes of a highly patriarchal society, it is also her duty to bear a child, preferably a male child and exercise control over her sexual desires. Speaking in terms of the film, in the eyes of the villagers, it doesn't matter that a woman is being subjected to all these expectations and even abuse. since any attempt to contradict the notion of an ideal Hindu woman and be something different would not be welcome and tolerated. This is established when the village *Grampanchayat* meets to discuss the case of a young, married girl Champa who has returned to her parent's house. The

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227   Geetanjali Gangoli, "Sexuality, Sensuality and Belonging: Representations of the 'Anglo-Indian' and the 'Western' Woman in Hindi Cinema" in *Bollyworld: Popular Indian Cinema thorough a Transnational Lens*, ed. Raminder Kaur and Ajay Sinha, (California/ London: Sage Publications, 2005), 146.

village *Grampanchayat*, in this case all old men, is of the opinion that she doesn't belong in her parents' house anymore, that she should go back to her husband's place and face her destiny. In a moment of helplessness, she confesses to her mother about the sexual abuse she has regularly been subjected to through her brother-in-law and father-in-law and begs her mother to allow her to stay back. In a daring moment, Champa even tries to tell the villagers that the village belongs to her as much as it does to them and that they should not send her away from home. In the eyes of the village community though, this kind of assertion of belonging, ownership is unheard of since in their eyes, a woman only changes hands, just like a commodity when her owners decide for it – owners in this case being the father, husband, son and men in the community in general. A woman asserting herself and trying to create an existence independent of these ties, claiming belonging to the village irrespective of her father, is unwelcome. Kishan, who offers to employ Champa and help her become self-sufficient, is criticised for his choice of an *Outsider* for a wife – Naobi, who is from Manipur. She is accorded the status of an *Outsider* not only because of her appearance but also because of her being educated, opinionated and because of the cultural disruption she is causing in the village, according to the elders. Interestingly, this notion of being an *Outsider* seems to be felt largely by the men in the village, since most of the women, including Raani and Lajjo, seem to come to terms with Naobi and Kishan and are thankful to them for giving them a chance to become independent. Their wish to become independent, it seems, is coming at a cost in the form of a cultural disruption. In spite of Champa's confession about the sexual abuse she is being subjected to in her in-laws' house, she is sent away as Raani looks on, making her question the decision.

As the women in the village start claiming more space and demanding more say in the way the village is run (by demanding mobile phones and TV Antenna connections), the men earnestly try to reject these demands at first by referring to these things as unnecessary and claim that they will have a bad influence on women and children in the village. One of the

village elders cites the example of a young girl running away with her boy-friend and blames it on the freedom she was allowed to have by possessing a mobile phone.

It is quite interesting at this juncture to see the ambivalence, paradox and most importantly, the double standards being used when deciding on issues depending on gender. For instance, the audience has seen Gulab and his friends watching porn on a mobile phone, as well as a huge number of men swaying to the tune of Bijli dancing to a sensuous number. This is usually considered to be normal behaviour for men – young and old. Even if we were to restrict ourselves to the narrative, we see that in the opening sequences, no one seems to mind the men going to the dance perfor-mances, nor is there any suggestion that the effects of modernisation (par-ticularly technological in this case) are as damaging for a man as they are for a woman.

There are several points that the filmmaker has tried to make in this scene by posing a series of uncomfortable questions that set the tone of the narrative. In the case of the young girl who ran away, the filmmaker doesn't question the move but pushes for a shared responsibility between both the man and the woman who eloped and questions the societal setup that may have pushed them to do so. The question in the case of a young girl like Champa, wanting to get out of an abusive marriage, should not be about what the village society thinks about it, if they believe it or not but it should be about her well-being, about freeing her. The question in case of demands made by women to be allowed to get a TV Antennae in the village shouldn't be about the need for it, but about the right to self-deter-mination. This introductory sequence briefs us about the broad and com-plex thematic framework of this piece of fabric that we have chosen to look deeply into – its broad boundaries are set by the issues of gender based discrimination, prevalent notions about the position of a woman in a society and the role of a society in upholding discriminating systems and mechanisms, rejection of education for girls. These topics also represent

the bigger *Need* that starts unravelling itself later in the narrative. It's important to make a note of this since in none of the narratives does the *Need* emerge out of the blue – the indicators for the *Need* have always been there, hidden behind the *Want*.

Increased awareness, need for change/ Call to adventure (0:21:25): This phase begins with Bijli confessing to her friends that she wants to quit dancing and having casual sex and instead, fall in love. Raani, who is reluctant about telling Bijli about her son's wedding fearing that she may want to attend it, confesses to her friends about her secret admirer, a man whom she refers to as Shah Rukh Khan. As Raani thinks about the end of an abusive marriage with a cheating husband, she realises how lonely she has been and struggling through life. Lajjo, after visiting Bijli, confronts her husband about the physical abuse he inflicts on her and in return, ends up getting abused and beaten up again. All these three situations, seemingly unconnected, are in fact the various forms in which the broader thematic strands that have been mentioned before, manifest themselves in the day-to-day lives of the three women. Additionally, these situations also imply the actual *Want* that each of the protagonist is craving for at this stage – the *Want* to be in a loving relationship where the partner would treat them with respect and dignity. It may appear at this stage that their *Want* is solely focussed on being in a relationship which inadvertently necessitates the involvement of a partner, presumably a man, going by their available biographical details. Though this seems to be problematic at the outset – the search for a man, different but nonetheless, a man, to legitimise a woman's existence, eventually, over the course of the narrative, evolve into different questions. As their *Need* becomes evident and the end of the narrative visible, it becomes clear that the filmmaker has indeed managed to help these women free themselves from the conditions that predetermine their existence.

A number of other elements contribute to an increasing awareness about the finer aspects of themes that dominate this sequence. Although the increasing awareness takes a while to sink in for the protagonists, the

process starts quite early on for the audience, probably even leading them to ask questions arising out of it. For instance, when it is revealed to Raani after the wedding that Janaki has shorter hair than expected, she gets angry for having paid such a huge price to the bride's parents for *such* a girl – with short hair. While the audience is familiar with this thinking from a man (demonstrated earlier by Gulab when he threatens to return Janaki if he is not satisfied with her), it is surprising to hear it coming from a woman. This chain of violence, abuse, discrimination perpetuated by women against women is a common theme that will reappear during the course of the film and will manifest itself in various forms. In this sequence, for instance, the discrimination manifests itself in the form of Raani distances herself from Bijli as she turns up at her home to welcome the new bride. The whole village, especially the men, mock Raani for her inauspicious presence, while Raani fails to defend her friend. On the following day, when Raani's mother-in-law passes away, the men in the village are heard saying that some of the women in the village believe that the old lady could not sustain the shock of seeing such an ugly bride and that it is Janaki who cost the old lady her life. Though this hearsay is not actually portrayed in the film, it certainly has a powerful presence in the narrative, since it doesn't seem to have occurred to these women that they could actually look at the death of the old lady rationally and not contribute to stigmatising Janaki, who has already been subjected to enough ridicule by the village community for having short hair.

This sequence is also very rich in imagery. One of the most profound images is that of Janaki staring at a doll stowed away in her luggage, as she is on her way to her in-law's place after the wedding (IMG. 66). When we look at this particular brief sequence in detail, it has a number of subtle references. Firstly, the doll is introduced in the scene at the same moment when Gulab starts establishing his ownership over Janaki by crossing over into a physically intimate space, as he places his hands over her lap and then his arms around her (IMG. 67). The introduction of the leitmotif of a doll at exact this moment is a reference to her age, her childhood and the

prospect of it fast slipping away, as she is now married. Secondly, the doll is visible to Janaki only through her veil (IMG. 68) signifying that the time that this doll represents is now rapidly slipping away – the barrier being the veil she is sitting under, representing her new status of being a married woman. The doll is naked which signifies an extreme sense of feeling exposed, stripped down to the outside world mixed with helplessness, echoing Janaki's feelings. As she is sitting among a group of unknown, unfamiliar faces, aware of the fact that this is where she will belong from this point on – irrespective of her wishes, she feels exposed and is aware of the fact that she is at their mercy this point onwards. Just like it is up to her to protect the doll from falling down and getting lost, it is up to these people to protect her. This is worsened when her veil comes off during her attempt to catch the doll and the entire group sees that her long hair is gone. It is a very intense emotional experience which strikes a chord with Raani – she is portrayed wiping off her tears. The reasons for Raani's tears are varied – ranging from the embarrassment in front of the village and her son to sympathy for her young daughter-in-law. This intense emotional turmoil involving complex feelings of shame, embarrassment and sympathy sets the tone for the way the relationship between Raani and Janaki evolves. Raani's complex process of change starts revealing itself when she goes to Bijli to apologise for her being unable to stand up for her in front of the village. On realising that her son has just forced himself on Janaki out of spite and a sense of entitlement, she also confesses to Bijli that she may have forced her son to marry at a young age, when he wasn't ready. From this point onwards, an intense process of a construction of identity in Raani's case, with a back and forth between tradition and experienced reality, dotted with rationality, becomes a pervasive element in the film. This last part also makes us aware that the protagonists are increasingly becoming aware of their surroundings and starting to take a moment to critically think about the experiences they are going through. The things that they had considered to be normal – seemingly simple things like preference for

a bride with long hair or then highly complex issues like that of child marriage – are now invoking a sense of discomfort that is causing distress, the first sign of an increasing awareness.

Fear or resistance to change/ refusal of the call (0:39:00): One of the most central issues in this part of the film are various dimensions of sexuality and how different protagonists placed in this sequence explore it. Their explorations of sexuality are strongly connected with their societal standing, including their gender and their marital status. The sequence begins on the following day after Raani has heard her son approaching Janaki and figured out that the meeting led to them having sex. As Raani goes about her day, Janaki appears from inside the house and can't even walk properly, probably because of the sex she was forced to have for the first time. Raani is evidently annoyed with her, apparently because of her getting up late and not being an expert in household chores and goes on to say that she got herself a bad deal when she agreed to marry her son off to Janaki. Instead of getting a daughter-in-law (an ideal one at that), she has probably got herself a goat, implying that she is good for nothing and has become a burden to Raani. On the other hand, as the audience has already been exposed to the upheavals that Raani is experiencing when she had heard Gulab forcing himself on Janaki, it is quite possible that Raani's irritation is not with Janaki but with herself, Gulab and the system that they all are a part of, which justifies the things that have happened to Janaki and even to Bijli. Her irritation also represents a sense of guilt for turning her back on what was happening between Janaki and Gulab and leaving Janaki at Gulab's mercy. Gulab, on the other hand, assures his mother that he has fulfilled his responsibility of consummating the marriage and in a state of being drunk, destroys the material and goods made by the women in the village, including his mother, which are stored at Kishan's house. It's a sign of protest against Kishan's support to the women in the village and Naobi's advocacy for education of women. Education, in general, is a sore point in this setup, more so for a woman to be educated. The village elders, especially the men, consider Kishan to be under bad influence because of his

education and his marriage to a woman who is different in every sense – from her appearance to her thoughts.

When Lajjo turns up at Raani's place with extreme injuries and shock, Raani tries to ease her pain by applying oil/ointment to the bruises. During this, both the women are shown sharing a few intimate moments, before being interrupted by Janaki. This intimacy is very crucial in the context of the whole narrative since it exposes a complex range of feelings experienced by the protagonists. The sequence exposes a vulnerability that is representative of a power equation based exclusively on the societal standing of the people involved –the vulnerability of being sexually abused. The reference to this sequence is not intended to suggest that it is only women who are objects of sexual abuse, but to draw attention to how the society that they are a part of, exploits their weak societal position and their vulnerability to practise abuse against them. It is the lack of a societal regard for the concerns and the safety of the weaker sections of the society, whose societal standing may not be high enough, and it is their sexual vulnerability that is being exploited. It concerns not only women victims but also victims with different sexual orientations and children. The perpetrators act from a position of strength – in most cases, the strength originating from their societal position. Speaking in concrete terms, the characters of Gulab, Manoj, Champa's father, Raani's dead husband Shankar, some of Bijli's customers are all the perpetrators who have either been the cause of abuse to the women in their life or they have been co-conspirators by allowing the violence to take place. Interestingly, as I have mentioned before as well, the role of women co-conspirators cannot be overlooked, who allow this violence to take place. So, while, Lajjo, Raani and Champa's mother are all women, who are victims of this violence, they are also co-conspirators by allowing this violence to take place towards other women. A concrete example within the same sequence is when Raani points out to Janaki that if she continues to read books and fails to present herself as an attractive wife to her husband, she may lose her husband to another woman, just like she did. While Raani at some level knows that a successful marriage isn't

dependent on the presence or lack of education in a woman and knows the futility of such an approach, she is also instigating Janaki to follow the same path she was made to follow by placing the blame on Janaki's education if her marriage proves to be unsuccessful.

Going back to the sequence, as Raani tries to ease Lajjo's pain, the vulnerability and the pain that they are experiencing compels them to explore physical intimacy. The sequence is quite boldly filmed and the aesthetics of this short sequence are well planned and executed in order to allow the audience to be able to differentiate between an intimate moment of sexual exploration and vulnerability vs. vulgarity – both of which have been presented in the film. At a further point later in the same phase, there is also a sequence that portrays Janaki's curiosity about intimacy, since she has not experienced it herself as yet and Lajjo craving for a caring touch. Especially in the sequence between Lajjo and Raani, as they explore each other's bodies, enjoy the sensation of being touched gently, one could easily wonder if they are homosexual and has not been allowed to explore that aspect of her personality. While there may be an element of truth to it, sticking to the framework of the narrative, the film doesn't give any further hints about the possibility of homosexuality, leaving the question unanswered. While their sexuality may still be ambivalent, their real-life explorations with it are meaningful here and highlight an issue that is usually not spoken about openly in the Indian society. For instance, the fact that Raani has not been physically intimate with a man for 15 years since the death of her husband, is not something she can be open or do something about, partly because in the setup she is living in, it is considered to be normal for widowed women to not be sexually active. Her want in this case goes well beyond just a sexual encounter – it is about experiencing love, warmth and security. Similarly, Lajjo has never been touched by her husband in a respectful, dignified manner and has always been treated as an object. In her case, it is fairly common for married women being subjected to domestic violence and in some cases, even justifiable in the eyes of the village society

because she is unable to bear a child. Janaki, during her first sexual encounter with her husband, is unprepared for it and is exposed to the sexual experience without having the chance to grant her consent to it or reserve it. As is the practise in many cultures (not just in India and certainly not limited only to child marriages), consensual marital sex is not a common practise. So, even if Janaki felt violated, her immediate surrounding, which hasn't been sensitised to this issue, finds nothing abnormal in it. In this sense, her first consensual experience with intimacy, exploring another person's body, however briefly, happens not with her husband, but with Lajjo who is craving a caring and loving touch. The common binding factor for both the participating members being a consensual, respectful and loving experience which they have never experienced with their husbands. In Bijli's case, though she has chosen a profession which allows other people to objectify her and focus on her physical traits, it is still problematic how men take her consent and willingness to have sexual intercourse for granted, even to the extent of subjecting her to violent gimmicks. In their eyes, by choosing to be in that profession, she is asking for that violence. All the instances represent a sense of normalcy that is created by regarding sexual transgressions and violation of her body to be normal. They represent the normalising of a thought process that problematises a woman's desire for sex by denying an opportunity for a widowed woman to seek intimacy and love again as well as normalising of violating the right of a young adolescent girl to consensual sex – all of this is a part of a wider discourse surrounding the issue of gender-based sexual rights and its almost negligible existence in public discourse in a conservative societal setup.

If we consider the other side of the same spectrum, the audience is well aware of the sexual transgressions committed by Raani's (now dead) husband when he started a relationship with Bijli and the violent ways that Lajjo's husband treats her. Eventually, when Gulab is being held hostage by the owner of a brothel in the city and Kishan and Raani rescue him. This

shows the other side of the spectrum, namely normalising sexual trans-gressions by men and no one questioning them about it. The two sides of a very difficult yet important issue of sexual rights sets the tone for how the identities of the various protagonists evolve and emerge over the course of the film.

In terms of aesthetics, this sequence is by far one of the most tastefully and beautifully shot since the emotions that this sequence represents needed to be handled sensitively before presenting them to the audience. As mentioned before, the film offers the audience enough opportunities to be able to differentiate between sexual explorations and vulnerability on the one hand and vulgarity on the other hand. The choice of the spaces and the angles chosen to represent this is important. An intimate moment shot between the two women protagonists, in both cases (Raani and Lajjo, Janaki and Lajjo) (IMG. 69 and IMG. 70) see the protagonists positioned at the same level. The images not only represent a sense of intimacy but also a sense of trust and vulnerability because Lajjo, in both the images, is shown to be voluntarily opening herself up after episodes of abuse, her physical responses representing the emotional state of her mind. As opposed to this, in the sequences so far, whenever there is an impending forced intimacy with her husband (IMG. 74), she is portrayed to be cowering in stature, presumably expecting violence while the camera shoots her from a perspective which makes her appear to be at a lower level, signifying her stature in the eyes of her husband.

Overcoming fear/ meeting the mentor (0:53:05): This sequence onwards, the relationship between the three women and Janaki starts to become increasingly ambivalent. So far, Janaki has been a character who is more on the periphery of the narrative with a secondary role. This point onwards, she has a more decisive role. Her character offers the three female protagonists central to this narrative a chance to revisit their childhood and adolescence and to rethink about the roles they have played since then. Most importantly, as a victim of violence and abuse perpetrated by multiple agents

in her life, Janaki draws their attention to the possibility of freeing themselves and as a result, also her, from the vicious circle of a continuous cycle of violence - as victims as well as perpetrators.

In an uncanny resemblance to her namesake, Janaki's fate is a contemporary representation of the conditions in which *Sita* was placed in *Ramayana*. Though there is no direct reference to *Ramayana* in the narrative, the composition of the imagery has clear references to the epic. For instance, while Raani is free to move about in the village as and when it suits her, Janaki is confined to the house. The house is fenced off and she has rarely set foot out of these premises, since the day she came into the house. In *Ramayana*, *Sita* has been asked not to cross the boundaries of the small hut that they are living in during their banishment to the forest. The boundaries are supposedly meant to protect her from evil influences that exist around her in the forest. Depending on where one stands on this, from a feminist perspective, it could also be interpreted as a veiled attempt by her husband and her brother-in-law to limit her mobility, her interactions and control various aspects of her life. To put it provocatively, *Sita* is merely an object of contention between two powerful men – *Ram* and *Ravana*. She has almost no say in the narrative besides waiting in vain for her husband to come and rescue her. Drawing parallels from that, it seems that Janaki isn't allowed to set foot out of the courtyard around the house, while she waits for her husband to return and turn around her life, though the possibility of that happening is meek since Gulab is a very conservative, misogynistic man who has very less respect for women in general. Similarly, just like *Sita*, Janaki has also been in an instance where doubts have been cast on her character when her friend, who she also loves but wasn't allowed to marry, comes to visit her from her native village. In one of the most popular versions of the epic penned by Valmiki, doubts are cast over the character of *Sita* since she had been in captivity for a long time and has to prove her chastity by walking through fire. Janaki is spared of taking a fire test, instead turning the narrative around, where the relationship between Raani and Janaki starts to become strong.

The moment of overcoming the fear has been represented in the film by presenting it in a sequence where the three main female protagonists are seen offering a gesture of friendship to Janaki. Wary and sceptical of it in the beginning, Janaki finally crosses the threshold and sets out on a journey with them. This stage marks a confluence– not only does Janaki cross the threshold and set out on a journey with Raani, Bijli and Lajjo but the incident also marks a shift in the nature of the roles these women play in each other's lives. The women start fulfilling the function of a mentor in each other's life rather than an outsider or a secondary character. Through their discussions and reflections about their lives, they start looking at each other for inspiration and support.

Committing to change/ crossing the threshold (0:55.22): This is a decisive sequence, since it is during this part that they talk about the most pressing issues in their lives. As they look at a young Janaki, who is happily frolicking around free-spiritedly, Raani mentions that this won't go on for long. She will have to become a mother at some point since it is a married woman's destiny to bear a child and that without fulfilling this duty, she wouldn't be serving her life's purpose. It also comes up during their discussion that while women need to do a series of things in order to legitimise their existence and hold an appeal over the men they are married to; what is interesting here is that they start discussing the alternatives to this reality, which they have accepted as *the* reality of their life. Bijli, being the boldest of them all poses a number of unusual questions and even makes a few seemingly outrageous statements like Lajjo's husband Manoj could be the impotent one and that it is not necessary that a woman is always at fault. She asks Lajjo why she would want to have a baby, whether it is to save her marriage. In a clear response, Lajjo, who is still not convinced about the theory of a man being impotent, says she wants a child for herself, irrespective of what her husband and the society thinks. If she is destined to have a baby, she will have one. This brief sequence represents a series of complex issues that define the way a woman's life evolves in a conservative Indian setup. Measures such as having a baby to save the marriage sound

outrageous, however, they continue to be popular in India as well across as the world. At the same time, Lajjo's demand to get what she is destined to get alerts the audience of the impending change.

A particularly emancipatory moment portrayed in the film is the moment when Bijli realises that most of the swear words like *Madarchod* (= motherfucker) and *Behenchod* (= sisterfucker) prevalent in Hindi focus on objectifying a woman and suggest a forced, aggressive sexual intercourse with her, in order to anger the men in her relation. These swear words, she theorises, must have been developed by men since they focus primarily on abusing and molesting mothers and sisters. Though the sequence is shot with a humorous undertone, it highlights a deeper problem associated with it – the objectification of a woman's body. It is used as an object to tease, appease, insult and degrade another human being. In order to change this dynamic, they decide to change the swear words and objectify men while doing so. In another interesting sequence, Raani, who is the only one in possession of a mobile phone, treats it like a sex toy by sitting on it and enjoying momentary pleasure. All these explorations and experimentations with sexuality, a new bold attitude towards it are markers of a coming out of sorts – not in the context that it is usually used in order to signify a voluntary disclosure of one's sexual (usually homosexual) preferences, but in the sense of a voluntary disclosure of having a sexuality, a sexual desire at all.

Experimenting with the new conditions (0:59:34): This phase is probably one of the most challenging ones in terms of the narrative, since it exposes the fault lines in the very intricate nature of the friendship between these three women and actually turns out to be an experiment with each other, with the freedom and boldness that they are trying to understand. When Bijli tries to warn Raani about Gulab getting carried away, Raani lashes back at her and draws her attention to all the unrest in the village caused by Bijli and her dance troupe. Raani, speaking as a representative of those women, distances herself from Bijli and asks Bijli to be more concerned about her own future instead of expressing concern over Gulab and tells her how the

women in the village are growing increasingly restless because in their eyes, Bijli is the bad influence on the men in the village. In a surprisingly defiant manner, Bijli defends her position and questions the whole premise of Raani's accusation - why she is always considered to be guilty of spoiling all the men and boys in the village when they willingly go to her. Though this may seem to be a defensive stance adopted by Bijli to protect herself, it addresses a broader question that is a part of the mainstream discourse in India, especially when it comes to abuse and violence against women. It touches upon the issue of making a choice at free will – to molest, rape and abuse a woman (or even members of the LGBTQIA community) by exercising their powerful standing in a patriarchal society and then looking for a fault in the victim, in order to legitimise the offense. The fault-finding in the victim ranges from banal issues like choice of dressing to more serious issues like justifying rape/abuse as a corrective, punitive measure in order to force the victims into submission and shockingly, finds a lot of support in popular discourses.

The sequence also unravels a complex history of the friendship between Raani and Bijli. It emerges that they became friends when Bijli went to drop off Raani's drunk husband, who was a client and Raani invited her in to stay for a meal. The friendship means a lot to Bijli, who, for once, has been treated as a human and a friend rather than labelling her off as a prostitute and bad influence. Though this is a small biographical detail, it highlights a different side of Raani and how she is capable of acting humanely in certain situations, rather than giving in to the societal pressure, which would have normally expected her to treat Bijli in an extremely insulting, disrespectful manner.

Preparing for major change/ Approach (1:02:39): After a brief falling out between Raani and Lajjo, Raani decides to continue walking home with Janaki, suddenly having found a new ally in Bijli. Gulab, who has been waiting for them, confronts them on returning home, getting angry about not being fed the whole day. It adds to his annoyance that they were hanging out with Bijli, a woman of bad reputation and character, in his opinion.

Raani bluntly points out his hypocrisy: it's acceptable for him to visit Bijli, but not for her and Janaki. She also admonishes her son to be human, before establishing his manhood. This signifies a major departure from her usual approach to her son and his behaviour – which is to turn a blind eye and if required, rescue him. While Bijli realises that she has been replaced by a younger girl, Lajjo is yet again being abused by her husband.

The sequence per se is brief and doesn't portray any major events. But it brings all the protagonists closer to discover their *Need* and realise that just achieving their *Want* will probably not grant them the satisfaction that they are looking for. Their *Want* is dependent on the assumption that the men in the narrative realise the worth of these women and start treating them with the dignity and respect that they deserve. Their *Need* starts to unravel this point on – it becomes evident that these women are not just looking to play a submissive role in a conservative society, their bigger *Need* is to be able to be in a position where they can make decisions about their lives independently and in a way that suit their needs and aspirations. It also starts becoming clear to them that their circumstances won't change if they continue to be passive and dependent on the society around them, it would only change if they actively worked towards it.

Big change with feeling of life and death/ Ordeal, Death and Rebirth (1:05:15): After yet another abusive episode, Lajjo approaches Raani for help. She is referring to something Bijli had offered to do for her – which is to make her meet the mystic man who influenced her profoundly in her understanding of life, love and sex. In a desperate attempt, she asks Raani if it is wrong for her to seek love, affection, respect and most importantly, try to become pregnant. Raani and Bijli decide to help Lajjo and set up a meeting with the mystic man that Bijli had been raving about. This is the gist of the sequence depicting this phase in the life of the three women protagonists.

The aesthetics and the imagery of this particular sequence is very tastefully and meaningfully done – especially when it comes to depicting the moment of rebirth. The female protagonists' ordeals have been evident through the film. At the beginning, it didn't seem as probable that their

ordeal would end at all, as they appeared to have resigned to their fate and accepted the consequences of the lives that had been chosen for them. But somewhere down the line, their troubles pushed them to a point where their identities evolved, their thought processes start changing as they question norms and accepted traditions. Till this point, for instance, Raani has accepted that as a widow there is no possibility of a relationship; Lajjo believes that she may never have a baby, regardless of which of the two – herself or Manoj – is impotent and infertile, and will continue to be in an abusive relationship with Manoj; Bijli has resigned to her fate of a loveless life because of her profession and the reputation attached to it. In a stark contrast to these impressions, their identities start evolving as they begin to explore their own sexualities and question societal norms. This starts in the earlier three phases and peaks in this phase when each of them experiences a moment of being born new.

Raani experiences a moment of rebirth when her secret admirer, Shah Rukh Khan, calls her and discloses personal information and asks her if she would still consider meeting him, without thinking about societal implications. The most momentous depiction of rebirth involves Lajjo and her sexual experience with the mystical man. In one of the initial moments after meeting him, she voluntarily lies down on the ground, pulls up her skirt and grants him access in order to quickly impregnate her. Instead, to her utter disbelief and shock, he approaches her as if she were a sacred object, treats her like a human and tenderly makes love to her, in a way she has never experienced before. The camera work and the resulting imagery is also strongly representative of a new power paradigm that the women have been exposed to for the first time. Whether it is symbolic gestures like him touching her feet or allowing Lajjo to take on a leading, probably even a dominating role, in their sexual encounter, it exposes rural women, through the eyes of Lajjo, to a new, alternative perspective on how a man-woman relationship could be (IMG. 75). The spatial choice of this encounter, deep in the mountains, somewhere inside a cave is representative of the complex layers that the mystic man has unravelled in Lajjo's personality.

By placing them in a very secluded, representative space, the sequence is able to portray a different variant of intimacy that has not been explored before. If we were to pinpoint a particular moment of rebirth, it would be the moment when overcome by euphoria and joy, they jump into a pond under the midnight moonlight, stark naked and emerge to be new women. Jumping into the water is representative of them washing away their old life, cleansing themselves and their thoughts after this particular act and set out on a new journey, as they are reborn as strong, confident women who have a clearer idea about what they want from their lives. The moment of rebirth for Bijli happens after this sequence. She confesses to Raju that he is her favourite person and she worries about him. She asks him to free himself off this business, go to the city and find a nice girl to get married and love her with all his heart. Bijli has shown vulnerability and these emotions explicitly for the first time in the film. It is also a moment of a bitter realisation for her when she asks him to go away. She doesn't consider herself to be the kind of girl Raju should marry and settling down with. Though this moment of rebirth isn't as momentous or pronounced as it is for the other two, it is relevant because it shows a sensitive and vulnerable Bijli for the first time.

Accepting consequences of new life/ reward, seizing the sword (1:14:01): The consequences of their actions so far and the impact that the internal clashes between various aspects of their own personalities will have on their present and their future, start appearing this point on. To begin with, Raani's approach to life seems to have changed. In spite of her repeated efforts to sensitise her son, Gulab continues to visit a prostitute. On the other hand, Janaki's friend Hira, drops off some books for her. Usually, considering her responses to similar situations, Raani would blame her daughter-in-law for her son's lack of interest in starting a family life. She would have probably even questioned Janaki's character and her relationship with the other boy. But since the identity constructs and understandings of the protagonists have changed enormously as compared to the beginning of the film, she chooses not to confront Janaki about the visit. Bijli, after having exposed

her sensitive side, is now coming to terms with the vulnerability she had kept suppressed for so long. The vulnerability manifests itself in the form of insecurity and jealousy against a younger girl, who is now being treated as her equal, sharing the stage with her and is being groomed by the manager. Raju confesses to her that he finds her beautiful, exciting and that she should learn to value herself and not fall for the insecurities created by younger women. The biggest consequence is now visible in Lajjo's life, since she realises that she is pregnant. She had hoped for this all along, but the reality of being pregnant with another man's child and dealing with the eventual consequences of it is something that makes her anxious.

In a brief sequence in this phase, the impending change in their personalities and the identity clashes already happening at a subtle level, make themselves visible. During a conversation among the village women, there is a brief moment when they are all discussing Lajjo's pregnancy. The women wish that their own daughters-in-law would get pregnant as well but their sons refuses to even touch their daughters-in-law, let alone have a sexual relationship. In response to this, Raani ridicules the unrealistic demands that men have from their partners – specifically wives – in terms of their physical appearance. They desire a voluptuous body, long black hair and beautiful eyes. The tone of ridicule that Raani adopts is a decisive departure from the submissiveness and conservative traditional mindset.

New challenge and rededication/ the road back (1:22:00): In the run-up to the climax, this phase is shorter and portrays the conflict getting fine-tuned – it informs of the impending situations that the three women are about to find themselves in – stuck between tradition and a humane approach, between upholding of a patriarchal model and modernity. The arrival of Janaki's friend, Hira, yet again gives us an inkling about the kind of conflict that Raani is about to face, as he tries to convince Janaki to elope with him to the city. The women in the village, on the other hand, finally fulfil their wish of getting a dish antenna for TV, ushering in modernity in some form, in spite of a strong opposition from the men.

Final attempt, last minute dangers/ Resurrection (1:23:00): This is the phase where the climax presents itself, before pushing the protagonists to a threshold where they need to make a choice in accordance with the bigger *Need* in the context of the film – the *Need* here being self-determination, emancipation. To begin with, as Lajjo anxiously awaits Manoj to return home and inform him about the pregnancy, she is uncertain about how he would respond to the news. Dressed up in her bridal attire, hoping to be able to strike a chord with Manoj and remind him of the time when they were just a newly married couple, she still harbours some hope about a positive response from him. Manoj is enraged by the news of her pregnancy because as it turns out, he knows that he is impotent and that if Lajjo is pregnant it only means that she slept with another man.

As Raju tries to lure Bijli to run away with him and start a new life, she is about to start believing that this could finally offer her a semblance of normalcy and a chance to escape her past. But Raju reveals his intention of starting the same business with her in the city and assuming the role of her manager and she continuing to be a dancer and sex worker. After expressing her rage at the disappointment and confronting Raju about his true intentions, she returns to her original dance theatre. In a fit of rage and insecurity, she accepts a customer who originally came for the other girl but wasn't ready to pay the high price. This customer, as it turns out, comes in with a group of other men and she ends up having sex with the whole group in one night and is visibly distraught, physically, but more so, emotionally.

As has been mentioned before, the internal clashes and the back and forth are by far most visible in Raani's personality. In this sequence, Raani accuses Janaki of stealing money from her. When Janaki confronts Gulab and asks him if he took the money, he gets violent and starts abusing Janaki. It turns out that he took the money to spend on the prostitute he has been visiting. In an apparent change of mind, the helplessness of Janaki reminds Raani of her own experiences from her past and she jumps in to save Janaki. Gulab leaves the house saying he is disgusted by both the

women and that he now understands why his father left his mother for a prostitute and challenges them to run a household without a man. Janaki confesses to Raani that she cut her own hair because she wanted to stop the marriage as she was in love with Hira. For the first time, we see a clear indication of a motherly instinct in Raani for Janaki when she embraces her to calm her down. Raani has not portrayed such intense affection even for her own son – partially because Gulab is more focussed on establishing himself as a dominant male in the family. The patriarch of the family, as Gulab understands, is not someone who shows empathy and emotions; instead he draws boundaries for the women in his house, establishing ownership over them and develops a sense of entitlement towards sex. Raani, who has now reached a finality in terms of her character evolution, decides to sell off her house and hands over a part of the cash to Janaki and Hira, wishing them well as she sends them away.

Mastery/ Return with Elixir (1:43:10): In the final sequence, the *Need* that was driving each individual struggles of the women in this narrative, start to reveal themselves. The *Need*, as it turns out, is strongly related to the right of self-determination. When Raani helps Lajjo escape the clutches of an abusive Manoj, who is grappling with his impotency and having difficulty accepting that someone else has fathered Lajjo's child and that this child would be referred to as his child, they set the cottage on fire, in a final attempt to save and free themselves of the violence. This moment also represents a huge change in Raani's personality, who has evolved and become stronger. In a similar incident earlier on, when she had heard Gulab forcing himself on Janaki, she had turned a deaf ear to the situation and walked away, leaving Janaki at Gulab's mercy. This time around, she chooses to save Lajjo from her husband's violent rage and not only defends her but helps her escape. They set Manoj on fire, a representative of the oppressive patriarchal system, while the commentator at the fair is announcing in the background that on this day, the society will destroy the evil and the good shall prevail.

Bijli, anxious and visibly hurt by her last experience, decides to run away with Raani and Lajjo. In this case, the heroes aren't returning with an elixir, instead they are departing with an elixir – a newfound freedom in their lives, which they had never experienced so far. They decide to move to a city and try and make a living there.

The symbolism in the last sequence is very strong in terms of the broader contexts it represents. The brief sequence when Raani and Lajjo set the cottage on fire, leaving Manoj to burn inside is comparable to the fatal end that the character of *Ravana* experiences in the *Ramayana*. Through symbolism, this moment is placed in the foreground, while there is an actual event happening in the background of burning an effigy of *Ravana* on account of *Dussehra*. On another note, while the epic *Ramayana* portrays a woman's dependency on her husband to be rescued, her dependence on him to be accepted back as his wife and their victorious return to their kingdom, the film shows a victorious escape for the female protagonists, who don't need a man to save them but are self-sufficient and self-reliant in defending themselves. This role reversal has not only taken place in the context of the epic that serves as a background for this narrative, but it has also taken place within the parameters of the film. A film, which shows its women protagonists as weak figures, dependent on their husbands for legitimising their existence, comes a long way when it shows the same women reaching a point when they start to exercise their right to self-determination and to be independent of any male and societal agency to legitimise their existence. Whether it having a child by herself or eloping with an unknown man or moving to a city in search of labour – all these choices are made by the female characters in order to finally be allowed to take some responsibility of their lives and not being treated as objects that exchange hands between different owners (father, husband, son, male members of the society).

SEQUENCE ANALYSIS: TRANSFORMATION IN PROGRESS (54:00 – 58:13) (IMG. 78.1-IMG. 78.22)

The sequence chosen from this film for the purpose of sequence analysis is a key moment of transformation in the lives of all the four women. It has been shot by Russell Carpenter. In this sequence, the cinematographer has played a lot with the technique of zooming in and out to signify the complexity and multi-layered nature of the conversations they are having. Without getting too much into the context, I will try to stick to the sequence analysis and image composition in this short sequence.

The sequence begins with Bijli and Lajjo driving to Raani's house. The first shot, a wide shot, shows them driving through the village towards Raani's house. The wide shot portrays the background on which this sequence plays out. Bijli is driving her butterfly shaped motorbike while Lajjo is sitting behind her (IMG. 78.1). In this mid-shot, Bijli is at the centre of the frame and the wings on the motorbike make her appear like a butterfly, signifying big change. Lajjo, on the other hand, has been sitting behind her and only emerges to stand up once they reach Raani's house (IMG. 78.2). Her sudden emergence from behind Bijli and moving to the centre of the frame is a hint to how this sequence will mark a turning point in her trajectory. Raani, on the other hand, is shown in a closeup shot standing in front of her house, just at the boundary between her house and the outside (IMG. 78.3). Though she is the only person to be seen in this image, the camera angle and the composition of the image is such that it appears she is standing behind the boundary of her courtyard. It seems she is adhering to the boundaries set out for her by the society while judging the other two and referring to them as monkeys. In the following image (IMG. 78.4) we see Lajjo crossing over to the inside of the compound and taking Raani with her, crossing the boundary together. In the meanwhile, the audience sees Janaki move into the frame (IMG. 78.5) – she is standing behind the windowsill, behind the bars. This mid shot is symbolic for her experience of entrapment. In the next over the shoulder perspective shot (IMG. 78.6), the audience sees Lajjo, Bijli and Raani standing on the bike while Janaki

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looks on. Though logically the three women are at a higher level than Janaki, they appear to be at the same level because of the image composition. It sets both the sides at an equal level in a stark contrast with what the narrative has conveyed so far. Raani and Lajjo, standing at the highest level, have been setting boundaries for Janaki; Bijli, though not a direct part of the group of women setting the boundaries, has certainly not directly condemned the boundaries being set for Janaki and has been compliant in following the traditions set by the villagers for young brides. The image composition, however, by putting them at the same level, looks at them through the lens of women who are equal. Surprisingly, though Janaki is still behind the boundary of the house, it isn't visible in this image. In the next image (IMG. 78.7) that has striking similarities to an earlier image of Raani (IMG. 78.3), we see Janaki standing behind the outer boundary of the courtyard.

Once the women invite her to join them, the next image shows them riding together on the butterfly shaped bike in an extreme wide shot, giving us a little information about their surroundings (IMG. 78.8). The road is in an uneven terrain, symbolic of the ups and downs in the lives of the protagonists. The next shot, a wide shot (IMG. 78.9), zooms in a little closer to the protagonists, placing them a little towards the left of the frame, drawing our attention back to the protagonists from their background. A striking feature of portrayed in this image is how Raani and Janaki are shown without their heads being covered as opposed to the earlier shots. The next shot is a wide shot (IMG. 78.10), allowing the viewers to see the surroundings the women are in – they are shown running down the stairs alongside what seems like the fort walls. Bijli and Raani are running down one flight of stairs, Janaki and Lajjo on the other. Their status' in the society – unmarried and widowed vs. married - separates them and puts them on different tracks. The next shot is an extreme wide shot (IMG. 78.11), showing the women sitting on the stairs of what looks like a step well – a common architectural feature that can be observed in the dry, arid parts of India. The extreme wide shot, drawing attention to stepped well, serves the function of drawing the viewer's attention to the complexity multi-layered

nature of the problems of the women who are portrayed in the shot. In this shot, the parameters of differentiation have changed, and the image shows Janaki, a child-bride in the background, away from the other older women. The topic of their conversation, as it turns out, is marriage as well as the societal pressure on a woman to bear children. Since Janaki is too young to be a part of this conversation, she is away. The image also shows her running down a narrow path – the descent symbolic of how the quality of her life has changed since her wedding. The other women on the other hand, are sitting on a flat, even surface, symbolising a little more stability in terms of their quality of life as opposed to Janaki. This is not to say that it is better than Janaki – its more about how disruptive getting married was for Janaki and how her life changed as opposed to the other women who have been more used to being women and being treated the way are for a longer time.

The next shot is a wide angle shot (IMG. 78.12), putting Lajjo, Raani and Bijli in the focus. Raani is sitting on the lowest level, Bijli is at the top level, Lajjo is at a level between the both of them. This sitting order is symbolic of how open-minded the respective women are – Bijli being the most open-minded and daring of them all, is shown sitting at the top; based on her conservative attitude, Raani is at the bottom while Lajjo, exactly like her thought process – a mix of daring and open-mindedness, yet conservative – is on the middle rung. This dynamic can be observed during some moments in this sequence as Raani as well as Lajjo are shown looking up to Bijli – symbolic of how inspiring and exciting they find Bijli's ideas.

The next image (IMG. 78.13) captures Lajjo in the middle of an exchange with Raani. It's a mid-shot and shows Lajjo looking down at Raani. As mentioned, the topic of conversation in this sequence is marriage and societal pressure on a woman to bear children. By questioning the existence of a woman if she can't bear a child, Raani displays her conservative attitude and unknowingly hurts Lajjo. Lajjo, who has been at the receiving end of this societal pressure, even in the form of physical abuse from her husband, is shown looking down at Raani. The choice of the colour green is

symbolic as well since in many cultures, including in India, the colour green is associated with nature and is considered to be a sign of fertility. In the next image (IMG. 78.14), a closeup shot, Lajjo is now shown looking up to Bijli. This looking up is directly connected to Bijli's knowing better than the other two and her attempt at enlightening them as she draws their attention to the fact that the lack of a child in Lajjo's life may well be because of her husband's infertility and not necessarily because of Lajjo. This moment of revelation and the events it sets in motion are key to the later evolution of the narrative in the film. The next image (IMG. 78.15) again shows the three of them continuing to sit in the same positions on the stairs while conversing with each other – symbolising the continuation of the dynamic amongst them. This sequence playing out at a waterfront is yet again symbolic of the changes occurring in the identities of the protagonists. The next shot of images (IMG. 78.16 - IMG. 78.19) shows the camera gradually zooming out from the step well while also showing Janaki now sitting much farther away in the background than she was earlier. As the camera zooms out, the different levels of the step well become visible – a direct reference to the multi-layered nature of the problems that they are facing. The IMG. 78.20 places the four women protagonists again in the middle of the frame, drawing the attention to the women's destinies from the broader context before zooming out.

The closing shots of this sequence (IMG. 78.21 and IMG. 78.22) show the four women standing together atop one of the bastions inside the fort. The first image is a wide shot while the second one is an extreme wide shot as the camera zooms out and draws the viewer's attention back to the broader circumstances. The grandness of the location points to the huge magnitude of the problem while the presence of a select few women there trying to tackle it points to how isolated these efforts are, considering how big the problem is.

It is very interesting to see in this sequence how the image composition through a conscious placement of the subjects in the left side of the frame (Lajjo, Raani and Bijli in IMG. 78.6, IMG. 78.9, Raani and Bijli in IMG.

78.10, IMG. 78.16, 78.17, 78.18, 78.19, 78.21) or the right side of the frame (IMG. 78.3, Janaki in IMG. 78.6, IMG. 78.8, Lajjo and Janaki in IMG. 78.10) can be connected to the nature of the responses or reactions of the respective protagonists in the frame. The images with the protagonists in the right side of the frame can be read as images that represent emotional responses, emerging from the right side of the brain, considered to be the centre of emotional responses, in this case connected with the sense of anxiety and fear in case of challenging societal norms. The images with the protagonists in the left side of the image can be read as images with analytical, rational responses – involving questioning the rationality behind the norms set out by the society, emerging from the left side of the brain which is considered to be the centre of this nature of responses.

The Bechdel test[228], which is a renowned test that is supposed to assess gender bias and representation of women in narratives: fiction, film, TV shows – any text that offers a storyline [229], outlines the criteria based on which one can decide if the female representation in any form of narratives is balanced and without gender-bias. The criteria are:

- The film has to have at least two women in it
- The women should be talking to each other
- Talks should focus on other issues than men

If we apply the aforementioned criteria on the narrative of the film, we realise that the narrative does well on all the three fronts. The film boasts of three strong women characters, who have a continuous dialogue happening amongst themselves about the issues pertaining them and the incidents happening in their surroundings. Though it may seem that the women often talk about the men in their lives, one quickly realises that the talk about men isn't focussed legitimising their own existence. In other words, while a number of women in the village would talk about men in

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228 Alice Fleischmann, *Frauenfiguren des zeitgenössischen Mainstreamfilms: A Matter of What's In the Frame and What's Out,* (Wiesbaden: Springer Verlag, 2016), 154.

229 Christie Launius and Holly Hassel, Threshold concepts in *Women's and Gender Studies: Ways of seeing, thinking and Knowing,* (New York/ Oxon: Routledge, 2018), 21-29.

their lives in order to legitimise and defend their roles in the societal hierarchy – those of a mother, sister, daughter, wife, lover – the three lead protagonists try to free themselves of these designated roles and talk about their wish to have be in a dignified relationship in which they are respected. Their talks focus on their wish to exercise their right to self-determination, of having the freedom to explore their sexuality and these talks are independent of the presence of a man and a male relation in their lives.

In her book *And The Mirror Cracked: Feminist Cinema and Film Theory* [230], Anneke Smelik looks at the function of an artistic medium like cinema serves when it comes to the portrayal of feminist issues. As she explains the central issues her book focuses on, she highlights the importance of looking at films in a different light.

> In changing dominant images and representations of 'Woman' and femininity, feminist filmmakers make powerful cultural interventions. This is how the title of my book, *And the mirror cracked*, is to be understood. This study traces the subversive cracks in a mirror which reflects traditional representations of female subjectivity […]. As a feminist film theorist I have been looking for the potential for innovation and reconstruction in both cinema and film theory.

> Feminism did crack the mirror. That gesture was necessary in order to open up the powerful camera eye to new fields of vision: to different angles, points of view, positions, images and representations. [231]

Considering these indicators, *Parched* indeed has managed to crack the mirror. It is a film that addresses all the issues problematised by Smelik. Yadav,

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230 Anneke Smelik, *And the Mirror cracked: Feminist cinema and film theory*, (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1998).

231 Ibid., 6.

with the help of her Oscar-winning cameraman Russel Carpenter, has ensured that the storytelling in *Parched* has a different quality and a noticeably different treatment of female subjectivity. Yadav's cultural interventions manifest themselves in the film in various forms. The narrative that is being rendered from the perspective of a female director, highlights the struggles, aspirations, problems and issues of women in a different light, with a different and nuanced understanding of the issue at hand by displaying a different sensitivity to it. For instance, let us consider the scene where Lajjo, in an attempt to escape from the violent outbursts of her alcoholic and abusive husband, comes to seek shelter at Raani's home. In this sequence both the women are shown exploring a different variant of intimacy, which is not only connected to their mental closeness and affinity to each other but has a different quality – it is more primal, instinctive in nature portraying the sexual needs of women and placing them at the same pedestal as the sexual urges of men. Bollywood films provide a large number of examples of women escaping alcoholic, abusive husbands. But very rarely has this escape led to a further probing of what it actually means to be a victim of sexual abuse, of the anxieties and fears that go well beyond the physical impact of the violence that the victim is experiencing. This sequence, as opposed to sequences in other films, confronts the audience with these questions and attempts to address issues like fear, vulnerability, sexual and physical desires as experienced by the women protagonists. The sequence in question isn't necessarily portraying homosexuality, what it is focusing on is the longing for a loving, caring touch. This sequence is an attempt at normalising the conversation around sexuality and bringing out different nuances of it by tapping into the huge mass appeal potential that a film has.

The film garnered its share of positive and negative reviews – as is the case with any film. Some of the criticisms in the case of this film though, were particularly brazen and represented to me, a very realistic perception of the film among a large number of Indian audiences. One particular detailed criticism that is worth citing, says:

These people (directors, actors) know their audience. They know that the typical judge at a Western Film Festival is a liberal who wants to "Save" countries like India by manufacturing certain type of social change. These movie makers (and actors) know how to play to that gallery. So feminism, gay rights, sexuality, etc. become main themes in their movies – because these are powerful groups in Western media. […] Though teenage Indian boys will no doubt enjoy some scenes in this movie, to the average Indian adult, the movie is nonsensical. Its as if these "Avant Garde wannabe" filmmakers are pissing on India's poverty and sexualizing it and using it to titillate Westerners. They are stereotyping, disrespecting and misrepresenting some of the most defenseless and vulnerable people in the world. […] To me this is stark vulgarity of their greed that is the most prominent feature of every frame in the movie. It is this obscene, cruel, narcissistic, selfish, ultra-capitalism that is the most defining aspect of these movies and such people. [232]

Though this criticism is an audience review, his views provide us valuable insights into conflict of values and perceptions between what he labels as the West and India. The whole premise of his criticism is based on the assumption that, the filmmakers, the actors are making the film in order to please an audience in the West, that issues like feminism, gay rights, sexuality are issues that are pertinent only to the people in the West because India, apparently, doesn't have these problems. Further ahead, he also accuses the filmmakers of portraying and sexualising Indian poverty for materialistic gains. All these issues represent the complexity of the topic at hand and the various nuances that define this problem.

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232   "Indian poverty porn tailor-made for Western Film Festival audience", review by user praveen-96759, accessed on January 25, 2020 under https://www.imdb.com/title/tt3043252/reviews?sort=userRating&dir=asc&ratingFilter=0.

Firstly, the claim that the film is made to appease powerful, liberal lobby groups in the West and the content of the film has less to do with Indian culture and ground realities, couldn't have been more far-fetched. The primary problem here isn't the portrayal of the issue per se but in fact, the portrayal of the issue from the perspective of women – a woman director and three lead actresses. The problem, not only in his eyes but also in the eyes of some other established film critics, is the space that has been dedicated to the issue of feminism, sexuality, emancipation of women over the course of the film and the realistic manner (with neo-realistic influences) of portrayal of these issues. There is nothing unrealistic about a woman in rural India expressing her loneliness, her wish for intimacy or a woman wanting to assert herself and claim a space for herself in the public discourse. These feelings, frustrations and aspirations have always been existent at a subtle level – even in the societal discourse, though they have been largely ignored and not granted the space they deserve because of prevalent notions of societal hierarchy and patriarchy. The filmmaker's realistic treatment of these issues in the film may invoke resistance from a gaze trained and situated deep in patriarchy. This gaze may find the narrative of the film to be misconstrued, unrepresentative of some of the realities in the Indian society since it is not trained to consider the wishes and aspirations of women. This gaze is directed towards women treating them as an object – for observation and for sexual gratification. The critic seems to be missing the point that the narrative focuses on allowing a woman a space to explore her sexuality – irrespective of rich or poor; instead he considers a woman's exploration of her sexuality as equivalent to porn. The filmmaker opts for a role reversal – she chooses not to be the object of a patriarchal gaze anymore but instead, reverses it and places the society under observation. This shifting of the gaze is very uncomfortable for a large part of a traditional, conservative Indian society since the patriarchal society that makes the rules for the existence of a woman, isn't usually used to being questioned by her about those rules. Even within the framework of the film, there are a few instances when the women protagonists reverse the gaze

and ask uncomfortable questions – when Champa questions the decision of being asked to leave the village and go back to an abusive marriage, or when Bijli is having a conversation with Lajjo and Raani about the various swear words and wonder why no one ever thought of using a male relative as an object to project their insults and abuses on.

While the film has strong women leads, it is also noticeable that the none of the men – apart from Kishan and the mystic man – seem to be in a position to deal with any of the women in a respectful manner. These two men are leading the lives of outcasts. Kishan is disrespected by the men in the village for marrying an educated girl who has a voice of her own and probably knows as much, if not more, than most of the men in the village while the women in the village respect him and look up to him as someone who treats them with respect and dignity. The mystic man, on the other hand, seems to have freed himself of any societal connections, while living on the outskirts in a remote cave. As opposed to these two figures, the majority of the men who are a part of the narrative are shown to be conservative and narrow minded and representative of a highly patriarchal societal structure that grants more rights and a higher standing to the men in the society. This representation of only a few men having a respectful attitude when it comes to women, who consider them to be just as human as themselves vs. the men who have a very narrow minded, constricting attitude towards women is, in my opinion, not entirely proportional but nonetheless, representative of some of the broader trends in the Indian society, even today. Though the narrative plays out in a rural context, it can just as well be true even in an urban setup, though the number of men who are exposed to debates and discourses surrounding issues of gender is higher, thus at least setting the ball rolling.

One of the primary questions that I have posed here deals with looking at different ways and means of how identity and cultural conflicts have

been portrayed in the selected films. In *Parched*, the three lead female protagonists are all a part of an *Ensemble* and the film itself an *Ensemblefilm*[233] – both terminologies understood in the sense of the interpretations of Margrit Tröhler. They are all a part of micro-cosmos that originates from the interactions between the protagonists and the contexts they come from. The protagonists in this film are undoubtedly a part of a bigger, overarching conflict arising from issues surrounding gender debates. This narrative isn't even touching upon the series of issues that concern the attitudes of the Indian society to issues like homosexuality and transgender etc. but only scratching beneath the surface of the classic gender divide between men and women. Even then, the deep-rootedness of the problem becomes immediately evident because within the short span of the narrative, it introduces us to a variety of conflicts like the status of a widowed and a childless woman, the status of a girl child, the societal views on issues concerning gender equality in a rural setup – all these conflicts being a part of the bigger problem of gender-based discrimination. The different positions existent in the society concerning gender-based discrimination are so magnanimously polarised, and yet, at the same time so deeply engraved in the minds of the members of the society, including the women themselves. Especially in the case of the women who are a part of this society, it is very interesting to see how they deal with the presence of two very opposing, polarising positions in their individual selves, especially since these thoughts, the consequences of following and practising these thoughts in real life have a huge impact on the life of women. The presence of the two very opposing, polarising ideas in women – one representing a very conservative, hierarchical and unequal positioning of a woman as opposed to a man, wherein she is subservient to him, is largely looked upon as an object without any chance of expressing her thoughts, feelings and her identity defined by her relationship status to a range of men (father, husband,

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233 Margrit Tröhler, "Plurale Figurenkonstellationen" in *Montage /av, Zeitschrift für Theorie und Geschichte audiovisueller Kommunikation, Figur und Perspektive* (1), (Marburg: Schüren Verlag, 2006), 101.

son etc.) and the other one representing a very liberal, non-linear, non-hierarchical positioning of a woman in the societal setup allowing her the space to self-determine, to assert herself – leaves a huge vacuum in the middle, leaving an ample space for the woman to self-determine but at the same time, also mounts a high pressure on her to make a call and in worst cases, probably let the other go.

In the case of the leading women figures, for the major part of the film, they are seen to be in this space of vacuum, stuck between the two opposite ways of life for a woman. On the one hand, their thought processes, their responses to situations are firmly rooted in the conservative, traditional attitude towards woman, including their readiness to turn a blind eye to injustice being done to other women. On the other hand, their inner instinct is increasingly drawn to a more liberal view on things, including taking a stand for themselves and being assertive, exercising the right to self-determination and calling out the perpetrators of sexual abuse. In some situations, their internal conflict which is situated in the vacuum-like place between the two opposite thought processes becomes evident. For instance, in the sequence where Gulab forces himself on a young Janaki out of a sense of marital entitlement or when he starts abusing her for confronting him about the missing money, Raani chooses to walk away from the situation or turn a deaf ear towards it. At the same time, in both instances, we can see her internal struggle to do something the situation. The difference between the first and the second situation is that while she walks away from the situation the first time, the second time around, after trying to turn a deaf ear to the happenings around her for a while, she chooses to meddle in the situation and protect her young daughter-in-law. This response is a significantly different response than what she has known as a standard response, partly also through her own experience which she narrates earlier on in the film. In a similar situation with her husband, her mother-in-law had not only not saved her from the violence but had also normalised it saying that this is normal in a marriage. Across the entire span of the film, the protagonists are trying to strike a balance between

two opposing ends of the thought spectrum surrounding them and find a position somewhere in between. It is a mix of conservative thought and it allows them to continue to be a part of the community they are living in while also granting them the space to become more independent, self-reliant and to carve a place for themselves.

Sudhir Kakar, an Indian scholar of cultural psychology, describes this variant of a conflict that an Indian woman goes through often by describing her feeling of being torn psychologically, of being caught in a crossfire between different ideologies – one representing traditional ideas about an ideal Indian woman while the other representing the necessity to save women from the clutches of the first one; all this while attempting to combine traditional ideals with modern goals[234]. While being caught in this crossfire, the two opposing ideologies being represented by the local men, including Manoj, Gulab, etc. in the village and by the likes of Kishan, Naobi, even Bijli to a large extent, Lajjo and Raani, accompanied by Janaki to a certain extent, are trying to find a golden midway path. Them working with Kishan in the cooperative is one such step.

Towards the end of the narrative though, it seems that they are approaching a point of no return – their shift to the different side of the spectrum, namely to the liberal one, is complete. Considering these shifts in the identities of the leading female protagonists, how they have changed their perceptions about how they see themselves, it is evident that all these women have undergone tremendous identity conflicts over the course of the film.

The issue of portrayal of cultural conflicts goes hand-in-hand with the issue of the identity conflicts. Going not only by the societal contexts that they are placed in but also going by their own responses to a number of situations, I would argue that Raani, Lajjo and Bijli are protagonists who have an open understanding of culture. If we were to merely go by the

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234   Sudhir Kakar: *Die Inder. Porträt einer Gesellschaft*, (München: Beck Verlag, 2006), 47.

societal context that they have been placed in and their unquestioned following of the norms that have been imposed upon them, it would have been more logical to place their understanding as a closed understanding of culture. But, in spite of the societal contexts and the social hierarchy that they are a part of, the three women seem to have a far better understanding of terms like own and foreign. To cite a concrete example – if Raani was someone with a closed understanding of culture, then, in her eyes, Bijli would have to be an outsider, someone who represents the *Other* and is not welcome in the village. Instead, in spite of the numerous ups and downs that their relationship endures – within and beyond the scope of the film (beyond, since they also bring up memories from the past), Raani and Bijli have a solid friendship. A friendship that survives on the principle of accepting each other, of acknowledging the existence of a space where a dialogue can take place. If we look at Lajjo, her fascination and admiration for Naobi and Kishan, both considered to be *Others* because of their liberal leanings, interest in emancipation of women and education for women, speaks volumes not only about her curiosity about the *Other*, but also her acceptance of the *Other*. Bijli, through the choice of her profession, is already someone who is considered to be an outcast by most of the society enough. Surprisingly, the men who condone her presence in the village are the same people who go and watch her dance. Quite different from the other two women, Bijli is an antithesis of everything that the village community would consider to be an ideal woman – she is brash and outspoken, she is not married, sex and sexuality is a part of her everyday life. Irrespective of the life she has chosen for herself, she is still very good friends with Raani and Lajjo because they both treat her as a human first. Practically speaking, she is actually living the life of the *Other* from the perspective of Lajjo and Raani. Her brazen approach to life represents the *Other* that the other two women are unfamiliar with but find exciting. Together, all three of them evolve over the course of the film while overcoming insults, misunderstandings, conflicts amongst themselves and move towards a point where they have an extended, comprehensive understanding

of culture. Their identity structure has become more fluid, less hierarchical meaning they haven't completely stopped being the women they used to be but have now found ways to ultimately let go of a lot of older bondages that held them back, and replace them with new thought processes, new plans instead. The concrete manifestations of this can be seen in the last sequence of the film when the women, who have cut their hair to really short, are now travelling without their heads covered, taking a path never travelled before while making plans of living in the city and earning a living for themselves. Does it mean that the women completely let go of the women they used to be? The answer is no. Because the friendships that they have forged while being those women, the experiences that they gathered together in that time have made them the people they are and hence however their appearances, their thought processes may change, the experiences that led them there will never cease to exist. What will cease to exist though, are the thoughts and adherence to repressive practises that they were a victim of and also a part of. When Raani happily allows Janaki to leave and lead a happy life, it is a moment of magnanimous proportions since Raani is freeing herself and by consequence, also Janaki, from a cycle of perpetual abuse. They carry the relationship forward into their new respective lives, but not the regressive practises that led them to getting to know each other in the first place.

Though the film plays in rural India, the story it narrates of repression, of abuse and normalising of the abuse, of a prejudiced, hierarchical society can be considered to be representative of large sections of the Indian society – irrespective of their urban/rural nature. In my opinion, the biggest difference between the rural and the urban setup is the factor of increasingly more women being aware of their rights and exercising them in urban areas. Even then, as Sudhir Kakar observes, the traditions and patriarchal hegemony in the Indian society has influenced and continues to influence the psyche of Indian women even today. They continue to consider their duties towards their family and children as the central characters of their identities – irrespective of if they are housewives or working women. The

traditional norms that dictate the roles of a woman – firstly her responsibility towards her children and then towards her husband – are independent of the educational and the working status of a woman[235].

Considering that two of the central research questions focus on allotted social identities and the emergence of a quintessential Indian together, this film provides a lot of insights into an intersection that focuses on the emergence of an image of a quintessential Indian woman which goes beyond the urban-rural divide. The traditional norms, which seem to have a far bigger influence on the lives of women in a rural setup continue to make their presence felt even in urban centres – in varying degrees. The degree and nature of discrimination that the women are subjected to may vary based on their other social identities like caste, religion etc. and give rise to intersectional patterns of discrimination, but regardless of any other social identity but that of gender, an element of discrimination is always there.

The primary segregation of a society as men and women and the prevalent positioning of a woman at a lower rung plays a decisive role in the facilitation of systemic discrimination against women. In this regard, her sexual identity, which can also be considered to be an allotted identity, is her primary identity that often contributes to victimising her. This victimisation often plays an important and a decisive role in influencing her openness towards other cultural models that allow her to explore other aspects of her personality, in addition to or in lieu of her gender identity. In this context, one can safely say that an increasing number of women are resisting and rejecting the societal tendency to construct the identity of a woman primarily based on her gender and instead striving for a broader approach, a rhizomatic construction of their identity.

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235   Sudhir Kakar: *Die Inder. Porträt einer Gesellschaft* (München: Beck Verlag, 2006), 70.

4.2.3   Caste-based identity conflicts: *Article 15* (2019)

The most recent film to be considered in this thesis is the Anubhav Sinha-directed film *Article 15*, released in 2019. The title draws its inspiration from Article 15 in the Constitution of Independent India that was officially adopted by the Constituent Assembly on the November 26, 1949 and came into force on January 26, 1950. It falls under Part III of the Constitution which deals with the fundamental rights of the citizens of India. The article is divided in 5 sub-articles (the last two were inserted through constitutional amendments in 1951 and 2005 respectively) and states:

(1) The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them.

(2) No citizen shall, on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them, be subject to any disability, liability, restriction or condition with regard to—

(a) access to shops, public restaurants, hotels and places of public entertainment; or

(b) the use of wells, tanks, bathing ghats, roads and places of public resort maintained wholly or partly out of State funds or dedicated to the use of the general public.

(3) Nothing in this article shall prevent the State from making any special provision for women and children.

(4) Nothing in this article or in clause (2) of article 29 shall prevent the State from making any special provision for the advancement of any socially and educationally backward classes of citizens or for the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes.

(5) Nothing in this article or in sub-clause (g) of clause (1) of article 19 shall prevent the State from making any special provision, by law, for the advancement of any socially and educationally backward classes of citizens or for the Scheduled Castes or the Scheduled Tribes in so far as such special provisions relate to their admission to educational institutions including private educational institutions, whether aided or unaided by the State, other than the minority educational institutions referred to in clause (1) of article 30.[236]

The presence of this Article in the Indian constitution is largely for two reasons:

- To ensure social justice to historically marginalised and vulnerable people and communities – like people from lower castes, women, etc. and to keep a check on the discriminatory actions that may be undertaken by the state or an individual. This right is an enforceable right, i.e. the state or an individual in violation of this article can be coerced into respecting this right of an individual or a community by means of legal remedy. Any Indian citizen can approach the Supreme Court under Article 32 for the enforcement of Fundamental Rights.
- To ensure equal treatment to members of all religious communities, irrespective of their religious beliefs. This provision was particularly important in the wake of the Partition of India since one of the countries that was created as a result of this partition, Pakistan, was based on Islamic principles. Since the newly created Indian state had distanced itself from endorsing any religion as its official religion, the state also needed to ensure the protection of religious minorities, including a sizeable population of Muslims. (In

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236   "The Constitution of India", accessed on January 29, 2020 under https://www.india.gov.in/sites/upload_files/npi/files/coi_part_full.pdf.

addition to Article 15, the presence of Article 25 further ensures the individual freedom of religion).

Both these reasons that contributed to the necessity and the insertion of the Article 15 have repeatedly proven to be valid reasons and legitimised the existence of Article 15.

The film *Article 15* can be considered to be a dark commentary on the socio-political issues that are key in today's India. It plays in rural Uttar Pradesh and revolves around the personal journey of revelations and discoveries of an IPS officer – Ayaan Ranjan. The narrative has strong references to two real-life incidents that took place in India between 2014 and 2016 – the Badayun/ Badaun Rape case in 2014 and the Una flogging incident in 2016. Considering the repeated references to real-life incidents and references to today's Uttar Pradesh, the filmmaker does justice to the film by shooting it in a neo-realistic manner. Before jumping into the character and film analysis, it is very important to familiarise ourselves with the broader thematic contexts that define the course of the narrative and grant the narrative it's unique texture.

As Poulomi Das wrote in her review, the film combines two different stories[237]. One story focuses on 'how far-removed the everyday functioning of India is from the fundamental rights posited in our Constitution' while the second story is about 'a police procedural, that investigates the collusion of the police force in the brutal gang-rape and murder of two lower-caste minor girls whose bodies are found hanging from a tree'. In other words, the two stories make the narrative a whole and represent the micro and the meta-level of the caste conflict. The micro-level it is represented by the immediate investigation of the case surrounding the rape and murder of young Dalit girls (three are raped while two are murdered; one is missing) while the meta-level represents the broader context and the nature

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237   "Article 15: a necessary movie on caste discrimination that lands punches on upper class guilt", arre.co.in, accessed on October 9, 2022 under https://www.arre.co.in/bollywood/article-15-review-caste-ayushmann-khurrana-anubhav-sinha-dalits.

of the caste conflict, the way it manifests itself in India in spite of the constitutional mechanisms that look at abolishing and uprooting the practise altogether. Both these sub-narratives contain in them a series of other issues which define the course of how each of the sub-narrative evolves. The meta-level has a number of examples and references about how some of the protagonists in the film are live examples of failures of the system in spite of constitutional provisions. They highlight how far-fetched the prospect of realising fundamental rights, as envisioned in the constitution, is for members of the lower castes. Jatav, Nishad and Gaura share their own stories; Nishad brings up how, because of his naivety of actually believing that he and his people will be treated equally by the state, they have been consistently at the receiving end of the failure of state policy. If someone else protests, they are warned; if he protests, he becomes a threat to national security. Gaura, who had the chance of becoming a beneficiary of a state-run scheme by becoming a cook to provide mid-day meals to children, had to leave because no child in the school would eat the food she cooked because of her lower caste. Jatav, on the other hand, is someone who has made his way into the system, even has a job that allows him to be a part of the state apparatus, but somehow, is still at the receiving end of the arrogance that his other upper caste colleagues feel towards him. The sub-narrative thus manages to introduce the audience to ways in which the discrimination manifests itself – how the state treats dissent, especially from the lower classes, as a threat to national security, how the society, irrespective of the successful tools that the state uses to fight caste-based discrimination ensures its failure by refusing to treat members of the lower castes as equal citizens.

At the micro-level, the sub-narrative focuses on the apathy of the police system responsible for maintenance of local peace and order towards the plight of the lower classes. The film highlights the lack of political will and inefficiency of democratic and constitutional remedies that ensure a fair treatment of the citizens irrespective of their caste affiliations. The lower castes, in spite of being a sizeable population in the country, continue

to be categorically ill- treated by the different organs of the judiciary, executive and legislature. The issues being highlighted by both the sub-narratives bear resemblance to the current political system in the country. The resemblance is noticeable through references of political attempts to diffuse the unrest among the lower castes by trying to shift the attention to the so-called real enemy – the Muslims. These references go hand-in-hand with a gross misrepresentation of Hindus being a singular, monolithic structure, including the Dalits and by suppressing the realities about discrimination by the upper castes against the lower castes. Furthermore, the uncanny resemblance that the characters in the film bear to real life politicians like Yogi Adityanath[238], including their controversial divisive politics or publicity gimmicks like eating at the house of a Dalit[239], the references to political parties, their untrustworthiness when it comes to Dalit rights and how they are more interested in securing votes, rather than actually do much for the betterment of the Dalits – all of them are unfortunate realities of the Indian society and politics.

The narrative is typically chronological and linear, with notable exceptions of the moments when Ayaan is reconstructing some of the incidents to understand the chain of events as may have happened. Though Ayaan is the central character, characters like Jatav, Brahmadatt, Gaura, Nishad, Chandrabhaan and Nihal Singh, make a decisive contribution in influencing Ayaan's world view and his understanding of India. They are all instrumental in shaping his world view through the various interactions among themselves and with Ayaan. The importance of these characters is independent of the actual time they are shown on the screen and has more to

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238 Yogi Adityanath (born as Ajay Mohan Bisht) is the current Chief Minister of the North Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. He is a member of the BJP and also the Head Priest or *Mahant* of the Gorakhpur Math, a Hindu temple and is known to be have right-wing populistic political beliefs.

239 "What's being cooked for Yogi Adityanath in Dalit homes?", dailyo.in, accessed on January 29, 2020 under https://www.dailyo.in/politics/yogi-adityanath-up-by-poll-results-dalits-rajnath-singh-bjp-mayawati-akhilesh-yadav/story/1/23765.html.

do with their presence and thoughts that they share with Ayaan in key moments or the way they respond to certain situations, in which Ayaan is only an audience. It must be borne in mind since these characters do assume an important role, no matter how brief, over the course of the film and help Ayaan decode the complex cacophony of symbols and social codes around him. However, Ayaan is the sole Hero in this narrative while the other figures are secondary figures. It is also imperative to note that the film employs the use of extremely strong rhetoric, in order to address the issues of caste discrimination. Though the use of language and rhetoric is central to any motion picture, films like this depend strongly on word play and the choice of words being used to describe a particular problem and even highlight the societal standing of the marginalised communities. The interrogation into the Hero's journey here is a very interesting process for multiple reasons. The *Texture* of the narrative here is such that there are a lot of elements at a sub-text level, which hint at '*Other*'ing of a particular group without explicitly mentioning it. The uniqueness of the narrative is also rooted in the fact that the role of a mentor here is assumed by the Indian constitution and not a person. These parameters make the inquiry a rewarding process since it draws our attention to new facets of the Film Text.

Limited Awareness of the problem/ Ordinary World (0:01:57): The opening sequence of the film is extremely powerful in its imagery (IMG. 79 – IMG. 84). It begins with a group of people singing a song while taking temporary shelter from torrential rains. The song being sung is in the tradition of folk songs highlighting the disparities between the lives of the rich and powerful and the poor and helpless in India. The following sequence portrays two girls getting abused in a moving bus. Momentary flashes of a bust of Ambedkar, a large vehicle making its way – first through wide roads then moving into the country terrain, a brief glimpse of one of the most iconic works by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, a freedom

fighter and the first prime minister of India, a book named *The Discovery of India*[240].

All these images, along with the messages they convey – especially the song, within the first five minutes of the film introduce the audience to the vast range of complex issues that set the framework within which the narrative will evolve – the extreme disparities between the rich and the poor, the importance of the power equation between the powerful and the powerless, violence and abuse against girls and women, the idea of a developed India being complemented by the *Discovery of India* – the book being suggested as a tool to help the protagonist understand the finer details of the things he will witness – and the complex issues that lie beneath the surface of the illusive notion of a developed country in modern times. Additionally, the two different colour schemes and musical scores that have been used to display the stark contrast between the two different worlds, the rural and the urban setup have a very strong impact. The scenes describing the dark times are actually colour graded to much darker and deeper, greyer colour tones while the shots portraying day-to-day life, going about at its own pace, are the ones which are shot in lighter colour tones. The music used in the background is also representative of two very distinct milieus in the Indian society. While two scores are used in the rural setup, one of them being the folk song and the other one being a ghastly, eerie background music being used to describe the intensity of what is happening to the girls, a score by Bob Dylan is employed to describe Ayaan's journey. The lyrics of this song, *How many roads must a man walk down, before you call him a man*[241], can also be considered to be representative of the struggles that Ayaan is going through, which become evident at a later stage. It is this journey of self-realisation that helps Ayaan discover his true persona.

The opening sequence is followed by Ayaan's initial interactions with his colleagues and his introduction to how deep-rooted the problem of caste is. His associate Chandrabhan, while referring to *Ramayana*, narrates

240   Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, (New Delhi: Signet Press, 1946).
241   Bob Dylan, "Blowin' in the wind" in *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*, by Bob Dylan, 1963.

him a story from the folklore saying that when *Ram* returned to Ayodhya after 14 years of exile, some communities which had lit up their houses in order to welcome him, chose to not burn the lights after a storm blew them out, instead staying in darkness in order to brighten up the palace of the king. As they are passing through a village, he finds out from his associates that it is a Pasi village, a community whose traditional occupation is rearing pigs and he is advised to not even consider standing in the shadows of 'these' low caste people, leave aside coming in contact with them or accepting water from them. When an amused Ayaan tells his friend about this encounter, bewildered how these things can still happen in India, she draws his attention to how these practises were a part of their day-to-day lives even in the cities. She reminds him that it is not until recently, that even in their city households, the maids were served food in different plates. On arrival to his posting, he is introduced to his associates – Chandrabhan, Brahmdatt Singh, Nihal Singh, Kisan Jatav and Mayank. At his arrival party, he notices a group of people, scared but persistent, asking to talk to someone. When he enquires, Brahmadatt mumbles something about *These people are back again* and walks over to drive them away.

The narrative here, just like in the case of the other films, is rife with references that go well beyond the scope of the primary plot. The references here, especially considering the nature and the rigidity of the issue at hand, are very important in order to understand the omnipresence of caste and caste affiliations, its implications in anyone's daily routine in India. What may have appeared to Ayaan to be a very clear differentiation between rural and urban India, however briefly - that rural India is still heavily under the influence of the caste system and that in urban India, one would not find this issue to be this present, the perception is immediately quashed by Aditi's reminder. The pervasiveness and omnipresence of caste in India is independent of rural or urban settings – only the form and degree to which it manifests itself are different. While in rural India, it may be a practise to just drive through lower caste villages, in urban India, people from the lower castes are allocated different utensils, so the higher castes

don't get defiled by coming in contact with the supposed inauspicious touch of the lower castes.

During his welcome party, when he notices a group of people, cowered, scared but persistent, he asks Brahmadatt about who they are. Brahmadatt's response carries a very clear message of distancing and disregarding them. He refers to them as *These people* – a seemingly harmless way of describing someone, but in reality, the description and the choice of words hint to a clear distancing and hierarchy between the two parties who are a part of the conversation. Brahmadatt drives *these people* away by discrediting them for coming to the police for 'small' things like missing girls.

Increased awareness, need for change/ Call to Adventure (0:16:05): The next phase of Ayaan becoming familiar and acutely aware of the complicated social context around him begins in the early morning hours the next day. The sequence shows Ayaan, along with his officers walking through a haze to a crime scene. As the fog disappears, it turns out that two of the three missing girls have been found dead, hanging from a tree. Brahmadatt says that the villagers have been talking about rumours of a same-sex relationship between the two girls who were cousins and that the third girl is missing. Ayaan is visibly disturbed and gets into an argument, first with Aditi when she is loudly wondering why these cases don't make it to the big headlines in the country and if it is because they are Dalits. This is then followed by an argument with his subordinates about their lack of seriousness and empathy in taking *these* people seriously. When the two girls are brought to a local government hospital for post-mortem, it turns out that the case will be handled by Dr. Malti Ram. When Brahmadatt finds out, he responds in a sarcastic tone hailing Dr. Ambedkar while referring to Dr. Ram's caste. His mutterings to himself provide the audience with a hint that he might be familiar with the perpetrator when he says that by hanging the girls, 'he' has provided food and poster material for the media. The sequence that follows portrays Brahmadatt's attempts at misleading the media and Ayaan as he places the blame on bad influences, available via mobile phones these days and in an undertone, appears to be legitimising the fate

of the girls for what happened to them by placing the blame on their families, who may have killed them to uphold their honour in the light of 'suspected' homosexuality. He also tells Ayaan that the post-mortem will yield nothing new apart from a confirmation of the honour killings. The narrative takes a new turn when the sister of the missing girl, Gaura, and the fathers of the two dead girls turn up at Ayaan's place, insisting on talking to him. They say that they would have taken their daughters back if someone had just abused them and left them, that they would at least be alive. Gaura draws Ayaan's attention to the fact that Anshu Naharia, a contractor in the village, had slapped Pooja, her sister because she had asked for a raise of three rupees in her daily wage – she wanted to earn INR 28 (approx. 0.39 $) instead of INR 25 (approx. 0.34 $). On being refused a raise in her wage, she and some other children left the job.

At this stage, the broader topics start revealing themselves clearly and evolving into a clearer framework within which the narrative will be placed. One of the most pressing issues that is being addressed here is the cross-section of discrimination against women of lower caste, and also to a certain extent, homosexual women. In modern times, this kind of discrimination, originating at an intersection of multiple social and political identities, combined with gender, is known as Intersectionality. The concept, first used by the lawyer and civil rights activist Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, has its roots in Black Feminism movement and focussed on the overlaps that exist when it comes to discrimination against women. Crenshaw used the metaphor of a traffic signal to describe the concept of intersectionality:

> Consider an analogy to traffic in an intersection, coming and going in all four directions. Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars travelling from any number of directions, and sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in an intersection, her injury could result from sex discriminiation or race

discrimination […] But it is not always easy to reconstruct an accident: Sometimes the skid marks and the injuries simply indicate that they occurred simultaneously, frustrating efforts to determine which driver caused the harm.[242]

When we consider this line of argument and apply it to women from lower castes in India, we realise that there are a lot of synergies and thematic overlaps that allow us to draw similar observations. To rephrase Crenshaw, 'if a lower caste woman is harmed, her injury could result from sex discrimination or caste discrimination (or both and/or notions of cultural superiority).' In the context of this film, the intersectionality manifests itself through the young girls representing a unique combination of being a girl from a lower caste and with suspected homosexuality, thus allegedly leading to a honour killing. Though the girls' characters are either dead or absent from the narrative in terms of their physical presence, their story, revolving around the reasons for their absentia, has a huge bearing on the narrative. The three broad problems that this cross section represents – problems of gender inequality (and sexuality), problems of caste-based discrimination and violence and problems surrounding resistance to modernity (in this case - notions of a modern, equal society and acceptance of different sexual orientation beyond the binary) will continue to influence the way the characters evolve.

Fear or resistance to change/ refusal of the call (0:34:45): This phase in the evolution of Ayaan's character is probably the longest since it makes him acutely aware of the multiple power structures, societal norms he is taking on and running the danger of disturbing the status quo. All the events taking place in this phase have the potential of scaring an individual and pushing him into being a follower and a silent spectator of the system in place. Though Ayaan emerges from this phase more determined than before to

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242 Kimberlé William Cranshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," in *University of Chicago Legal Forum. Vol. 1989: Iss. 1, Article 8*, 149.

take on the system, for a long time he is either being ignorant towards some realities like Brahmadatt's guilt or plainly scared of taking on the powerful people who have a stake in the case. I will just highlight the major events in this phase in order to understand the deeper contexts contributing to them. They can be summed up as: Ayaan's ignorance to the possibility of Brahmadatt being an accomplice to the crime and his close ties with the suspect Anshu Naharia, the general apathy of the state apparatus towards the issues of the lower castes, the different aspects to the personality of Brahmadatt that define his dynamics with Dr. Malati Ram, Ayaan and the other associates, and lastly, the arrival of the character of Nishad on the scene.

To begin with, Ayaan has been ignorant of the possibility of Brahmadatt and even his associates being accomplices to the committed crime. Being a part of the system, it takes him a while to figure out that the system, that is supposed to be safeguarding the interests of the most vulnerable sections of the society, is itself responsible either for committing the crimes against them or facilitating them by turning a blind eye. This apathy and disinterest makes its presence known in this sequence at multiple junctures - in the form of strong-arming the dead girls' fathers to give false testimony and confess to a crime they didn't commit, hints that Nihal and Brahmadatt may actually be a part of the crime, commentary by Jatav, himself a member of a lower caste, when he talks about the horrible living conditions of people from the lower castes and how no one cares about it. Last but not least, it also portrays the incident of a public flogging of men from the Dalit community, for allegedly attempting to enter a temple.

In this phase, the character of Nishad is introduced into the narrative, though he appears on the screen much later. He is a young Dalit political leader, heading an outfit called the *Bhim Sangharsh Sena* or Bhim's military – the term Bhim here being a reference to Dr. Bhimrao aka Babasaheb Ambedkar. It is an outfit which appears to be very influential in the rural context and their struggle for justice is starting to unravel itself through many ways – be it the attack on the police vehicle for strong arming the

dead girl's fathers and other villagers into giving false testimony or be it the appeal to all the Dalit communities in the area to go on a strike when three young Dalit men are beaten up by the men of a religious political leader, for allegedly trying to enter a temple.

The character of Brahmadatt can be considered to be representative of a particular section of the society. Deeply conservative, this section of the society also considers itself to be placed over the others by virtue of belonging to an upper caste and consider themselves to be entitled to benefits (not just monetary but also social). Most importantly, people from this section of the society are themselves a part of the system, those who keep the system running the way it does, allowing some people to come out on the top while leaving the others at the bottom of the ladder. Speaking strictly in terms of the film, Brahmadatt's character is seen to be utterly disappointed when Dr. Malati Ram doesn't give in to his pressure and insists on entering multiple rape in her autopsy report. He reminds her not just of her position in the food chain, hers' being at the lower most rung of the ladder (woman + lower caste) but also reminds his subordinate that it is because of 'generous' people like them that 'these' backward class people are now in a position of having access to education. At a later stage, when the investigation is starting to yield results by giving hints about the probable location of the third missing girl, Brahmadatt yet again, tries to intimidate Ayaan, his superior by employing the support of a high-ranking regional politician.

This very brief sequence, keeping in line with the theory of intersectionality, exposes the various spheres of power and the intersecting modes of oppression at play here – politics, not strictly in terms of executive power but more in terms of societal power dynamics, gender and caste. The intersectionality of the various categories used as basis to discriminate will be very relevant at multiple points over the course of the narrative, since various protagonists are represented by different intersections while also placing the perpetrators in one or more spheres of power. The characters of Dr. Malti Ram, the three girls who have been raped and abused,

Gaura can be placed at the intersection of all the three spheres of power – they have no political rights or any space in the political sphere, they are the weak link in the power chain because of their gender and their caste. They are all victims in some or the other form as a result of this intersectionality. Nishad can be placed at the intersection between politics and caste since his political rights and aspirations are heavily compromised because of his caste – it is a vicious circle of causality. Because he has no political rights, he is unable to bring about changes for members of his caste and because of his caste, he has no political rights. Jatav, himself a cop and not a direct victim of oppression, still can be placed at the intersection of politics and caste since in spite of him apparently having a space in the political setup, his caste will always come in the way of his progress. The oppression he faces is somewhat similar to Nishad, just at a different level. On the other hand, the characters of Ayaan, Brahmadatt, Anshu Naharia can be placed at the intersection of politics, gender and caste. All the three spheres of power place them at a preferential position through their gender and caste affiliation. In the context of this film, it is not only important to understand the intersectionality of the victims and the reasons behind the violence perpetrated against them but also the intersectionality of the perpetrators themselves. Though Ayaan tries to free himself of this power equation over the course of the film, we cannot overlook the fact that his placement at the most influential intersection of power, caste and gender also helps him in finding out solutions for the problems faced by the victims. Brahmadatt, being an accomplice in upholding the system meting out injustice to members of the lower caste, tries to warn Ayaan of the dangerous territory he is treading and that his prodding around may disturb the 'balance'.

One of the key scenes in the entire film takes place in this phase in Ayaan's journey – frustrated at everyone around him bringing up their caste affiliations at every possible opportunity, Ayaan rounds up all his colleagues and asks them about their castes, about who is placed higher in the hierarchy, who is more superior/ inferior than whom, who can or cannot touch

whom, who can share food and who can't. Unsuspecting of Ayaan's frustration, they all give him honest answers on how they understand and live their social hierarchy, even at work. Though this is a very brief sequence, it draws the audiences' attention to one key detail – that disclosing one's full name to someone is as good as leaving behind a visiting card with very important social markers in India. One's name discloses the caste affiliation, class, religion and that, at the outset, is enough for people to place one at a particular level in the social hierarchy.

This sequence is also very rich at a lyrical level, especially at two points. The first part portrays the fathers of the two dead girls, carrying their dead bodies home on a cart drawn by a cycle. The background score that plays here is a folk song, traditionally sung at the seeing-off or *Vidaai* of a daughter after her wedding, when she is about to leave her parent's home and set out on a new journey with her husband. In the context of this sequence, the usage of this song serves a different purpose. The fathers are bidding goodbye to their daughters because they are leaving their parent's home and setting out on a new journey – only in this case, they will never return.

The second point at which a vivid narrative takes over is when a message being circulated on WhatsApp, probably composed by Nishad, is being read out loud in the background while the visuals focus on Ayaan's convoy snaking its way through the darkness. The message puts together the dependency of the society on the lower castes, who do all the work no one else wants to do like manual scavenging, burning off the corpses, physical labour in the farms, etc. while the accompanying visuals present the utter hopelessness that Nishad and other people from the lower castes experience. When translated, the message reads something like:

You and I are invisible to them, though they depend entirely on us.

We work on their farmlands, we clean up their shit.

We deliver their babies, we burn their corpses on funeral pyres.

Now we are done begging for justice, we have begged for it too long.

Stop working now!

For any audience, even slightly familiar with Indian affairs, this message holds a tremendous appeal, since every word of it is true. It captures the very essence of the Indian society – on the one hand the dependency of the society on the lower castes for getting a large chunk of work done, while at the same time the aversion to granting them rights and humane treatment.

Overcoming fear/ Meeting the mentor (0:59:30): This phase begins with a conversation in the film between Ayaan and Aditi. As a consequence of the protest in the form of a strike by the Dalits, garbage has been dumped into the premises of the police station and other government offices. Disturbed by the attitude of the people around him and their pretence of normalcy, he calls up Aditi. He expresses his inability to understand a system where young girls can be raped and lose their lives for asking a raise of three rupees. He also brings up a strong feeling of disillusionment since while he was living abroad, he would often blindly praise, glorify India in front of foreigners without understanding the complexities of the problems here. He insists though, that this disillusionment has in no way affected his pride in being an Indian; instead, it has offered him a chance to 'unmess' the mess by creating different approaches, different thinking patterns if one wishes to solve the problems that plague the society for centuries. This process of thinking out aloud, articulating his thoughts in a concrete manner enable him to overcome his fear. Additionally, it also motivates him to look for solutions that he can start implementing at a personal level and not necessarily wait for the system to bring about the change.

In a significant change as compared to the other films, Ayaan's mentor is not a person but the Indian constitution itself. As a statement of his true

allegiance, he gets a copy of the Article 15 from the Indian constitution and hangs it in front of his office to make his position and resolve absolutely clear. The song *Vande Mataram*[243] (Hail thee motherland), in an obvious reference to the independence struggle, is used to affirm the importance of this moment – it signifies the aspiration to gain independence from oppressive powers. This time around, the oppressive power structures are internal as opposed to the British colonisers during the Independence struggle. This step, again in contrast to the other examples, unravels the *Want* and the *Need* of the protagonist simultaneously. By committing himself to the principles as set out in the Indian constitution, not only has Ayaan confirmed his commitment to the short-term goal, his *Want* which is to find the third missing girl and strive to get justice for all of them without giving in to any intimidation while also unravelling the bigger *Need*. The *Need* here is not merely to get justice for the victims but to start bringing about a fundamental change in the thinking patterns of people around him, asking them uncomfortable questions, which push them to look inwards and face the reality. His pursuit of the *Want* and the *Need* go hand-in-hand as opposed to the other films where the protagonist's *Want* becomes visible early on and the *Need* presents itself only at an advanced stage.

Committing to change/ crossing the threshold (1:04:01): Over the next few sequences, the narrative starts to unravel at two levels and represents an increased commitment on Ayaan's part to the change he intends to see in the society around him. The investigation into the rape and murder of the girls progresses and exposes deeper relations between the perpetrator and the police machinery. When Ayaan interrogates Anshu Naharia about his possible role in the crime, while rejecting any allegations against him in the crime under investigation, he also justifies slapping Pooja for asking a raise

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243 *Vande Mataram* or *Bande Mataram* is a Bengali poem written by the noted author Bankim Chandra Chatterjee in the 1870s in his book *Anandmath*. The song pays tribute to the motherland and became an iconic song during the Indian independence struggle.

in her daily wage. According to him, if *these* people are not made aware of their standing in the societal structure, things will go awry and the society will descend into anarchy. When questioned about who assigns them this standing in the society, Anshu responds saying that it is the standing that is granted to them by the upper castes and political leaders.

Simultaneously, at another level, a meta conflict is shown evolving which bears uncanny resemblance to current day politics, not just in Uttar Pradesh but also in India. The sequence portrays a political rally in the light of the upcoming elections where a Hindu Right-Wing political party (evident through the colour scheme, the designations chosen to represent the leading figure, etc.) is trying to appease Dalit and other lower-caste voters. In this process, they have tied hands with a local Dalit leader and stage a meal together. At the political rally, the Mahant (or a priest) addresses his audience by drawing their attention to their Hindu identity, while consciously neglecting the issue of discrimination against lower castes and mob- lynching of the young men. He also appeals to them to recognise the 'true' need of the hour – if they want to save the Hindu religion, then the Hindus need to unite beyond the caste barriers. However inclusive this approach may seem at first glance, the reality of Indian politics tells a different tale. Most political parties, including the ones led by Dalits or leaders from other lower castes, have often and repeatedly failed to deliver on their promises of addressing the issues of inequality and discrimination. Though some progress has been made in form of affirmative action, most of the political parties have realised that keeping the Dalit vote bank intact is crucial for their existence and in order to achieve this, more than often, they have delivered just the bare minimum in terms of their promises while failing to deliver on the bigger societal issues pertaining caste domination. It is also very important to remind ourselves here that the group of people belonging to lower castes aren't uniform and free of hierarchies. Even amongst the lower castes, there is a strong hierarchy (as Jatav mentions in the sequence before – he is a Dalit, from a shoemakers' caste *Chamar* but considers himself to be much higher than the pig rearing caste of the *Pasi*).

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It is necessary to acknowledge this fact because even if the affirmative action has had measurable impact (strictly speaking in terms of statistics) and contributed to a higher representation from the lower castes in all spheres of public life in India, it is yet again the select few castes – higher amongst the lower castes, which are well represented.

Though both the aforementioned sequences represent two different levels of the same narrative, they are strongly interconnected because of the existent power equations. The political party in power close to Anshu Naharia is trying to meddle in the outcome of the investigation, almost to affirm Anshu's belief that the lower castes and women can only rise up to a certain position which the men and the upper castes allow. This interference also reinstates his belief that only the issues that the political and societal powers consider worthy of investigation will be pursued and probed. The other issue of political alliances in pursuance of power appears to be the other end of the spectrum since it outwardly offers the lower caste representative a place in the political discourse at an equal footing. The one represents the abuse of power, the other political manipulation – the recipient in both the cases being the common man from a lower caste.

Experimenting with the new conditions/ Tests, Allies, Enemies (1:08:25): True to the description of this phase, this juncture in the narrative reveals Ayaan's allies and enemies. Ayaan turns to a number of people who will turn out to be important allies for him – not just to solve this case but also to instil confidence among people, that he is now committed to the change he envisages. He turns to Dr. Malati Ram and motivates her to help him put the real perpetrators behind bars. Eventually she confirms that the DNA samples found on the girls match the DNA of Anshu. Ayaan turns to a local journalist to get the news out that Anshu is a prime suspect. His biggest ally, though, emerges in Nishad. The character of Nishad not only serves the function of an inspiring ally but can also be considered as a mentor who points Ayaan in the right direction in his pursuit of his *Need*. Their first and only interaction, which takes place inside an abandoned school, is one of the key moments in the film. Nishad, who was one of the

brightest children in the class, is now in hiding, out on bail. When one of Ayaan's associates Mayank questions Nishad about why he has become so negative, Nishad draws his attention to the different treatment meted out to him as opposed to anyone from a different caste for the same actions – he has been on the run for questioning the societal hierarchy and is in hiding out of fear for his life while someone from an upper caste wouldn't have to share this fate. Gaura had a job as a cook in a school which hardly lasted for a day because children from other castes refused to eat the food cooked by someone from a lower caste. The food cooked by an upper caste woman would not be disrespected like this. People wash their hands after shaking Nishad's hands, no one would do that to Mayank. Young men get publicly beaten up for 'daring' to set foot inside a temple, no one from the upper castes would face this consequence. In a very clever word play, he mentions that since India gained Independence, things have changed for the Dalits – at some point they were *Harijan*, at some point they were *Bahujan*, but never had a chance to become *Jan*. The word *Jan*, originating from Sanskrit, means people. *Harijan* was a term coined by Mahatma Gandhi to refer to the people belonging to the Dalit and other lower castes and meant God's people. The term *Bahujan*, meaning large group or majority of people, was used by social activists and reformers like Mahatma Jyotirao Phule, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar to describe the masses who had been historically discriminated against. In the history of modern India, the usage of the term *Bahujan* continued through the creation of political parties like the *Bahujan Samaj Party* which were created with the solitary purpose of representing the lower castes (the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes in official nomenclature). Nishad's word play focuses on how they have always been given special treatment, not necessarily in a positive sense since their caste status stopped them short from being treated as equal citizens. It aches him to see that no one really cares about the real issues of the lower castes and that stunts like this Dalit-Hindu unity rally are just political stunts to appease the voters. The image composition

in this sequence is very interesting and represents a paradigmatic shift in power equations.

When the conversation between Ayaan and Nishad begins, Nishad and Gaura are sitting on the ground while Ayaan, along with Mayank, even Jatav are literally looking down at them – representative of the caste power structures at play (IMG. 85). As the conversation progresses, Ayaan gradually moves towards Nishad, sits down and starts talking to him at an eye-level (IMG. 86). This move is rooted in Ayaan's realisation that he needs to have Nishad as an ally and that he can only lead by example in gaining the confidence of this new ally. The whole sequence makes it evident how dependent a senior, high caste police officer like Ayaan is on a lower-caste political activist Nishad. Then whether it is Ayaan seeking out Nishad for the conversation, or the questions of a high-caste, city lad, well-educated officer like Ayaan being answered by a low-caste, village educated person like Nishad, or Ayaan moving in towards Nishad or then Ayaan taking the effort of approaching Nishad at an eye-level, offering respect and asking for his help in his search for Pooja; all these instances, coupled with the visuals used to portray them, point to changing dynamics.

On the other hand, Ayaan's enemies are just as easily identifiable as his allies. The two main characters, who turn out to be his adversaries are Anshu and Brahmadatt. As it turns out, Anshu flees on being alerted of his impending arrest by Brahmadatt. It also emerges that Anshu and Brahmadatt are both the perpetrators who committed the crime against the girls and that Brahmadatt kills Anshu in order to secure his position.

Preparing for major change/ Approach (1:24:45): Predictably enough, as a result of political intervention, the inquiry into the death of the two girls and one missing girl is now taken away from Ayaan and is handed off to a central investigation body, the Central Bureau of Investigation or the CBI. Panicker, the chief investigating officer tells him that Ayaan should be careful in following local customs and traditions and accuses him of being a casteist because he publicly asked everyone about their caste and that he can be punished for it since it is a criminal offence. Ayaan agrees that he is

agitated and anxious and admits that the post-mortem reports confirmed that the girls were raped. He also refutes the allegation of being casteist by saying that he is dumbfounded by the presence of a 2000-year-old system in 2019 and how people still blindly followed it. Though this and the next two phases aren't as long as the other phases, they are most certainly very impactful in giving the audience an insight into the intricate power relations between politics and the security apparatus while capturing its impact on the lives of upright, honest citizens who don't believe that they can challenge the system.

Big change with feeling of life and death/ Ordeal, Death and Rebirth (1:30:57): As the investigation progresses and it starts emerging that influential politicians and their followers may be connected to the incident, the chief investigating officer asks Ayaan to withdraw himself from the investigation. A key witness, Satyendra, confirms that Brahmadatt and Nihal Singh were among the men who raped the girls, but he refuses to testify since he is scared for his life. Nihal Singh jumps in front of a speeding truck and commits suicide out of guilt.

Although short, the sequence portrays a lot of key moments. The interconnectedness of the three characters, whose fate is shown in this case, can also be represented by the key words used to describe the phase. Satyendra, also a government servant, has been on the run for a long time. He has been a witness to the crime that was committed but has been threatened to stay quiet. The guilt that he will live with, the ordeal of having to be on the run, away from his pregnant wife and job, in order to save someone else is not a small thing. On being discovered as one of the perpetrators, Nihal Singh, utterly ashamed of himself and unable to live with the guilt, commits suicide. Ayaan, on the other hand, experiences a moment of small victory, in however difficult circumstances as it may seem, when Chandrabhaan comments (referring to two real-life incidents) saying that all this while, they used to pretend that the rape cases, crimes happened in

far- away places like Badayun or Bulandshahr[244] and that considering all that has happened so far, they can't pretend to look away anymore, that people need to realise that these things can and are happening in their own backyards as well. This is something that Ayaan has been willing to achieve since the outset and the moment of this recognition may not be a dramatic one, but certainly a confirmation that his resolve to urge people to look at their realities more critically is now paying off. The moment he sees the small impact of his work is the moment of rebirth, since he has now found his true calling, his journey of self-discovery and discovering a purpose in his life, has now reached a conclusive point.

Accepting consequences of new life/ Reward, seizing the sword (1:36:25): The two sub-narratives that I have mentioned before, one concerning the immediate investigation of the rape case and the other concerning the bigger systematic, endemic problem of caste-based discrimination, are both in their final stages now. As his last act as Additional Commissioner, Ayaan decides to go ahead with the arrest Brahmadatt with the cooperation of his other associates like Mayank and Jatav. His biggest challenge is explaining to Amali that her brother was a part of the gang who raped the three girls. On his arrest, Brahmadatt abuses Jatav for daring to put him behind bars in spite of him being from a low caste and reminds him that Jatav will always be in his debt because Brahmadatt 'allowed' him to come so far and become a police officer.

Both these sub-narratives throw light on how the dynamics is now evolving. As a consequence of his actions against the guilty, Ayaan has been relieved from service and the few colleagues like Jatav, Mayank and Chandrabhaan, who had stood by him, are now taking over the responsibility of standing up for what is right. In a momentous departure from his submissive behaviour so far, Jatav snaps back at Brahmadatt when he tries to make

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244 "Bulandshahr rape:2 arrested, say 'we picked up girl for fun'", news18.com, accessed on February 4, 2020 under https://www.news18.com/news/india/accused-in-bulandshahr-highway-rape-murder-say-we-picked-up-girl-for-fun-1627723.html.

him aware of his true standing in the society and slaps him hard. Nishad, this time around, is being persecuted and followed not just by people from the upper castes but also by his former colleagues because he is not willing to compromise on his principles when it comes to striving for equality. Nishad represents an interesting embodiment of a confluence of two political schools of thought championed by Gandhi and Ambedkar. While upholding the need for a political struggle to seek equality for the lower castes is his aim, he is also a believer in non-violence. While he would like to distance himself and his people from the terms coined by both these leaders, *Harijan* and *Bahujan*, he also considers the paths laid down by them to be his guidelines in his struggle.

Simultaneously, Nishad has been informed that he will be put under arrest again because it is being claimed that he is a threat to the national security. In his last conversation with Gaura, someone who he intended to marry, he talks about his aspirations, his non-violent principles saying the day the lower castes resort to violence, it will give a valid reason to the upper castes to perpetrate violence against the lower castes. Eventually, in a politically motivated fake encounter, he is betrayed and killed. Parallel to this, as a part of the election campaign, the Hindu-Dalit unity rally that Nishad was opposing is shown taking place and being a major success. The main leader focuses his speech on 'the time has come for Hindus to unite, regardless of their caste and recognise the actual enemy', hinting at the Muslim community. This attempt by the leader of the Hindutva populist party can also be considered as an attempt at saffronising Dalits[245].

New challenge and rededication/ the road back (1:49:01): Both the micro and meta narratives now start converging, giving the audience a final insight

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245   "[...] in order to enter Dalit memories and saffronise them, Hindutva forces have given representation to leaders of Dalit communities in state and national politics, while trying to appropriate cultural symbols and folk icons popular in Dalit oral traditions and redefining local societies in north India" in Badri Narayan, *Fascinating Hindutva: Saffron Politics and Dalit Mobilisation*, (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2009), 158.

into the deep rootedness of the problem. Mayank asks Gaura for forgiveness saying she should never forgive them for allowing Nishad's death – it is his way of apologising to her and by extension to the Dalit community for the failure of the system to protect them repeatedly. As extreme violence breaks out at the rally in response to Nishad's death, the senior officer investigating the rape and murder of the young girls asks Ayaan questions about the violence by Dalits, in response to Nishad's death, saying that they will suffer the hardest for starting the violence. He puts the onus of the tensions and the violence on the Dalits saying that they should not be divisive by chanting the slogans of *Jai Bhim.* This is exactly the kind of response that Nishad had predicted if the Dalits were to grab arms and express their frustration at the system vociferously. In response, Ayaan resorts to a brazen criticism against the perception of the Dalit's fight for equality, mentioning that more often than not, the system fails to see the bigger violence that has been going on for centuries which fuel the existing disappointment and frustration and act as a trigger for violent reciprocation. Depending on who is propagating this violence, the system condones violence emanating from powerful structures in the society and terms it as 'law and order', while terming the other as 'terrorism'. Ayaan exposes the officer by proving his involvement with the political leader, who is trying to suppress reality, and informs him that he has shared the proof of the girls being raped and not killed as a result of honour killings, with higher officers in the central government.

Ayaan's brash and brazen criticism of the governmental system can be considered as a commentary by the filmmaker on the current political climate in India. The film can be read as his commentary on the sensitive issue of the convenient *Othering* of putting various entities like Women, Dalits, Muslims by the society and polity. The Indian state's history with the lower castes and minorities hasn't always been cordial and solution oriented. The most recent example, also bearing similarities to the fate that

the character of Nishad faces[246], is that of Chandrashekhar Azad 'Ravan'. Chandrashekhar Azad is a Dalit activist in the state of Uttar Pradesh and was imprisoned under the National Security Act, which 'allows the state to detain any person it feels pose a threat to the security of India or could disrupt public order'[247]. Though Ravan was acquitted later and allowed to go free, the fact that he could be put behind bars for wanting to install a statue of Dr. Ambedkar, against the wishes of the upper castes, speaks volumes. The same act has also been used to prosecute other members of the minority groups[248] in the state of Uttar Pradesh, increasingly since the current BJP Government came into power in 2017.

Final attempt, last minute dangers/ Resurrection (1:52:00): In this penultimate phase on his journey of self-discovery, Ayaan continues with his monologue about the practise of caste and its manifestations in day-to-day lives of millions of Indians. Ayaan also points out to the officer in-charge of the investigation that had he (the officer) dared to disagree with the politicians and other powerful people above him, he would have probably been in a position to see the reality that Ayaan is trying to show him. On being warned of consequences, he asks the officer to back off and informs him that he would continue with the search for the third girl. In a major shift from the societal norms that had been followed in this part of Uttar Pradesh, Ayaan decides to get into the pig swamp himself and not just leave the work to the lower castes. During a conversation with his other associates, as they make their way through the swamp, they are shown discussing the electoral politics in UP. In clear references to real life contexts (election

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246   "Nishad is the hero, Ayan the protagonist in 'Article 15'", business-standard.com, accessed on February 4, 2020, under https://www.business-standard.com/article/pti-stories/nishad-is-the-hero-ayan-the-protagonist-in-article-15-mohammed-zeeshan-ayyub-119070400740_1.html.

247   "After 15 months in Jail, UP Govt releases Bhim Army Chief Chandrashekhar Azad", thewire.in, accessed on February 4, 2020, under https://thewire.in/rights/bhim-army-chief-chandrashekhar-azad-release-up-govt.

248   "In run up to 2019, NSA is the Latest Weapon Against Muslims in UP", thewire.in, accessed on February 4, 2020, under https://thewire.in/rights/in-adityanaths-up-the-national-security-act-is-latest-weapon-against-muslims.

signs of the flower: the Lotus – BJP, Cycle – Samajwadi Party, Elephant – Bahujan Samaj Party, Palm – Congress, Candle/ Light – Rashtriya Janata Dal), the group is shown discussing who votes for whom, how they are sometimes so uncertain about all of the political parties that they choose not to cast their votes at all, how the parties get into a coalition despite having different agendas, confusing the voters.

This sequence stands out for two small things – first is the step taken by Ayaan to get into the swamp, leading the way for other to follow suit. When Chandrabhaan tries to warn him that his clothes will get dirty and Ayaan insists on getting into the swamp anyway, asking for tips to wash dirty clothes. Chandrabhaan refers to a popular television advertisement in India of the washing powder Surf Excel: *Daag Acche hai* (stains are good). The tagline focuses on allowing one's clothes to get dirty since they open a new world of experiences and highlights how washing dirty clothes is a good deed, if they enable the wearer to good experiences. As I have mentioned before, a commercial with this tagline has been in the limelight for facing criticism from the ultra-right for showing a budding friendship between two children in India: a Hindu girl and a Muslim boy. The second thing that stands out in this brief sequence is the very real, genuine apathy in the political realm towards the representation of Dalits and their issues, including the political parties that were founded solely for this purpose.

Mastery/ Return with Elixir (1:57:45): In the final sequence, the squad finds the third girl, severely injured and unconscious. As a result of her statement, Brahmadatt is sentenced for eleven years imprisonment and the fathers of the girls who had given false testimony under pressure are acquitted. In the closing sequence, as all the police officers, including Ayaan, are sitting on the side of a road after the successful completion of their mission. As they buy food from an old woman and share it, Ayaan asks her about her caste. Her answer is inaudible because of the honking of a truck passing by. As the sequence ends, one can recognise the bhajan *Vaishnav Jan To,* which became popular during the independence period when Mahatma Gandhi started using it at his Ashram in Sabarmati. In his final act

as a Hero, Ayaan has managed to make the caste divisions invisible, bringing together people from different castes, sitting together and sharing food.

SEQUENCE ANALYSIS: LEVELLING WITH NISHAD (1:13:40 – 1:18:40)
(IMG. 90.1-IMG. 90.12)

In this sequence, the cinematographer Ewan Mulligan has played a lot with the light and the camera angles in order to highlight the issues Anubhav Sinha and Gaurav Solanki have penned. In the first shot (IMG. 90.1), the opening shot of this sequence, we see ruins of a building, which by its exterior appearance, could have easily been a *Haveli* or a mansion. It is revealed over the course of the sequence that this place is an abandoned school. The aged, yet sturdy building symbolizes the old caste-system, which as it turns out, is the topic of the conversation coming up. In the second shot (IMG. 90.2), a medium long shot, we see the interiors of this building lit up with sunrays in some parts. The building, which from the outside, appears to be very dark inside, has in fact some light on the inside – a metaphoric symbolism used for the protagonists present here, who are struggling to find a solution for the immediate problem of the missing girl and the overarching problem of caste. In the following shot, we see Nishad, the antagonist in the film, entering the building. In this long shot, Nishad is shown to be a very small figure, about to cross a boundary (IMG. 90.3). On crossing the boundary, as he enters the space in the following shot (IMG. 90.4), he starts appearing to be a bigger person. This increase in stature has something to do with the perspective of the people he is about to interact with. The play with light is also very impactful in these two shots. Nishad moves from a well-lit space on the outside to a darker, more ambivalent space on the inside.

In the next shot (IMG. 90.5), the camera goes back a few steps again. In this medium long shot, Nishad appears to be shorter again. This point of view shot, shows Ayaan's pre-conditioned, caste influenced gaze looking at Nishad. The next shot (IMG. 90.6), a medium shot taken from below,

points at Ayaan's higher position. The light effects show only one half of Ayaan's face – the other half being in darkness. It points to the possibility of a darker side in him, potentially leading to a darker turn of events. The caste affiliation and possibility of a darker turn of events, together with Ayaan's power as a police officer, could only have fatal consequences for Nishad, who is in hiding.

In the following shot (IMG. 90.7), a closeup shot, we see a hole in the wall – symbolizing the possibility for the audience to get a peek into the minds of the people inside. The focus in this shot is on the wall, signifying a divide. The background, though slightly out of focus, points at the uncertainty about how the situation would turn out, at this stage. On a broader level, the hole is also symbolic of the fractures and breakages in the apparently sturdy societal structure which is about to be addressed. The next shot (IMG. 90.8), a straight, closeup shot, we see Nishad standing firmly, facing Ayaan at an eye level. His closed arms, his puffed-up chest, the body language in general point towards a confident, self-assured person.

Just like Ayaan in IMG. 90.6, only half of Nishad's face is visible here, yet again pointing to a darker side, the possibility of a violent reaction to the conversation with Ayaan.

In the next shot, a medium long shot (IMG. 90.9), we see Ayaan and Nishad facing each other, both of them standing. Nishad's stance continues and he is now visible from a slightly different view point. Gaura, his partner, on the other hand, is shown sitting on a broken chair. By sitting down, she is placed at a lower level than all the men in the room, symbolizing her lower status as a Dalit woman.

As the conversation progresses, Gaura and Nishad are shown sitting down on the floor, looking up to Ayaan and his associate, Mayank – a marker of the caste-influenced perspective (IMG. 90.10). In this shot, a medium shot, Nishad is looking up to Ayaan. On comparing it with the first shot, we realize that Nishad and Gaura are now at the same level. It represents the changing dynamic once the conversation around caste starts.

Though both of them are placed at a lower level than Ayaan and his associate, Gaura, because she is cowering, is at slightly lower level. In the next two shots (IMG. 90.11 and IMG. 90.12), we see the same moment being displayed from two perspectives. Before this shot, Ayaan walks up to Nishad, squats down to have a conversation. In IMG. 90.11, we see Nishad, looking up to Ayaan as they talk. This is an over the shoulder shot, from the perspective of Mayank as Ayaan talks to Nishad. The shot suggests that though Ayaan is sitting down and talking to Nishad, they are not at the same level. This is thanks to Mayank's cast-influenced perspective - Mayank and Ayaan both being Brahmins.

The same moment, viewed from Gaura's point of view, however, seems to be different. In her eyes, she sees Ayaan and Nishad at the same level (IMG. 90.12). Both of them are helping her to look for her little sister. In this moment of changing dynamics, she no longer considers herself to be at a lower level than the other two men in the shot. The initial caste barrier, as portrayed in IMG. 90.9, disappears as Ayaan and Nishad realize that they both need each other's help in order to solve this problem, representative of a bigger system.

In her very sharp and reflected criticism of the film[249], Poulomi Das has made some valid points and criticised the film for the choice of the main character being a classic Hindi film hero – an upper class Brahmin man of privilege and suffering from a *Savarna* saviour complex, for misrepresentation of Dalits as Scheduled Castes and Tribes and Other Backward Classes, for wasting Dalit characters like Gaura and Nishad by allotting them secondary roles, while also praising the filmmaker for taking the necessary and a long-overdue step of making a film that doesn't tiptoe around the issue of caste. Though her criticism may be right, especially the

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249 "Article 15: a necessary movie on caste discrimination that lands punches on upper class guilt", qrius.com, accessed on January 29, 2020, under https://qrius.com/article-15-review-a-necessary-movie-on-caste-discrimination-that-lands-punches-on-upper-class-guilt/.

part about the main character being a man of privilege and the misrepresentation of Dalits, I also believe that in hindsight, these 'mistakes' if you may, have actually contributed to a more nuanced portrayal and probably even a better understanding of the ground realities by the audience. To begin with, even if the central character of Ayaan is a character from a privileged background, it is important to see his character in the light of the narrative. An urban character like Ayaan, well-educated, upper caste is representative of a large section of the Indian bureaucracy – however unfair it is. His ignorance to the issues highlights the realities on ground – how senior bureaucrats from privileged backgrounds are not familiar with the seriousness and complexity of the issues. What sets Ayaan apart, in spite of his caste and class credentials, is his eagerness to learn. The character of Ayaan is coaxing the audience to critically revisit their own positions and understandings of the issues surrounding caste, in spite of their strong belief that their education has taught them enough about these conflicts. Building upon the argument presented by Smelik in the context of gender representation about the cinema being a cultural practise that produces, reproduces and represents myths[250], one could say that through the character of Ayaan, the filmmaker and the narrative are producing a mythical figure dealing with the issue of caste, hoping that it would be reproduced and represented. If the figure had been a Dalit himself, it would have had its merits but at the same time, the conversations about the ignorance of the upper castes about the issues of the lower castes, about their problems would have most probably been in a more confrontative form than being a process of self-realisation. It is not to say that a Dalit police officer would have been a bad choice for the narrative, but the choice of Ayaan as a police officer can be looked at as leading by example by revisiting his own blind spots, ignorance and lack of understanding about a number of things. As much as a Dalit character in the main role would have held its appeal to

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250   Anneke Smelik, *And the Mirror cracked: Feminist cinema and film theory*, (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1998), 7.

the audience, so does a character like Ayaan – admittedly for different reasons. Having said that, one also cannot overlook the fact that Ayaan's informants, who contribute to his understandings of the problem, are not necessarily an elite class of native informants, interested (and giving) voice to the other[251]. His informants are in fact natives to the situations and the societies that he is trying to understand and representative of the heterogeneity of the society he is located in. His willingness to not be the voice of *Others* but letting the *Other* speak for itself is also a marked departure from other films dealing with this issue. To quote the headline of a review of the film, *Nishad is the hero, Ayaan is the protagonist*[252].

Considering the primary research questions in the context of this film, some pertinent conclusions can be drawn here. This is primarily because of the intricate and the inherently conflicting nature of the narrative and the way the characters are connected to each other. I insist on saying inherently conflicting because through the nature and the content of the narrative, it makes it difficult to place any given character in a category one would have otherwise chosen for it. For example, one would have placed Ayaan's character in the category of a Brahmin, well-educated person, unfamiliar with the societal codex of rural India. Having said that, one could put him at almost the same level as Brahmadatt, also a Brahmin and a well-educated person but familiar with the societal codex. Based on this, one could easily also expect the character of Ayaan to follow in Brahmadatt's footsteps and follow his lead while becoming familiar with the societal codex and choosing to uphold the status quo of the system. The conflict arises here because as opposed to Brahmadatt, Ayaan actively decides to do something to uproot the societal codex and change it once he becomes

251 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the subaltern speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Ed. Cary Nelson und Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 283-284.

252 "Nishad is the hero, Ayan the protagonist in 'Article 15'", business-standard.com, accessed on February 4, 2020, under https://www.business-standard.com/article/pti-stories/nishad-is-the-hero-ayan-the-protagonist-in-article-15-mohammed-zeeshan-ayyub-119070400740_1.html.

familiar with the codex. Both the characters, with large overlaps in their identity structures, vary in some key fields thus giving rise to complex identity structures, further from each other. The one fights for upholding the system, while the other fights for a change in it. Ayaan's understanding of culture at the beginning of the film would be somewhere between an open and an extensive understanding of culture. He is aware of the multicultural nature of the society he lives in but is still further away from allowing the boundaries and the *Otherness* to disappear. This *Otherness* can be perceived as the opposite of what he is not – so non- or less-educated people from lower castes living in rural India. As the narrative progresses, as he discovers his allies but also his enemies, there is a realignment of his understanding of his own position, which leads to the negotiating of these boundaries. So, the *Other* eventually comes to be represented by caste-conscious, corrupt bureaucrats and politicians. This renegotiating of the categories of people, of identities and the boundaries between the *Own* and the *Other* also changes the dynamic of his (and the audience's) perception of the society that he lives in. He becomes acutely aware of the heterogeneity of the society that he lives in, while also discovering the complex contexts, histories and identity politics that goes with it. This renegotiation of what signifies the *Own* and the *Other* also has a profound impact on his own position in terms of cultural understandings and exposures, since the boundaries are now more fluid. For one, he cannot distinguish anymore his own identity structure if his contempt for the caste system comes from his exposure to Western education or whether it comes from strong women characters like Aditi, Dr. Malati Ram and Gaura and their influence on his thought process or it comes from having seen the ground realities and the injustice being meted out to fellow human beings or if it is a combination, in various degrees of all the above and more. In the true sense of the term, his personality has now evolved into a figure that has an extensive and comprehensive understanding of culture.

As far as the question of allotted social identities is concerned, of all the films studied here, *Article 15* presents the rupture of allotted societal

identities in the most impactful manner. This happens primarily because in addition to the central figure in this narrative, even secondary figures like Jatav, Chandrabhaan, etc., can be seen undergoing a change in their identity constructs. This change is regardless of their allotted social identities and non-linear. In other words, the construction of identity for protagonists like Ayaan, which involves letting go of a social status that accords him a much higher standing in the societal context and making way for a different perception of identity is refreshing. In his understanding, he is trying to free himself of the perception of caste identity being a strictly rigid and hierarchical structure. As I have mentioned earlier, Ayaan shares some of the allotted social identities with other characters in the narrative like Brahmadatt. But because of his experiences, his own consciousness and exposure to critical thinking, he attempts to break free of the allotted construct of an identity that defines his societal standing and tries to break free of it. Similarly, other protagonist like Jatav and Chandrabhaan, who belong to other castes and are also averse to the idea of intermingling at the beginning, can be seen undergoing a major change over the course of the narrative. Somewhat disappointing though, keeping in line with Das' criticism, the figures of Nishad and Gaura have been wasted by limiting their presence and their story of evolution on the narrative. This would have been an interesting addition to the narrative since it would have added more insights to the discourse from the perspective of people who are at the receiving end of this particular variant of discrimination, which is based on allotted social identities and offer no possibility of an upward mobility. On a broader scale, one could say that in the context of this narrative, the allotted social identities play a crucial role in influencing the openness of the protagonist to *Other* in a decisive manner. The allotted social identity and the consequences as a result of this identity provokes the protagonist to depart from them.

In the context of this film, it is also worth considering the urban-rural aspect briefly. One can safely say that the atmosphere and attitudes in rural India are shockingly open about caste divides. This doesn't mean that they

aren't present and evident in the urban centres. But as is also the case with issues of gender, these problems have a propensity to become invisible behind other pressing issues that impact the lives of people in an urban setup, like the huge disparity between incomes of the rich and the poor, infrastructure, etc. The criteria used to differentiate between people in a city are dependent on other parameters, in addition to caste, religion, sex and power structures and hence the manifestation of caste-based conflicts may be slightly different in urban centres than in rural India. In other words, the criteria that influence the defining of the *Own* and the *Other* are largely similar in the rural as well as the urban centres, but their degree of influence is varied. The relationship between caste and profession often gets blurred in urban centres while in semi-urban and rural areas, this relationship continues to be of high relevance. What is undoubted is their influence on how people perceive the *Other*. For example, a maid in an urban area from a lower-caste is bound to face more discrimination than a maid in an urban area from a higher-caste. The exposure to discrimination influences both the women when it comes to their openness to *Other* people with similar fates; their own caste background may however play an influential role in the intensity of this openness.

5.   Results of the film analysis

The six case studies presented up until this point, focussed on film, image and character analysis of the chosen films. This was a decisive step in understanding distinct issues and contexts that they represent. The analysis, in turn, also contributes to a better understanding of the importance of considering not just the narrative but also the protagonist as a site for religious, social and political conflicts. This chapter focuses on presenting the findings of the film and character analysis in a compressed manner, in order to eventually address the primary research questions. The case studies of the chosen films have laid bare some key facts that are central to understanding the portrayal of different ideas of culture and identity conflicts at two levels: an image, the most basic component in a film, and the film narrative. It is also necessary to be aware of the similarities between Panofsky's three stage model and the *Textures* model of access and interrogation of the material at hand since both factor in the interpreter's biographical details and tendencies, his/her subjective world views that play a vital role in the analysis. The presentation of these conclusions considers both these levels – an image, that through an analysis of its *mise-en-scéne* makes its various layers accessible, in order to be able to understand the broader context that it is referring to. The image analysis also helps in unravelling the film-text, thus combining Panofsky's model of iconography and *Textures*. So, when I analyse an image, it is not only the image I am talking about. The image is a multi-layered text, that on unravelling discloses the many levels of messages that it has been trying to represent. The composition of the image is also a significant factor that contributes to changing subjectivities

and perceptions surrounding the subject at the centre of the narrative – a person of a particular caste, religion, gender and cultural preferences.

I have chosen a compilation of images spread across the chosen films that represent a series of messages and contexts. The three stages mentioned in an earlier chapter allow a systematic analysis of the films at the level of the chosen imagery and the image composition, to interrogate them at a level of image constitution while combining it with the issues that they represent, which would then allow me to comment on those issues in light of the broader contexts that the topics represent and look at them in the light of the primary research questions. The composition of the chosen images may not be the same, but the issues and the contexts that they represent are similar. All the chosen images from decisive sequences in each film respectively are representative of a multitude of things that go well beyond the scope of the isolated image – it is not necessarily only the image that serves as an object but the context in which the image is composed, the meaning and change it represents as well as the implications of this change that eventually become visible over the course of the narrative. Considering the fact that the films represent varied locations across India – from arid deserts of Rajasthan in *Parched* to rural Uttar Pradesh in *Swades* and *Article 15* to semi-urban areas of Gujarat in *Kai Po Che* to the tribal, rural hinterlands of India in Madhya Pradesh, it would be unrealistic to find images composed in a similar fashion. In each of the chosen film here, entire production teams have taken the efforts to mirror the local flair of the areas the narrative is situated in – from clothing to cuisine to language to representation of local myths. This varied representation in itself is a significant marker of how the cultural diversity in a vast country like India makes its presence felt and known in cinema.

On analysing the said films, I stumbled upon thematic commonalities and usage of a particular set of images to comment on those issues – the most important being education, transformation and politics. The interconnectedness and interdependence of these issues becomes increasingly

clear as we progress into the analysis. It is, however, necessary to understand what I am inferring to when I mention these three leitmotifs. Education, in the context of this discourse, is a mixture of the classical school-based education but more importantly, it also represents the mental, moral and emotional development of an individual and the arising critical mindset that allows one to pose questions and seek answers that eventually contributes to altering the identity construct of the protagonist in a decisive fashion. The concept of transformation refers to the evolution and changes the protagonist(s) undergoes over the course of the film as a result of various factors like circumstances, education, etc. This transformation presents itself in some films like *Parched* in the form of an obvious, external transformation while in other films like *Article 15* or *Kai Po Che*, the transformation is represented through the actions, changing response patterns of the protagonists. *RDB* represents transformations of both sorts and employs it as a tool to not only signify the changing personalities of the protagonists but also to represent a switch in time. The biggest challenge, by far, is to describe (and also limit) the scope of the term 'politics'. In the context of this inquiry, I understand politics as the activities, decisions associated with the governing of a country and area – but most importantly, also a community. These activities may or may not be codified (in terms of a legal text), the governing structures may or may not be systems set up by the state, but they continue to exert immense power on the running and functioning of any given community and society. In some contexts, like discrimination based on gender, caste and religion, it may even happen that the official policy, codified by the state that abolishes any form of discrimination, may be miles away from the realities on ground.

To begin with, the leitmotif of education as a means of empowerment is strongly present in all the chosen films. In *RDB*, *Kai Po Che*, *Newton*, *Swades* and *Article 15* the narrative includes a place of learning like a school, a tuition class or a University in order to highlight the importance of education as a means of mass empowerment. They also have repeated visual cues

that refer to the importance of books as a tool for discovery and emanci-pation. In some sequences, there is also a fleeting reference to Janaki read-ing books and being ridiculed for her aspirations. The sequences shot in the space of a school/ university/ centre of learning are largely representa-tive of educating the protagonists and drawing their attention to issues that matter – different ideas of nationalism, caste, religion, modernity and gen-der. These attempts of consciously making the protagonist aware of the finer nuances of a given issue in turn contribute to the clashes, making and breaking, the evolution of his/ her identity. If we were to implement Panofsky's three-stage model here, we would realise that each image that I have referred to here, while applying the first stage of the analysis, repre-sents a space of learning - a school, a university, a centre of learning. The second level allows me to investigate the said images in a bigger, broader context of the narrative – allowing me to look at the composition of the images in the light of the conflict that they represent. The third level allows me to connect the analyses of the various chosen images and look at them in the light of the broader problems that the chosen imagery represents and its connotations. To highlight the contrast between them, it is im-portant to consider how the portrayal of this space is a direct commentary on the state of affairs.

In *RDB*, the entire group of protagonists is shown spending most of their time on the University campus. The camaraderie between these pro-tagonists – each representing a different stratum of the society that they live in – is nurtured in a largely egalitarian space, which grants all these diverse members of the society an equal access to education. Though this representation may be slightly misleading by the absence of a lower caste and a rural protagonist, the effort to represent the diversity is definitely notable. A number of transformations and life-changing moments like their heated exchange with Lakshman Pandey and the moment of hearing about Ajay's death that influences the way the protagonists evolve, are con-nected to this space. In *KPC*, the process of learning is intrinsic to the

narrative since it clearly presents the figures of Ishaan and Ali in a symbiotic relationship built on the aspect of learning. While Ali learns to explore various aspects of cricket under Ishaan's tutelage, Ishaan, along with his friends, learns more about his society, his own friends through his interactions with Ali. While the first process is very evident and present, the second process is more subtle. In *Newton*, the space of a school is at the centre of the narrative, as it is the venue where elections will be held. The abandoned school is in a dilapidated state. The backdrop of the school, quite literally, offers a canvas to highlight the institutional ignorance and apathy this part of India faces. In a metaphorical manner, the image of Newton sitting with his back towards the blackboard, representing his lack of knowledge, if not conscious ignorance, speaks volumes about the points that the narrative is trying to make (IMG. 42). The image is representative of the two contesting ideas of governance and rule – while Newton represents the one, he is starkly unaware of the other. It highlights the importance of the things that Newton doesn't know but ideally should have known. An empty blackboard, albeit with his back to it, also represents a clean, impressionable slate which is how the narrative eventually evolves when Newton, after being exposed to the realities of the context he has been placed in, evolves and starts understanding the complex background and consequence of the military presence in this area, their intervention in order to implement democratic principles and exercises in the area and the conflict between the locals and the security forces.

In *Swades*, the composition of the group of people who attend school is a starting point that reflects reality. The narrative repeatedly highlights the resistance of the village community to enable access to education to girls and children from the lower castes. In a number of sequences that take place inside the premises of a school or in a classroom, the conscious image composition highlights two things – first is Mohan being exposed to the local contexts in a country he has been away from for so long. Secondly, it also represents a constant clash between the *Us* and *Them*. It is also representative of the conflict between a conservative, traditional society and

modernity. The definitions of *Us* and *Them* are constantly shifting though – in some sequences the conflict is between Gita and Mohan, focusing on their differences; in some sequences the conflict is between Mohan, Gita and Dadaji (representing same morals, values and vision for the village), along with other like-minded people like Melaram and Nivaran on the one hand vs. the villagers, insistent on upholding the existent societal structures on the other hand. There are also some other sequences that, without commenting directly, refer to the conflict between the various elements in the Indian society. For instance, when a lower-caste labourer's children are being enrolled in the school, the parents are still standing outside the school premises. This spatial division of the children and the parents draws our attention to the possibility that the children may have a chance to free themselves of the shackles of the caste system and attend the same school as the other children, but the parents will continue to be a part of the societal structure that stops them from being in the same premises as the higher castes. It is no wonder, that some of the key moments in the film take place inside a school, a space that encourages people to cultivate a critical mind-set, promotes rational thinking and equips you with knowledge to combat the problems that the film represents. For example, sequences like Mohan commenting on the rigid caste-system and the reluctance of individuals to shoulder responsibility in development.

In *Parched*, the film has a number of references to education. While education is referred to as an external, unwanted influence that 'harms' the traditional culture and questions the existent societal structures by the majority of the villagers, there are other characters who are well-aware of the importance of education in the process of emancipation of women and achieving gender- equality. There are several moments when a character like Naobi, who is well-educated and is seen promoting other girls in the village to continue their education, is subjected to insult and ridicule. Even Janaki's aspirations of wanting to study further are met with mockery. This disdain is symbolic of a more systematic issue than the sole rejection of an individuals' wishes – it represents a society's attitude of not wanting to look

inwards and ask uncomfortable questions that challenge the power dynamics in that society. In *Article 15*, it is not a mere coincidence that one of the key moments in the film, a conversation between Ayaan and Nishad takes place on the premises of a school. The dilapidated state of the school refers to this being the place where Mayank, Gaura and Nishad went to study together. Nishad's observation about the inherent flaws in the system, which is governed by the upper classes, that may allow a person from the lower caste to have access to education but doesn't allow them to become a part of the mainstream, is brought out through the school's condition. It is representative of the decaying state of the system that was founded with an aim of betterment of the lower castes but has been unable to make social impact. Similar to *Parched,* the school premises here also represent the unwillingness in a society to look inwards and critically revisit its own position on issues of caste, gender and religion-based equality. The school is now deserted and serves as a meeting point for a poignant conversation between Ayaan and Nishad. As I have mentioned before, the composition of the image where Ayaan and Nishad are talking is not only representative of Ayaan's need to be educated about the caste-intricacies, but also representative of an evolution that Ayaan is willing to be a part of, an evolution that represents a significant shift in the power equation (IMG. 86). It is later revealed that it was indeed on the premises of the school that the girls were raped. The juxtaposition of the space of a school that represents learning and symbolises progress and modernity with the events that transpire in the school, what it eventually represents in the film is very effective and highlights the irony of the situation. A space that represents the promise of a future for young children becomes the space that later represents the crushing the aspirations of young girls, of their voices by molesting and abusing them. It is also worth a mention here that the scientific and technological advancement (that falls under the broad category of education) that is portrayed in the film (DNA testing of Anshu Naharia, Brahmadatt to prove his) turns out to be a tool to dismantle the construct of

societal superiority. Without the DNA testing, it would have been very difficult to find Anshu and Brahmadatt guilty of the crimes they committed since they had managed to terrorise the victims, their families and their social circle. A DNA test, however, couldn't be terrorised or threatened and hence, provided results that were consistent with the truth. In other words, scientific and technological advancement, critical questioning and logical, rational reasoning are some of the things that education provides an individual, which in turn, enables some, who have been traditionally oppressed, to challenge existent social hierarchies. Since this enabling is then seen as a challenge to conservative, regressive social practises, education as a tool for empowerment comes under heavy criticism from the conservative elements in a society.

One of the recurring questions in the context of education is also how education (or lack thereof) influences the allotted social identities of a protagonist. In the context of most of the central figures of the chosen films, the characters have been repeatedly exposed to progressive influences like gender equality, minority rights, ideas about social justice etc. As a result of this exposure, there is arises a disparity between what their social identity expects them to do vis-à-vis what they are prone to do. For instance, in the case of Newton in *Newton*, his allocated social identity (that of a Government servant) expects him to not only be representatives of the State and be on the same page as the security forces and but also be a silent spectator and watch the power equation between the tribal people and the security forces unfold. Or in the case of Ayaan in *Article 15*, not only is he expected to be aware of his standing in the social hierarchy but he is also expected to become a part of this system and ensure that the 'social balance' (as is often brought to his notice by Brahmadatt) is not disturbed. Interestingly, in the case of Nishad in *Article 15*, the same is expected as well. He is expected to be aware of his standing at the bottom rung of the ladder and not demand any changes that would disturb the 'social balance'. In both the films, the protagonists, thanks to their exposure to progressive, liberal ideas like minority rights or social justice, find it very difficult to go against

their principles and be silent witnesses while the oppression continues. Though the other characters in these films who choose to be silent spectators or direct contributors ensuring that the system of oppression continues, can be assumed to have some basic education (their jobs would require them to have a basic education), it is decisive in the cases of the main protagonists that they choose to push back the allotted social identity and allow their education to play an important role in their decision making. In other words, though an access to education cannot guarantee an openness to liberal ideas of gender equality, minority rights and social justice, it certainly exposes the protagonists to alternative identity constructs which are derived from these ideas, thus allowing them to choose.

The other leitmotif, central to this inquiry, is that of transformation. The transformations, as I have mentioned, are present in two different forms – one evident through a change in the physical appearance and the other evident through changing response/reaction/ thought patterns of the protagonists. Both the variants of transformation are not only due to the circumstances in the given narratives but also due to a massive change and shift in the perceptions of the subject in the way he looks at the object. In other words, the relationship between the protagonist and the object of his gaze undergoes a paradigmatic shift because of his/her deliberations with the self and vice versa. This cyclic pattern of transformation, keeping in line with the idea of an unforeseeable beginning and end of a rhizome, is a continuous process of evolution. It is also important to highlight that all the protagonists that undergo a transformation over the course of a narrative are primarily figures who believe in leading by example. In order to efficiently do so, all the protagonists, irrespective of their backgrounds, start on a journey of discovery, aided by education and transformation. In *RDB*, the film narrative involves two sub-narratives. Every time the protagonists move from one sub-narrative to the other, a physical transformation takes place. Simultaneously, with every move between the sub-narratives, an imminent internal transformation takes place as well, which affects the thought and response patterns of the protagonists in a decisive

manner. Both variants of transformation take place in a non-chronological, non-linear manner making everything about the transformation – the pace, duration and direction of the movements between the present and the past – unpredictable, also making this transformation a rhizomatic process. This film, which is an innovative mix of two diverse concepts representing a constellation of characters as protagonists – two sets, situated in different time frames, each fitting the description of *Figurenensemble* and both of them culminating into a *Figurenmosaik*, traces the transformation of each individual in a manner intertwined with the narrative. So, a narrative that at the outset portrays a careless group of youngsters, moderately aware of the politics around them, questioning the purpose of the Independence struggle in light of the current state of affairs, on undergoing transformations, become part of a narrative that shows a politically active and aware youth, drawing their inspiration from the Independence struggle and attempting to lead by example. In *KPC*, the film focuses on the massive transformation of a society that is being represented by the four figures that fit into the category of a *Figurenensemble*. The transformation of this society from a fairly peaceful space - undoubtedly ridden with cultural differentiation but peaceful to a large extent nonetheless, into a society marred with extreme violence is evident through the transformation of the protagonists. The transformations of each protagonist are varied in terms of the manner, direction and the extent of the transformation. For the characters of Ishaan and Govind, the transformation takes place in a manner of self-discovery and in a chronological manner as compared to a haphazard transformation that Omkar undergoes. Ali, on the other hand, being younger in age and lesser experienced than the other three protagonists, is still in the process of self-discovery and evolution. Till the point he gets to know Ishaan, he has been constricted to a fairly monolithic cultural space, in which he was raised by his parents. His exposure remains restricted to this because of the clear divisions between the Hindu and Muslim communities. Only after his exposure to Ishaan and his friends, after starting to develop a sense of belonging to his team and cricket, and through the final

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act of Ishaan saving Ali and his family and literally taking a bullet for them, does he start acknowledging and respecting the diversity. Though his acknowledgement in the childhood and teenage years is not well articulated, it is evident from the fact that he chooses to play for the Indian National Cricket team, in spite of his loyalties being questioned, leaving traumatic memories. Omkar on the other hand, goes back and forth in his transformation – moving from an indecisive young man to a member of a right-wing political party to a person seeking revenge for the death of his parents to a repentant individual reflecting on the death of his friend. Omkar and Ali have both been subjected to similar fate – both being exposed to death through the loss of immediate family or the impending danger of their own death. It is their respective responses to the given situations and their transformation that eventually play a decisive role in how their characters turn out.

In case of *Newton*, the transformation presents itself in various forms and is a consistent topic that is repeatedly discussed over the course of the film. It begins with Newton changing his name from Nutan Kumar to Newton. This conscious choice that Newton makes for himself is a significant gesture of the series of transformations that are to follow. The smaller transformations have a direct impact on his personal life – like his falling out with his parents on grounds of a different thought process. In spite of being brought up in a fairly conservative, rural setup, he disagrees with his parents on marriage or it's reflective in his commitment to take up a job with the Indian government despite the opportunity to get a higher paying job in the private sector. Though these initial transformations are beyond the scope of the narrative portrayed in the film, they are very evident because of the contrasting ideas and ideals that Newton represents as opposed to people in his surroundings. The bigger and more consequential process of transformation starts when he sets out on a journey that is not only physical journey (to the hinterlands to oversee the election process in a remote constituency in central India) but also an internal transformation. *Newton* combines the two leitmotifs of education and transformation in an

efficient manner – in which the need for him to be exposed to ground realities, which are far from his idealistic notions of a working democracy, is highlighted as much as his transformation, evident through his changing responses. Had it not been for his willingness to take a stand for the values he believes in, neither the attempt at education nor the transformation he undergoes, would have been possible. Newton's transformation is at its most visible stage when he responds to an attempted rigging of the elections by the security personnel assigned to ensure its smooth running by threatening them. This act goes against his principles and morals, that in an ideal world, would have stopped him from doing so.

The character of Mohan in *Swades* is yet another protagonist who undergoes a huge transformation, in a process that is similar in nature to Newton's journey. Only after he is exposed to ground realities, the complex nature of the problems that mar development in India, problems that are rooted in a rejection of modernity, does an inward-looking journey of deciphering his *Need* and a necessary transformation in his personality begin. There are several junctures at which the ongoing process of transformation is extremely evident in the film. Some of the most decisive sequences represent a physical journey that goes hand-in-hand with an internal journey. One such instance is the sequence where Mohan is on his way back after visiting Haridas and travels in a boat and then a train. His interaction with Haridas has left him dumbstruck and deeply disturbed, leading him to look inwards for answers, for ways that he may be able to change something. This process of something in the making is evident through small gestures when Mohan purchases a glass of water being sold in an earthen tumbler – not filtered or bottled but just plain water – and consumes it just like other common people. This seemingly small step is a departure from his position of holding himself slightly above and aside from the rest around him, making the divisions between *Us* and *Them* very clear. The boundaries start vanishing with this small gesture, the transformation is under way.

Parched handles the topic of transformation on two levels as well – one symbolising an external transformation, while the other symbolising an internal transformation. The most evident external transformations can be seen in a few sequences over the course of the film. The first time it becomes visible is when Raani starts warming up to Janaki and agrees to take her along with Lajjo and Bijli on a small excursion. A particularly relevant image in this sequence is when Janaki, Raani and Lajjo let their veils slip away, while trying to defy the norms set for them by the society. The vehicle that they are travelling in is shaped like a butterfly, symbolising a coming-of-age and metamorphosis, or in this context, a development (IMG. 72). Two other images that signify a completion of this transformation are portrayed towards the end. One is when Janaki leaves the village with Hira and is shown travelling on a bus without a veil covering her face (IMG. 76). The other features Raani and a pregnant Lajjo, leaving the village, along with Bijli. In this particularly interesting sequence, in terms of the image composition, there is a stark difference between when they set out on the journey and the time when they are in an advanced stage in their voyage. When they set out from the village at night, Raani and Lajjo's physical appearance depicts that they are abiding with traditions. As the night progresses, they both cut their hair very short, and finally let go of the veil (IMG. 77). The passing of a night and arrival of a new day is a common tool employed by filmmakers to highlight a new beginning, a new chapter. Though the women have been seen without a veil before, it is for the first time, that they are completely comfortable without it. In the earlier sequences, they chose to forego a veil only for short periods of time, when they were together and away from the public eye, whereas towards the end, they have gotten rid of it completely, moving around comfortably in public spaces without feeling awkward. As far as the internal transformation is concerned, it is a very interesting process spanning the course of the film. At the beginning, all four female protagonists Lajjo, Raani, Bijli and Janaki have accepted their circumstances and are trying to make the best out of it without questioning them. Over a period of time, as they start questioning

their circumstances, as the sense of injustice grows, their transformation begins. So, a character like Raani, who chooses to be a silent spectator to the ordeal of Champa, as she complains about the abuse she is regularly subjected to, changes her response to the situation when Janaki is being subjected to abuse by Gulab, in the latter half of the film. Lajjo, who gives an impression of speaking her mind and being curious (both traits not considered to be traits in a 'good Indian woman'), is hesitant to do something about her situation, raise her voice against her husband who subjects her to abuse regularly in the first half of the film. Only in the latter half of the film, after a few conversations with Bijli, after her sexual escapade with the mystic man, does she realise that people are capable of treating her differently, treating her with more respect, that she can make the choice to end the abuse she has been subjected to. Her final stage of transformation comes when she sets the hut on fire, leaving behind her abusive husband to burn in it. Though it may appear that Bijli is truly a step ahead of the other three women in terms of her openness, her progressive thoughts and a streak for anarchy, Bijli has also given in to her fate, accepting that she may never be able to lead a 'normal' life, that she may never earn her livelihood through other means, that she may not find a partner who accepts her for who she is, including her past. Only towards the end of the film, does she start realising that leaving behind the village also allows her to leave behind the life she had led so far, of being marginalised for the nature of the job she does, of not having any respect in the society and always being treated as an object rather than a human. Janaki, the youngest of the lot, isn't much aware of the transformation she is undergoing because the agents responsible for her transformation are others, like Raani and Hira, and not herself. She has repeatedly expressed her wish to study and attend school but has not dared to act on it. It is only because of Raani's willingness to let her go and Hira's willingness to 'accept' her (in spite of her being married) that a true transformation is possible and thinkable for Janaki.

In *Article 15*, just like in *Swades*, the external transformations of the main protagonist are not so visible, as much as the internal transformations. Throughout the film, Ayaan continues to be a well-dressed police officer, who in his time off-duty is usually seen dressed in Western semi-casual wear. His internal transformations have a different quality to it, since in his case, it doesn't seem that he would have been averse to the idea of treating people equally, or not discriminating against them. His education and his thought process, combined with his experiences, have contributed to him becoming a person who believes in equality. The need for a transformation emerges when the situations and circumstances he finds himself in demand a shift from 'belief and faith in something' (here – the Indian Constitution and equal treatment of all citizens) to 'enforcing the implementation of the Constitutional rights'. This situation is somewhat similar to that of Newton. This shift entails Ayaan challenging existing societal norms and structures and political systems that are designed in a manner to undermine the constitutional rights of the marginalised and the minorities, so that only a select few, mostly upper caste (in this context – male), benefit from it. One of the most visible moments of his transformation is when he decides to put up a copy of Article 15 in the Indian constitution outside his office. Till that point, he is trying to work within the system and do the right thing, as per his ideals. But eventually it becomes clear to him that if he intends to take a stand and ensure that justice is done, he needs to be outspoken about upholding the constitutional values and probably even choose a side, go down a path where he may face resistance, opposition and pressure from the people more powerful than him.

In each of the sequences mentioned above, the transformations are evident not only through verbal interactions between protagonists but also because of the camera angles, positioning and framing. More importantly, the interconnected and interdependent nature of the two leitmotifs of education and transformation have been captured repeatedly by the means of image composition over the course of a films' narrative.

The presence of politics as a central topic is common to all the films here and is one of the most important components in any film that deals with issues related to culture and identity. A broader understanding of the concept of politics, defined by Merriam Webster as "the art or science of government" helps us understand the different variants of politics present in the chosen films. The first category of films that focuses on the identity conflicts originating from different understandings of nationalisms highlight the politics of Nation and Nationalism. They look into various discourses surrounding different ideas of nationalism, while also interrogating the intricate nature of the influence of these different understandings on the evolution of the identity construct of an individual. Most importantly, they look at how each unique variant of nationalism claims to represent the *Own* while excluding the *Other*. *RDB* looks at different facets of the Indian political system including its history, which is rooted in Indian Independence struggle, the endemic corruption in the system and its oppressive nature, and most importantly the presence of religious nationalism. *KPC* focuses exclusively on the consequences of religious nationalism and questions about belonging. *Newton* focuses on the issue of Tribals, their rights and their sense of being left out which is grossly underrepresented in Indian film productions. It spotlights the disparity between perceptions – while the Indian nation-state claims to grant them representation and consider their interests through elections, a huge Tribal population continues to live in dire conditions, can't associate anything with democracy and feel victimised for being forcibly represented by arm-twisting them to participate in the elections. *Article 15* which centres around the problematics of caste-identity and gender, also looks at the impact of caste on the broader political system. All the films, together, can be considered as a commentary on the political system in India in the 21st century highlighting its drawbacks, problems and most importantly, how these issues are impacting the identity construction of individuals, who find themselves at cross-sections between the politics of religion, caste, gender and nationalism. *Swades* and *Parched* focus more on the politics of gender and politics

of modernity at a societal level. This variant of politics is not a coded system, but stems from a very conservative, patriarchal societal structure. The system insists on upholding allotted social identities of caste, gender, religion and a social-behaviour codex along with it which prescribes a separation of people based on their caste, gender, religion as well as treating each category differently. This variant of identity politics also rules an upward mobility for the marginalised, disadvantaged groups. All the films here offer the audience an insight into the politics surrounding topics of gender, caste and religion in various parts of contemporary India. They also highlight how this politics of identity, manifesting itself through various discourses on belonging, *Own* and *Other*, continues to create hurdles for individuals looking to free themselves of allotted, rigid identity constructs and view their own identity as an open and fluid construct, which is in the process of becoming.

Two other topics that make their presence felt very strongly across some of the selected films are that of political colours, relevance and importance of religion, religious folklore and mythology in India. While the topic of political colours makes itself visible in films like *RDB*, *KPC*, *Newton* and *Article 15*, the presence of religious symbolism, festivals and references to religious mythology is a common feature in all the films.

Before discussing the image-composition highlighting political colours, I will briefly refer to what I mean by political colours. Political parties, movements have historically used a particular colour to represent themselves in public discourse. In the Indian sub-continent, especially since the partition in 1947, politics and religion have been inseparable, since the division of the sub-continent was based on the argument citing incompatibility between Hindus and Muslims. While the colour green represented Islam in general, but most importantly the Muslim political interests in public discourse, the colours orange/ saffron, red represented Hinduism and by extension, Hindu political interests. One of the primary reasons for

green being the colour used to represent Islam is rooted in its history[253], while the usage of orange/ saffron or red to represent Hinduism is connected to the importance of fire in rituals and as a symbol of asceticism in Hinduism. These two colours, primarily used to represent religions, eventually came to represent the politics that the political parties committed to representing the interests of the respective religions believed in. Parties like *Shiv Sena* or the BJP came to be known as saffron parties while Muslim League/ Indian Union Muslim League (before/ after Partition) continues to have a green flag representing the party. Additionally, the colour Blue also holds a particular significance in the Indian sub-continent as it represents the Neo- Buddhist movement[254] under the leadership of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, which led to the conversion of a large number of lower caste people into Buddhism. The colour blue has become increasingly popular as the colour of Dalit resistance[255]. These three primary political colours, representing very diverse political interests in India, also contribute largely to the aesthetics of a public space. The sheer presence of a colour used in a neighbourhood can speak volumes about the political leanings of that particular area in India, especially in urban and rural centres, where tensions run high between these three groups. This presence of the political colours in public spaces and the resulting tension between the majority vs. the minority gets mirrored in films as well. The images that have been chosen here (IMG. 20, IMG. 21, IMG. 32, IMG. 33, IMG. 38, IMG. 88, IMG. 89) from the films *RDB*, *KPC*, *Newton*, *Article 15* play a very important role by clearly marking the political sensibilities of the spaces

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253 Michel Pastoureau, *Green. The History of a Color*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 48-49.

254 Neo-Buddhist Movement is a religious socio-political movement in India. It was started by Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar and led to a radical re-interpretation of Buddhism in India. As a result of this movement, along with Dr. Ambedkar, thousands of Dalits renounced Hinduism and converted to Buddhism.

255 "Why is blue the colour of Dalit resistance", livemint.com, accessed on February 10, 2020 under https://www.livemint.com/Politics/vSI3JCDhYr-noBObUCN6h1M/Why-is-blue-the-colour-of-Dalit-resistance.html.

they represent. All these narratives focus, among other topics, on the conflicting religious divides and by extension, the conflicting political representations and their implications.

Another recurring theme is Religion, Myth, Festivals and Folklore. Rachel Dwyer, while investigating the mythological film in India, looks into the influences of mythology and folklore on Indian cinema. She goes on to highlight how the traditional folk theatre, in its regional and multiple forms is a rich source of narrative[256]. While talking about the use of mythology in the social film, she explains that idea of accessing and constructing the (Indian) modernity through familiar discourses from the past, is particularly appealing to the masses and makes the narrative more relatable.

> In the social, mythological stories are brought into everyday world, where they are retold as part of daily life until the division between religious and the mundane is blurred. In these tellings, belief is not necessarily implied […]. The social film often provides an arena in which familiar stories are retold or referred to as the everyday is framed by myth, which can be used to narrate the way the world is and the way it should be.

> The major way in which mythology appears in the social film is the referencing of the mythological stories, usually those of the two great epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana.*[257]

Continuing on this line of observation, when I looked for traces of mythology, references to the epics, folklore in each of the chosen narratives, there were numerous examples to be found. Not only had the films drawn references from the epics, trying to paraphrase the stories from them but had also actually borrowed heavily from them in terms of symbolism.

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256   Rachel Dwyer, *Filming the Gods. Religion and Indian cinema*, (Oxon/ New York: Routledge, 2006), 17
257   Ibid., 145-146.

Films like *RDB*, *Swades, Parched* portray the folk tradition of *Ramlila*[258] where an effigy of *Ravana* is burnt down on *Dussehra* in order to mark the victory of the good over the evil – good being represented by *Ram* and the evil by *Ravana*. In *RDB*, in a sequence situated in the time during the Independence movement, plays out in a public space where a *Ramlila* performance is under way. Chandrashekhar Azad, who is on the run from the British – the good and the bad respectively, escapes by strategically placing the troops following him under the burning effigy in danger. The burning effigy of *Ravana* is not just a symbol anymore, by extension, it is also responsible for the burning down of the evil forces: the British. The metaphorical end of a dark age, represented through the burning of an effigy, is also a leitmotif that has been replicated in the other films. In *RDB*, the placing of this sequence at a crucial juncture in the film – namely a juncture where the protagonists are having a series of revelations about themselves, in the process of evolving – can be considered to be an indicator of changing times. In *KPC*, the presence of *Ramayana* may be visible only in indirect terms through the portrayal of the festival of *Navratri* (the tenth day of which is *Dussehra*), the sequence is strategically placed in the narrative in a manner that it precedes one of the most important moments in the life and beginning of the Saffron Rally. Though the impending change isn't exactly positive, it is a big change nonetheless, with a decisive impact on the narrative. The character of Omkar will not be the same this point onwards, since his journey to the far-right will not only be limited to ideological differences but will also have violent consequences. In *Swades,* the portrayal of the *Ramlila* is also placed in the narrative at a crucial juncture – just after a confrontational interaction between Mohan and the villagers in the school on the occasion of *Dussehra* and before Mohan decides to do some-

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258 *Ramlila* is a popular form of folk art, especially in North India and focuses on a dramatic re-enactment of various stories from the epic *Ramayana*. These re-enactments are staged during the nine-day festival of *Navratri* and on the tenth day of *Dussehra*, after the re-enactment of the war between the good and the evil, effigies of *Ravana* are burnt with fireworks.

thing about the lack of electricity in the village. Mohan is still very disappointed with the discussion preceding the performance but has also realized that if he wants to bring about change, he needs to lead by example. *Parched* also has a sequence portraying the burning of the effigy of *Ravana*. The time at which the burning of the effigy takes place in the film, interestingly coincides with Lajjo setting her hut on fire. Though most of the popular versions of the *Ramayana* ascribe *Ram* with the good deed of burning the demon, the sequence running parallel to the portrayal of the *Ramlila* shows Lajjo burning down her hut, her husband and walking away decidedly. Another reference to the *Ramayana* is the line around the hut that Janaki is so hesitant to cross – a direct reference to the *Lakshmanrekha.* In *Ramayana*, the character of *Sita* is asked to stay inside the compound of the hut and not cross the line drawn by her brother-in-law *Lakshman* (hence the name), for her own protection as he goes to rescue *Ram.* The filmmaker employs this reference to depict Janaki's hesitation to cross the boundaries of the compound and set foot in the outside world without anyone accompanying her. *Newton* and *Article 15* don't portray any sequences of *Ramlila* but contain multiple references over the entire course of the narrative that hint at *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata.* The references to *Ramayana* and *Mahabbharata* in *Newton* contain a double layer – while at one level they refer to the geographical location of the fabled *Dandakaranya*, about *Ravana* abducting *Sita*, at an indirect level, it is also a commentary on the rhetoric propagated by the Hindu right wing about the glorious Hindu past. *Article 15* has the character of Chandrabhaan narrating several tales from the *Ramayana* while he tries to draw Ayaan's attention to the persistent societal norms. All these references or direct portrayals of tales from the epics may seem to be superficial, but they serve a deeper purpose of relativising real-life experiences through the narration of mythological anecdotes and offering the audience context and familiarity to interpret the thematic strands being presented. Let us consider Chandrabhaan telling Ayaan the story of those who let their village be in darkness in order to allow the palace of *Ram* to shine. The context in which this story is being told is that of introducing

the protagonist into the narrative and also inserting him into a location and space. Through the opening sequence, the audience is now aware of the topics that the film will touch upon. When Chandrabhaan tells the story, it is an attempt to justify and legitimise, even to glorify the backwardness of some groups in the society, based on the argument that only through this act, which is seemingly being undertaken voluntarily, will it be possible to uphold the glory of the people ruling over them. This attempt at legitimising discrimination, under the guise of voluntary acceptance of being graded as lower than the rest, is a popular rhetoric and acceptable to a wide range of people. If God saw no harm in allowing this, how could humans think of questioning it? This opening sequence, story and its abysmal attempt at legitimising a problematic power equation helps the viewers to understand the story in context of the narrative and also understand one of the probable reasons why discrimination may still be acceptable to some.

There are a series of other leitmotifs present across the chosen films representing transformations and evolutions. A window or a door has often been used as a tool to represent the curiosity of the protagonist while also representing his apprehension, a sense of being objective to the realities he/she is being exposed to is a window. A window not only allows the protagonist to maintain a distance to the story, but also allows him/her a peek into what is happening, leaving it entirely up to them if they want to persist and get closer to the happenings and look at them from a closer distance, letting go of the divider and crossing over. In some images from *Swades*, *Newton* and *Parched*, a window is shown to be barred, also deepening its meaning. A protagonist, sitting behind a barred window not only represents his distance from the realities he is being exposed to, but also represents a sense of being trapped in his own realities. As a result, when Mohan looks out at the young boy selling water on a railway station platform, Mohan realises how trapped he is in the system that he is representing, in spite of being exposed to a different reality on the other side of the window (IMG. 51, IMG. 52). When Newton looks out of the window, it is a similar sense of being trapped in his own realities in spite of seeing a whole new

set of realities outside. Interestingly, the motif of the window has been used from both perspectives in *Newton* – once when the viewer is looking into Newton's setting from the outside while in the other perspective, the viewer is placed along with Newton in his setting and is looking outside with him (IMG. 40 and IMG. 43). These framings allow the outsider to look inside while also letting the insider to look outside. In *Parched*, Janaki is facing a similar predicament as she stands inside the cottage, looking outside (IMG. 71). The inside world is too suppressive, violent while the outside world is beckoning her with the possibility of freedom and self-determination. While she is trapped in one world, she is longing for an escape into another.

A door, as an extension of what the window represents, stands for a curb, a threshold and a gateway between two worlds. This tool has been used in all the chosen films here and is placed at a decisive juncture of a literal crossing over a threshold into the *Other*. It is also worth mentioning that the protagonists who are about to cross over into the *other* territory, often linger around at the door momentarily. In some sequences, they cross over while in some others they retract. In *RDB*, the protagonists are often seeing crossing gates, doors as they go back and forth between two time periods as well as the two worlds. In *KPC*, the inside spaces of characters are visibly different from each other, highlighting their differences while common spaces like a cricket ground and playground, where Ishaan is training Ali, are more mixed in terms of their composition. The conflict in the narrative begins when the inside spaces start manifesting themselves on the outside i.e. when the indoor spaces in a Hindu or a Muslim house-hold start claiming public spaces, it becomes a political act of marking ter-ritories, thereby excluding the *Other*. In *Newton*, the protagonist is often shown lingering around at the curb of the school where they are holding the elections without actually crossing over to the other side (IMG. 44). He is aware that the other side is widely different and unfamiliar but crossing over would entail a commitment on his part to explore the other side with an open mind. For this to happen, he would have to leave behind ideas he

is holding on to – like his unshakeable faith in idealism. Unless he lets go of his faith in idealism and his blind faith in the democratic principles, he will not be in a position to understand that the real world of the Adivasis on the other side is nowhere close to his ideas. What democracy is doing to them is not compatible with the ideals of a healthy democracy. But it takes him a while to make the decision to cross the threshold, in order to commit himself to understanding the *Other* side.

Swades also employs the image of a door to suggest a crossing over between cultures, conservative traditions and modernity. Over the course of the film, Mohan crosses over from one side to the other multiple times – from his caravan into rural India, Kaveri Amma and Gita's house, from a modern setup on the inside of his caravan into the conservative societal setup outside. The most decisive crossing over is when Mohan, after a long journey, crosses the threshold of Haridas's hut – a crossing over from the idealism of a beautiful, rural India into the realities of a victim of the wretchedness of the system that defines the day-to-day affairs in rural India. In *Parched*, just like in *Swades*, the protagonists cross thresholds at multiple junctures at different times. Whether it is Janaki crossing the threshold of the cottage, from her parent's house into the outside world when she is married off to Gulab or from inside Raani's cottage into the courtyard and then into the world beyond the cottage. Or, the final sequence where Lajjo crosses the curb of her cottage, for the last time before setting out on a new, different journey, free of violence and pressure that the cottage represented. *Article 15* has Ayaan crossing several thresholds by disregarding his caste affiliations and crossing over into unmarked public spaces, denoting the presence of a certain caste. Various means of transport like a car, van, boat, airplane etc. are also often employed to complement the inner journey that a protagonist is setting out on with an actual, physical journey that will help the protagonist get further on his journey of self-exploration and self-discovery. The image of a bridge represents a connection of two

distant ends – in this regard, cultures. A protagonist is often showed crossing a bridge at a crucial stage in his transformation in order to symbolise him/her bridging the gap – literally.

Yet another key element that has been regularly employed in some of the films to hint at an impending transformation is water. Water, by its fluid nature, is a perfect symbol to represent the fluidity of the concept of an identity. The degree to which it has been actively employed is varying and inconsistent. In *RDB*, for instance, there are brief, fleeting references to water that symbolise the beginning of a transformative phase or an awakening (IMG. 12, IMG. 13, IMG. 17). In Swades, water is a key element and is consistently present every time a key transformative process is in Mohan's life is impending. There are small, brief instances spread over the film –at the beginning of the film when he hesitates to drink non-bottled water and keeps away the glass (IMG. 46), when he switches from taking a shower in his caravan to taking a bath inside the house or then, as a symbol of his transformation, him stepping into the river to clean up after a round of wrestling (IMG. 59) towards the end of the film. There are also other key instances connected with water that signify bigger transformations. Particularly interesting is the imagery of his boat journey when he goes visit Haridas (IMG. 48) and the one while returning (IMG. 50). Both these images, though similar to each other in more ways than one, speak volumes about Mohan's state of mind. In the first image (IMG. 48), he is shown to be standing, looking forward to being done with this trip so he can travel back to the USA. He seems to be enjoying the boat journey, however challenging it is because of the number of people and their proximity. There is also a marked distance between him and the rest of the people. In the second image (IMG. 50), he is visibly dejected by Haridas's situation, feeling helpless and angry. Moreover, he is shown sitting amongst the rest of the people. There is also a stark contrast between the time before, during and after his visit to Haridas. Before and during his visit to Haridas, he is usually shown holding on to his bottled water and choosing to drink out of it (IMG. 49) vs. on his journey back from Haridas', he chooses to drink water

out of an earthen tumbler instead of bottled water signifying a complete transformation (IMG. 53). Another sequence employing the element of water to symbolise transformation is when he is standing on the banks of the river while the Ramlila is under way. He is furious, dejected, clueless, posing difficult questions to the society around him and wishing to bring about a transformation in the lives of the people there (IMG. 54). His main act in the film, that of making the village energy self-sufficient by designing a low-cost hydro-energy power station, is also connected with water. The image where he frees the mulch from the water turbines in order to let water flow freely is also a comment on the situation around him (IMG. 55). The image can be understood as his appeal to the villagers to get rid of the mulch in their thought process that is blocking their development, that they should allow their identities to freely flow and evolve keeping up with the times. In one of the key moments towards the end of the film, when he is back in the USA and wakes up missing India, the village terribly, he is briefly shown to be longing to dip his feet in the river in the village (IMG. 58) vs. his actual reality, a carpeted floor (IMG. 57). These images can be understood as a wish for his identity to be more fluid, free of the concrete, fix brackets that he has been struggling to fit in. In *Parched*, water as a key element isn't as consistently present as in *Swades* but has been employed brilliantly at a decisive point. It is the sequence in which after Lajjo has had sex with the mystic man and all the three women are shown jumping into the water in the dark of the night while the moon lightens up the sky, naked and rejoicing. (IMG. 73). It is clearly being celebrated by them as a moment of freedom. This decisive point marks a major transformation in the lives of the three women.

Water is also a key leitmotif in *Article 15* and is presented in important contexts. Water has a very close connection to the concept of purity in India and has been at the centre of numerous discussions when it came to

caste-based discrimination. There have even been localised social move-
ments like the *Chavdar Tale Satyagraha*[259] that focussed on establishing the
rights of the lower castes on water. V. S. Naipaul, in an interview with the
noted Dalit activist and writer Namdeo Dhasal[260], gained insights into this
complex when Dhasal narrates to him anecdotes from his childhood. Nai-
paul writes,

> Water is taught caste prejudices …

> That idea about water was important to him. He referred to it more
> than once. It came from his memories of the strict untouchability
> that prevailed in the village near Poona where he had grown up.
> The upper castes used the river upstream; the scheduled castes used
> the river downstream; and the upper castes used the river first. He
> had a memory of something that had happened when he was in the
> second standard. The village children didn't have caste prejudices;
> they would play together. One day he went bathing in a pond with
> some upper-caste boys. The guard spotted him and threw stones at
> him. He had defiled the pond. He was chased and stoned. He ran
> bleeding back to his own settlement and hid there. His mother was
> abused, and afterwards his mother beat him for defiling the pond
> and causing trouble.[261]

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259   Mahad Satyagraha or *Chavdar Tale Satyagraha* was a Satyagraha led by Dr. Ba-
      basaheb Ambedkar on March 20, 1927 to allow untouchables to use water in a
      public tank in Mahad (currently in Raigad district), Maharashtra, India.
260   Namdeo Lakshman Dhasal was a poet, writer and Dalit activist from Maharash-
      tra. Following the example of the American Black Panther movement, he founded
      the Dalit Panther movement with friends in 1972. This social movement worked
      for the reconstruction of society on the basis of the Phule, Shahu
      and Ambedkar movements.
261   V. S. Naipaul, *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (London/ Basingstoke/ Oxford: Pan
      Macmillan, 2011), 131-132, Kindle.

This brief anecdote explains the deep-rootedness of the problem, that continues to raise its ugly head even in today's modern day India. It was important to quote this anecdote here since large parts of the narrative in *Article 15* that are built around the element of water have bear in them traces of this caste-context. At the beginning of the film, when Ayaan is passing by a Paasi village, his associates try to dissuade him from drinking water there. At later stages in the film, water makes a repeated appearance. Then be it in the verses recited by Nishad where there is a context of sewage and manual scavenging, the actual image of a man emerging from the sewers after cleaning it (IMG. 87), or when there is a discussion of walking through the swamps to look for the missing girl and the actual point in time towards the end when Ayaan's colleagues seem to be hesitant for him to get down in the swamp and wade through it to look for the missing girl. The presence of water in these sequences isn't mere coincidence and serves a purpose in the context of allotted identities that expect people to stick to their allotted identities and not question them, not strive to break free of them as well as in the context of the evolution of identities. All these examples cited here and a number of other smaller, brief examples that have water present as an element either represent the social standing of a person based on his/her caste or a crossing of a border, of a transformation.

The use of water, door, bridge etc. as leitmotifs in the imagery in the context of identities is a vast topic and my attempt here is just scratching the surface. There could be entire research projects designed to dedicatedly look at this.

Though these are only a few handpicked examples of how education and transformation manifest themselves at the level of an image and how an image and sequence composition contribute to the narrative, there are certainly many more objects, other images as well present in some of the films or an individual film which contribute heavily to the evolution of the narrative.

6.   Conclusion

At the outset of this thesis, I had a number of questions that originated from my own perceptions, my understandings of a number of realities dominating the public discourse about day-to-day affairs in India. My perceptions, my understandings were shaped by a number of factors – from the society I grew up in in India, from the interactions I had with people outside of India (Indians and Non-Indians), from literature, art and films. These thoughts and deliberations played a very important role in exposing a lot of flaws in ideas of nationalism and patriotism, problematic societal systems like the caste system and demanded a critical questioning, a critical revisiting of ideas surrounding gender biases, discrimination, etc. The emergence of a new political discourse in India led to questions surrounding notions of nationalism, patriotism, discussions about an ideal Indian, etc. which over-arched the other debates. Considering that cinema, along with other forms of performative arts, not only mirror but also create new social trends, not only reflects existent value systems but also offer new value systems, I decided to look at cinematic manifestations of the issues mentioned, in order to understand the underlying currents and subtexts, in order to get a grasp of thought processes, political and societal mechanisms that would eventually enable me to answer questions surrounding the construction of identity. Over the course of this interrogation, I looked at six films representing various conflicts – each film focusing on a specific kind of conflict, while also hinting at the presence of other kinds of conflicts in the narrative in various degrees. The case studies, focusing on character, film and image analysis have not only enhanced my knowledge about India but also equipped me to answer the primary research questions focusing on understandings of culture and identity construction posited at the be-

ginning of this inquiry. In order to do justice to the comprehensive con-
clusions that I have drawn, I decided to divide this section in three parts as
answers to the initially raised questions.

- How do Bollywood films portray identity and cultural conflicts on
  the lines of nationalism, gender, modernisation, religion and caste?
  How are various cultural concepts like inter, multi and transcultur-
  ality portrayed in Bollywood? Do existing social identities of a pro-
  tagonist, like caste affiliations, location in a rural/urban milieu, re-
  ligion, sexuality etc., play an important role in defining the
  openness of a protagonist towards 'other' cultures?

Bollywood productions have always reflected the existent cultural diversity
in India in various degrees. While looking at the films considered here as
exemplary samples of contemporary Bollywood which are located at an
intersection between the genres of Masala, Social and Parallel, there
emerge certain patterns of how different understandings of culture and
identity are portrayed. These understandings are interwoven with notions
of nationalism, gender discourse, modernisation, religion, caste etc. within
the framework of each narrative respectively, which eventually impact the
perceptions of the protagonist(s) about how they perceive culture and their
own identity.

   To begin with, one of the most influential tools at a filmmaker's dis-
posal to highlight the '*Other*'ness in the society is that of space. As men-
tioned at an earlier point, the '*Other*'ness can only be constructed against
the template of the *Own*. In other words, in order to highlight the differ-
ences, it is first necessary to create a template of what the *Own* looks like.
Let us consider the example of the film *RDB*. In a narrative that is rife with
characters coming from various backgrounds, the audience has only been
allowed to become familiar with the backgrounds of DJ, Aslam and Karan,
as well as with the background of the secondary figure of Ajay to a certain
extent. While each of these figures is individually rooted in a very different
context, simultaneously, they are also rooted in a common context that

brings them together. Each of the individual contexts is portrayed differently, based on their religious, social and financial backgrounds. The difference in portrayal is evident through the choice of the spaces a filmmaker chooses to place these figures. Aslam's family and his home – they are all placed in a crowded lower-middle class neighbourhood. The interiors of the house point to the family being lower middle class, having limited means. From the conversation between Aslam and his father, his brother along with the visuals over the course of the film, it is evident that the area that they live in, is an area mostly populated by Muslims (IMG. 22 – IMG. 23). The space invokes the feeling of a ghetto at a subtle level. Karan, on the other hand, is representative of an upper-caste, affluent Hindu elite in the Indian society who are closely connected with politics. The space he, his family are placed in is a large, open, luxurious space flooded with light (IMG. 24). Aslam's space represents a sense of fear while Karan's space symbolises a consciousness of power and superiority. DJ, along with his mother and his grandfather is placed in a space which is representative of a middle class – the space is open, accessible, not luxurious and is a space that combines economic aspects of life with the personal ones since his family is living in a space which also doubles up as their workspace and their place of worship (IMG. 25 – IMG. 27). The aesthetics of these spaces are also specifically moulded according to the beliefs of its inhabitants. So, while the interiors of Aslam's house are shown to be a fading shade of green, symbolising the Islamic faith of the inhabitants, the fading shade of it points to a decay, which Aslam himself hints at when he points out that he feels claustrophobic in this space because of the conservative thoughts of the people in it. In short, the space can be considered a representation of the conservative cultural perceptions of the people living in it. The space representing Karan is more neutral of any allotted religious or cultural identity, while highlighting the business-like nature of it. His father makes money by corrupt means and the religious and social identities of the victims of this scheme, is hardly of any relevance. The space represent-

ing DJ is rooted in a more open, welcoming ethos, symbolised by the variety of people accessing it, without forgetting to highlight the presence of a religious aspect of the space. Similar examples hint at the social, religious identity of a protagonist, his/ her standing in the society that is represented through space in all the films chosen here.

Though the varied portrayals of spaces cannot be mistaken for varied understandings of culture, the choice of the spaces certainly help us to sort the characters into a so-called hierarchy in terms of their societal standing. Based on this, one could then move on to the question if these existent, allotted identities in any way influence the openness of a protagonist towards different cultural influences and new understandings of culture. The answer to this question is no. The existent, allotted identities certainly play an important role in creating and influencing certain worldviews and thinking patterns. Having said that, reiterating an earlier argument, the protagonist is not only a part of the space in which his/her family is rooted, he/she is also a part of other spaces which are different in their composition, spaces where the protagonist stands a chance to come in contact with other individuals who may be more like him/her on fronts, which are more important personally to the protagonist than the allotted social identities. Let us consider the example of Aslam, Karan and DJ - in spite of the varied backgrounds they come from, they have a common space, a sphere of interaction represented by their university. The interactions that take place in this space are not completely free of the social identities, but once the protagonists have realised that the commonalities among them – their thought processes, strong likes/dislikes – the differences move into the background. Their interactions in this space are more decisive than the pre-allotted identities. They allow the protagonists to discover new aspects of their personalities, new identities and eventually even enable the protagonists to transport these back into the space they originate from. When we consider each of these spaces as representations of different notions of culture, we can use Herder's model to depict them in order to visualise and understand the process of identity evolution and identity conflicts.
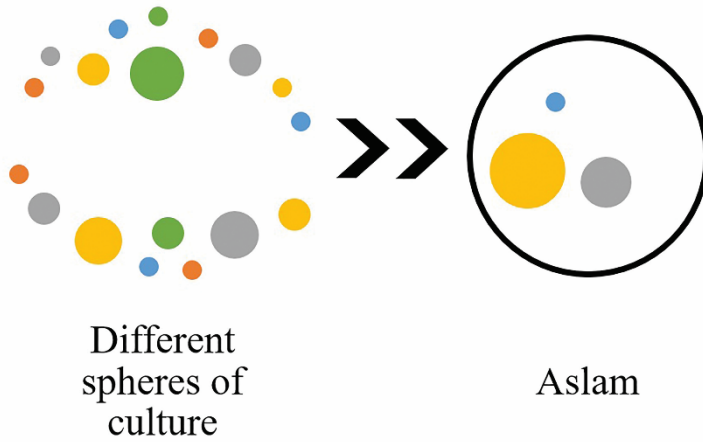
IMG. 91_Identities

An individual protagonist, represented here by Aslam, contains within him varied elements, inspirations, thoughts that he has taken back from his interactions with various social and religious circles, as well as from the historical narrative that he is a part of. This process of holding on to certain impulses, inspirations, thoughts and letting go of some has conscious and unconscious aspects to it. The degree of their influence on the protagonist is further decided by his/her own personal experiences, his own likes and dislikes and is not predictable from the point of view of an outsider. Even if two protagonists were to be a part of the exact same cultural spheres like in *KPC*, the protagonists can still evolve differently over the course of the narrative. This phenomenon is noticeable in every film chosen here and on serious consideration, even in the societies we live in. Individuals in a society, exposed to the same socio-political contexts, with a small degree of variation in terms of some of their social interactions with other, probably even insignificant groupings, eventually turn out to be different individuals. This observation validates the argument that identity constructs – either the constructed identity of a protagonist in a film or the identities of individuals in real life, are hierarchic and unique in nature. The allotted

social identities of caste, religion, gender, the urban-rural settings are perceptions based on ideas formulated by the society around them. The influence of these social identities on the identity of the protagonist is limited and is often countered by unique mechanisms and mutation processes that result in the creation of a unique identity which may or may not be open to ideas of *Other* cultures. Having said that, it is also noticeable – in the films as well as in real life – that the individuals, groups of individuals who are themselves subjected to injustice (or have seen someone close to them being subjected to it) and have been exploited (or have seen someone close to them being exploited) as a result of these existent societal identities are more prone to be open to new ideas of culture and modernisation, since it offers them a way out of the bondage of the unjust social identities. Traditionally privileged figures like Brahmadatt in *Article 15*, Gulab in *Parched,* etc. choose to uphold the allotted social identities because they enable them to legitimise their power exploits. Figures like Mohan in *Swades*, Ayaan in *Article 15* provide an antithesis to these figures because their perception of the injustice being meted out is stronger and profound than their own allotted societal identity. In the light of these examples, it would be safe to argue that the social identities play only a limited role in determining the openness of a protagonist to *Other* – culturally, socially, politically.

Going a step further here, it is also very relevant to see how the actor, who is chosen to play a particular protagonist in a film, brings along his own set of allocated identities and how those allotted identities can sometimes be at conflict with the identity of the protagonist the actor is playing in a film and get rejected by the audience or sometimes even enhance the role of the characters they are playing. Looking at the films that have been analysed here, one could easily consider the example of the two most popular actors – Shah Rukh Khan and Aamir Khan. It is public knowledge that both these actors are practising Muslims and are/were married to Hindu women (Shah Rukh Khan with Gauri Khan née Chibbar; Aamir Khan first with Reena Dutta, then with Kiran Rao – currently separated from both). Both the actors belong to a generation of artists that experienced success

while their religious affiliation played no or very little role. In her book *New Kings of the World*[262], Fatima Bhutto explores the complicated relationship between the personal identities of the three Khans – Shah Rukh, Salman and Aamir – and the changing political realities in India. About Shah Rukh Khan she says:

> Of all his contemporaries, Shah Rukh Khan's early life and career had been built on the old Nehruvian idea of India—pluralism, brotherhood, and symbiosis between its two biggest religions, Hinduism and Islam. Khan is Muslim while his wife, Gauri, is Hindu. His family came from Peshawar, Pakistan, but his father fought for India in 1947. His youngest son, born through surrogacy, is named AbRam, a combination of Abraham, a Muslim prophet, and Ram, a Hindu God. Straddling both India's ways of being, today Khan is a lonely figure. In his films, he was the bridge between socialist India, as it moved toward its hyper-capitalistic future, and a guide to how one could be modern but still principled and traditional in neoliberal India.

This syncretic background, a harmonious co-existence of two faiths which features in his personal space, could also be observed in his on-screen persona. At no juncture did it seem that his Muslim background was in any way hindering him from performing roles that posited him as an upper-caste, Hindu man. In fact, in his entire career spanning over decades, Shah Rukh Khan has played a Muslim character on screen only six times, three of them after 2016. Khan insists that it is mere coincidence and not a matter of political posturing[263]. Though Khan continues to be largely apolitical and silent on expressing his views on the socio-political developments in India, the few times he does it, it creates a stir. The difference,

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262 Fatima Bhutto, *New Kings of the World: Dispatches from Bollywood, Dizi, and K-Pop*, (New York: Columbia Global Report, 2019), Position 499-505, Kindle.

263 Ibid., Position 708.

however, is now in the perception of his Muslim identity by the political actors in India.

When in 2013, he wrote an opinion piece about being a Muslim in India post 9/11[264], he received an offer from neighboring Pakistan to resettle there. The Indian Home Minister as well local politicians back then, retorted by saying that Indian authorities were well capable of looking after its citizens and Khan issued a press statement saying that he didn't feel troubled or unsafe in India[265]. The political and the public space wasn't alarmed at him expressing opinions and neither did they suggest that he should move to Pakistan, he hadn't been *Other*ed based on his Muslim identity. Similarly, when he played the role of Rizwan Khan in *My Name is Khan* and addressed the issue of what it meant to be a Muslim in a post 9/11 world in some media interviews, barring some local political controversy in Mumbai, he didn't face a rejection from the audience. In other words, a co-existence of his allotted and chosen identities in the personal space – that of being a practicing Muslim man, married to a Hindu woman – and his syncretic beliefs and way of life didn't seem to be at crossroads with the identities that were allotted to the characters he played on screen – both were widely known and acceptable.

As opposed to that but on a similar note, in the wake of the promotions of an upcoming film *Pathan* (slated for release in 2023), right wing trolls dug up an old interview with Shah Rukh Khan where he addresses the growing intolerance in India and argued that his upcoming film should be boycotted based on this[266]. The hashtags #BoycottPathan, #BoycottPathanMovie have been trending on Twitter in India for a while now.

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264   "Read Shah Rukh Khan's article which appeared in Outlook Turning Points 2013" on ndtv.com, accessed on October 3, 2022 under https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/read-shah-rukh-khans-article-which-appeared-in-outlook-turning-points-2013-511771

265   "Shahrukh Khan's Muslim remarks Ignite Controversy" on thediplomat.com, accessed on October 3, 2022 under https://thediplomat.com/2013/02/shahrukh-khans-muslim-remarks-ignite-controversy/.

266   "Netizens say #BoycottPathanMovie, Shah Rukh Khan fans trend Pathan First Day First Show and India awaits Pathan" on dnaindia.com, accessed on October 3,

His syncretic way of life, the Hindu characters he has played on screen in the past – all of that has been deemed void by this political act. The only thing that matters in the eyes of the trolls is his Muslim identity and their rejection of it.

Aamir Khan has been comparatively a little more politically vocal over the years and the trajectory of his experiences is very similar to that of Shah Rukh Khans'. For the most part of his career, he too has played upper-caste, Hindu characters on the screen and has been popular amongst the audiences. Through his activism and involvement in social awareness projects like *Satyamev Jayate*[267], he has often been embroiled in controversy – but very rarely so because of him being a Muslim. The most recent controversy to hit him, however, has everything to do with his Muslim identity and the statements he made in that light. Right wing elements have appealed for a boycott his film *Lal Singh Chaddha* (2022) on Twitter, citing him being an Anti-National based on an older interview where he condemns the growing intolerance in the country. The hashtag #Boycott-LalSinghChaddha also trended on Twitter in India for a while.

Additionally, the Khan Trio – Shah Rukh, Aamir and Saif Ali – based on their choice of spouses in real life, have also been the object of allegations of *Love Jihad*[268] – an alleged conspiracy of Muslims in India to allure Hindu women to convert to Islam by marrying them, thus ensuring the growth of the Muslim population in India. The extreme right fringe finds this to be a 'dangerous' ideal to present to a new generation of youngsters since it normalizes an inter-faith relationship.

When one looks at the roles Shah Rukh Khan and Aamir Khan have played in the selected films here – Mohan in *Swades* and DJ/ Ram Prasad

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2022 under https://www.dnaindia.com/bollywood/report-netizens-say-boycott-pathan-movie-shah-rukh-khan-fans-trend-pathan-first-day-first-show-india-awaits-pathan-2977182.

267 http://www.satyamevjayate.in/.

268 "Wives of Shah Rukh, Amir Khan, Saif are victims of Love Jihad" on deccanherald.com, accessed on October 3, 2022 under https://www.deccanherald.com/content/455290/wives-shah-rukh-amir-khan.html.

Bismil in *Rang De Basanti* respectively – in the light of the developments mentioned above, one cannot help but wonder if the acceptance of these actors in the roles that they played would have been acceptable to the audience in today's time, if the personal (choice of faith) could stay free of the political or if it would necessarily be looked at in the light of the political, leading to a rejection of these actors in the roles they were cast in. Though the fan base of both these stellar actors continues to be huge and supportive, a strong presence of the right wing in social media and their ability to pose a real-time threat to the well-being and success of these actors has been a worrisome development.

In the light of the question here concerning the existing identities and the openness of the protagonists towards other cultures, I would say that the existent identities of the actors in question have allowed them to be open and respectful of the *Other* and personify it on screen when they play characters that are necessarily the *Other*. The attitude of the viewers, however, is undergoing a transformation. The social identities they allot to the actor (being a Muslim man) are increasingly influencing their acceptance of the protagonists the actor plays (of a Hindu and/or a Muslim man), in turn making them a little more closed to notions of *Otherness*.

Another tool that is at the disposal of the filmmaker is the power of the word. When I argued at the beginning of this inquiry that I wanted to look at the Film as Text, it also involved a part of looking at the text in a film. A powerful screenplay, well-suited to represent the complexities the filmmaker intends to address – especially in the context of the topics considered here – contributes to an efficient, accurate portrayal of the internal conflicts that the protagonist is going through. The usage of poetry like *Sarfaroshi ki Tamanna*, which is rooted deep in the history of Indian independence in *RDB* not only evokes a sense of familiarity among the audience but also provides a hint of an impending rebellion while also connecting it to a bigger sense of achieving freedom, just like in the case of the Independence struggle. Similar examples can also be found in the case of

Article 15 when the song *Vande Mataram* is used to refer to the independence struggle, to refer to the impending conflict at hand and how necessary it is to free ourselves of it. The differentiation here isn't as much between *Us* and *Them* as much as it is between *Then* and *Now*. In an interesting juxtaposition, the *Then* of colonial India is portrayed in a romanticised, even a progressive manner since it allows the filmmaker to create a space where the common people had joined forces to oust the colonisers. This can be considered as an attempt to appeal to the audience to join forces in a similar fashion in order to oust the evils of communalism, corruption, caste and gender.

Another recurring lyrical element is the one that highlights the portrayal of various aspects of alienation and '*Other*'ing. Usage of terminologies like *Qaum* to represent the political Muslim *Kulturnation*, the juxtaposition of the British rulers with the corrupt government in *RDB*; labelling the Muslims in Gujarat as *Other* asking them to turn elsewhere for help in a veiled reference to Pakistan in *KPC*; a variety of groupings like city people, election officers, police and military forces to describe the Outsiders in *Newton*; labels like outsider, foreigner and guest used to describe Mohan's status in *Swades*; labelling and ridiculing women who are interested in technological advancement and modern values like education as the bad ones by men, while legitimising their objectification in *Parched*; the verses recited by Nishad in *Article 15* highlighting the perpetual state of being alienated from the main society –some of the most strong lyrical representations of the *Other* in the chosen films.

The impact of each of these tools individually in each film is noteworthy in order to understand the visual language that is developed and transported to the audience, in order to highlight the different and varied nature of each cultural sphere, of the existent fissures at an individual level underlying the broader society. As I have highlighted before, it is imperative to understand the identity and cultural conflicts and the perceptions of the *Own* and the *Other* at an individual level, in order to then eventually understand the numerous nuances of the broader public discourse impacting our

societies. Especially in a society which may appear to be liberal or conservative at a broad level but has contradictory individual elements in it, understanding an individual's identity struggles and their social standing is important to understand the delicate fabric that holds the society together, or is responsible for creating divides in it. For instance, without knowledge of the conflicts that Ayaan and Nishad are experiencing at an individual level in *Article 15*, it would be difficult to understand the two very different standpoints and then using them as a point of reference in order to understand the public discourse in India in reality. The struggle of an individual with his/her identity is a micro-level example of the meta-level struggles of a society with the very fluid concept of culture.

- Does the portrayal of these diverse conflicts and cultural concepts give rise to a particular identity concept? Is there a stereotype of Indian identity that can be deduced from Bollywood?

At the outset of this inquiry, largely influenced through my personal exposure to and affinity to popular mainstream Bollywood productions, I was convinced that these films peddled a stereotype of an ideal Indian. There were two ideal Indians – an ideal Indian woman and an ideal Indian man (the other genders hadn't made a prominent appearance on the scene as yet). The traits that they individually represented were also demarcated along the lines of gender. The stereotype of an ideal Indian woman, up until the turn of the century, continued to be rooted in the depiction of the Indian woman as a *Pativrata*, a faithful, obedient wife, placing the well-being of her husband, her in-laws and her children above anything else. The *Other* of this, the modern Westernised woman, the Anglo-Indian woman, the Christian woman and the NRI woman were essentially that – they were the *Other* of the ideal[269] and not necessarily perceived as positive influences. The ideal Indian man, on the other hand, was mostly a worldly

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269   Geetanjali Gangoli, "Sexuality, Sensuality and Belonging: Representations of the 'Anglo-Indian' and the 'Western' Woman in Hindi Cinema" in *Bollyworld: Popular Indian Cinema thorough a Transnational Lens*, ed. Raminder Kaur and Ajay Sinha, (California/ London: Sage Publications, 2005), 146.

creature, who was still rooted in Indian culture. He was usually patriotic, a provider for the family, an ideal son, a good husband and a disciplinarian father. Even in social films, which dealt with delicate social questions, the protagonist, in addition to his liberal worldview, possessed these traits in varying degrees. The ethos of non-violence and self-sustenance inspired by Gandhi, as well as the socialist and secularist thoughts inspired by the Nehruvian ethos, combined with the Independence struggle, lay below the surface of these narratives. Though the notion of an ideal Indian was largely influenced by the majoritarian Hindu society in the country, the ideal Indian wasn't very exclusive in claiming his position of being an Indian by sheer virtue of being a Hindu. The films largely mirrored the syncretic, secular nature of the Indian society but also of the Bollywood industry itself where the religious communities continue to have their unique coexistence, but they interact and shape themselves in relation to the *Others*[270]. They portrayed secularism Indian-style – equal regard for all religions[271]. In other words, they portrayed the Hindu Ethos (not to be mistaken with the political Hindutva) in terms of religiosity. The one predominant aspect that they usually left out, unless required otherwise (like in *Sujata* or *Phulan Devi*), was the representation of people of caste. In a nutshell, the stereotype of an ideal Indian was a derivative of a range of his/her social, cultural and religious identities, embedded in the Gandhian and Nehruvian ideals and framed as a response to the *Other*. Barring some notable exceptions of films like *Ghulam* (1998), *Satya* (1998), *Vaastav* (1999) that fell under the category of Mumbai Noir, this stereotypical Indian around the turn of the century was the antithesis of an overtly individualistic, capitalistic, modern and even atheist protagonist.

As I delved deeper into the research about diverse identity conflicts, not only considering the chosen films here but a much wider range of films in the new century, a different picture started to emerge leading me to first

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270   Rachel Dwyer, *Filming the Gods. Religion and Indian cinema*, (Oxon/ New York: Routledge, 2006), 166.

271   Ibid., 133.

revisit my observations and then critically look at the stereotypes I just described. As mentioned before, the beginning of the 21st century also brought in its wake a lot of cultural, socio-political changes for the Indian society – the most important being an exposure to the Western world. The value systems and modern ideas like gender equality, access to education combined with the economic benefits and prosperity that came with the liberalisation of the Indian economy started making their presence felt in the new genre of indie cinema. Different communities and societies responded to this exposure to modern values in different manners. It continues to be a very curious process. On the one hand, a large number of people and communities, who had been traditionally placed at the bottom of the societal hierarchy and had limited or no access to education, exposure to values of Western modernity, saw modernity and education as their weapon to fight the discrimination and abuse that they had been subjected to since centuries. This group included women fighting for gender equality, lower castes fighting the rigid caste system, and even other religious denominations, especially the Muslims fighting systematic prejudices and right-wing propaganda. On the other hand, numerous privileged communities as well as individuals, who had been exposed to education, Western ideas of modernity, categorically rejected the demands of people asking to be treated equally and granted access to education for a simple reason – they felt that the social order which placed them at the top of the pyramid was now being threatened. This process started making its presence felt through the new crop of films being made – in mainstream Bollywood productions which could be categorised as social films, some films that could aptly be described as Masala films, as well as films that would fall under the category of Parallel Cinema. Films like *DCH*, which faced some criticism for unapologetically portraying the lifestyle of a frequent flyer and affluent youth, addressed the stigma in the Indian society surrounding a relationship where the woman is significantly older than the man and is a divorcee with a drinking problem. A number of films like *Kal Ho Na Ho* (2003), *Rang De Basanti* (2006), *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara* (2011), *Dil*

Dhadakne Do (2015) in the coming years started focusing more on the freedom (or lack thereof) to make individual choices putting the societal and family expectations in the background.

Eventually, almost as if to directly mirror what was happening in the society, there started emerging a small, yet a significant category that represented the *Other* of the ideal Indian as portrayed in films so far. This new generation of protagonists wasn't only highlighting their right to self-determination, but were also challenging existing social notions surrounding religion, caste and gender, which not only concerned their own individual fates, but also of other individuals. These protagonists can further be categorised into two sub-categories. In the first category, the protagonist belongs to an upper caste, is well-educated, mostly comes from a Hindu background and is asking uncomfortable questions, challenging his/her *Own*. Protagonists like Mohan in *Swades*, Ayaan in *Article 15*, Ishaan in *KPC*, Karan in *RDB* fall under this category. Protagonists, who had a personal experience of discrimination based on their allotted societal identity and rose to question these identities fall under the second category. Aslam in *RDB*, Nishad in *Article 15*, Newton in *Newton* are representative of this category. As opposed to earlier films falling under the genre of social films, the object of discrimination was now also being portrayed as a protagonist. This new version of the discriminated protagonist is often a self-conscious, educated youth. A key trait in all these protagonists was their acute awareness about them either being an instrument or an object of discrimination and their *Need* to address it by leading by example. The protagonists don't disavow their responsibility towards the society, instead choose to question its archaic structure. In some cases, like in *Newton* and *Article 15*, the protagonists also portray a strong belief in the Constitution, the envisioned democratic principle while being/becoming acutely aware of the drawbacks and pitfalls of those systems. It is important to note here that these new protagonists are patriots but not blind nationalists. They don't believe in the romanticised, self-glorified image of India where everything is perfect, but they certainly believe that India has the potential to be a great

country. Protagonists like Mohan in *Swades*, Ajay in *RDB*, Ayaan in *Article 15* categorically speak about this, while in other films, the actions of the protagonists signify their unwavering faith in this thought. This acute differentiation is necessary considering the current rhetoric in India, which makes it very easy to label dissenting people, who question the anomalies in existent structures, as traitors, anti-nationals, urban Naxals, etc. Our new protagonists could be categorised under the so-called labels of anti-nationals and 'urban Naxals' for their critical attitudes and approaches but they are citizens nonetheless, who believe in the potential that India has. As opposed to the protagonist of the 90s, the new-age protagonist doesn't shy away from challenging family and social traditions, is influenced by modernity while reaffirming his faith in the Gandhian, Nehruvian, Ambedkarite ethos – making him the *Other* Indian. This *Other* Indian is the antithesis of the 'good' Indian man, who also continues to exist in the film narratives. This good Indian man is a traditional, largely conservative, upper-class, well-educated, even a nationalist, Hindu figure who takes it onto himself to protect the cultural heritage of the *Leitkultur*, challenges and resents diversity, even resorting to violent means at times to that effect. Figures like Lakshman in *RDB*, Bittoo and Omkar in *KPC*, Brahmadatt in *Article 15* are some such examples.

Just like there emerged the *Other* Indian man, there also emerged the *Other* Indian woman. This *Other* Indian woman started becoming a more common and a prominent feature in Bollywood productions and went well beyond the established categories of women who fell under the banner of the *Other* - the Anglo-Indian woman, the Christian woman, the modern Westernised woman, the NRI Woman. The new breed of the *Other* Indian woman came in multiple varieties – the rural, the urban, the well-educated, the educated, young, old, married, single, etc. Most importantly, the discourse around the *Other* of the *Pativrata* Indian woman started changing – the negative perception of the *Other* started changing. As opposed to the portrayal of a Westernised modern woman, symbolised by scantily dressed, drinking, smoking woman characters, the new figures came to be rooted

more in Indian modernity. These female protagonists aren't fulfilling the function of being just a female character in the film, they are portrayed to be serious characters, with a concrete world-view, with insights and ideas about their own position in the societal hierarchy. Most importantly, they started to play a decisive role in the film narrative. More than often, the conflict between the societal perception about their role and position and their own perception of their role, position, aspirations, is very real. This conflict has been the topic of many films like *Life in a Metro* (2007), *Lipstick under my Burkha* (2016), *Dangal* (2016) and *Mission Mangal* (2019). An increasing number of films are placing female protagonists in important roles along with the male protagonist, offering them a bigger and a serious space to deliberate on issues. Figures like Gita in *Swades*, Raani, Bijlli and Lajjo in *Parched*, Malko in *Newton*, Dr. Malati Ram and Aditi in *Article 15* – irrespective of their status as primary or secondary protagonists – have a decisive role to play in altering and influencing the world view of the male protagonist and leave a profound impact on his life, as well as the society around them, by taking a stand. The *Other* Indian woman is very close to the reality of modern India and is representative of women across different sections of the society. Interestingly, the barriers of caste, religion, nationhood are secondary when it comes to differentiating between the *Other* and the *Pativrata* Indian woman – the main point of contention is their approach and understanding of Modernity while demanding equality. On the one hand, we see their own sense of victimhood and solidarity with other women, their views about attaining equality in the society often playing an important role in bringing them together with other women, regardless of caste, religion and nationhood. On the other hand, we see a clear pattern of how society uses their primary identity as being a woman, together with divisions of caste and religion to further discrimination. This approach is, for instance, clearly visible in *Parched*. Over the entire course of the film, none of the woman protagonists have spoken about caste, the bond that unites them is that of them being a woman. But when it comes to being

the object of discrimination and abuse, the society, in addition to their already degraded status as women, also looks at them through various other criteria like marital status, presence of a child as well as caste, religion, etc. leading to the emergence of intersectional patterns of discrimination. In the case of *Parched*, Lajjo is perceived to be an infertile woman, Raani is a widow, Lajjo is a dancer while Janaki, in addition to being a girl, is aspirational and wants to study. All these additional adjectives increase the propensity of them being objects of discrimination compared to other women in the village, who may be married, have children and are uneducated.

To sum it up, the 21st century not only saw the emergence of new variety of conflicts in Indian society but also the emergence of a new category of cinema – crossing across established and non-established genres. This new genre focussed on the disparities between societal expectations, allotted social identities and the aspirations of an individual and the conflicts arising out of it. While the historically traditional, conservative predecessor of the protagonist continues to make his presence felt in the film narratives, the new breed of the *Other Indian* protagonist is equally present and pervasive, mirroring the realities of a dynamic Indian society, especially in the genre of "Cinema of Identity Conflict".

- Is there a particular genre of "Cinema of Identity Conflict" in Bollywood?

In order to be able to answer to this question, it is first necessary to understand the concept of genre. Renowned film scholar Barry Grant has extensively dealt with the topic of genre in his book *Film Genre. From iconography to ideology*[272]. While describing the nature of genre, he explains,

> Genres are neither static nor fixed. Apart from problems of definition and boundaries, genres are processes that are ongoing. They undergo change over time, each new film and cycle adding to the tradition and modifying it. Some critics describe these changes as

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272   Barry Grant, *Film Genre. From iconography to ideology*, (London: Wallflower Press, 2007).

evolution, others as development, but both terms carry evaluative connotations. Rick Altman theorises that generic change can be traced by the linguistic pattern wherein the adjectival descriptors of generic names evolve away from their anchoring terms and become stand-alone nouns. His examples include epic poetry, out of which the epic genre emerged, and the musical, which developed from musical comedy. [273]

This approach to understanding genre as a continuous, dynamic process that is constantly evolving and undergoing modifications is a very interesting approach and bears resemblance to the model of a rhizome. Similar to a rhizome, a genre is continuously in the process of becoming, influenced by the contemporary socio-political situations in any given cultural and cinematic context. Considering Rick Altman's analogy that Grant refers to in the context of Bollywood, one could also observe similar patterns. Expanding the horizons of Altman's argument that generic change can be traced by understanding how dynamic linguistic patterns lead to the creation of a stand-alone genre, we could connect the evolution of dynamic linguistic patterns to contemporary happenings in any society. In simpler terms, as the modern Indian society alters its perceptions about belonging, similarities and differences, about politics of nationhood, the changed perceptions come to be represented in the language and sometimes, even the semantics of a word. The notions of what words like *Own, Other, Indian,* etc. represent at a societal, meta-level undergoes a profound change, which eventually finds its way into art forms as well. Simultaneously, at a microlevel, the perceptions of individual protagonists about their own identity and their understandings and responses to topics like belonging, similarities and differences, politics of nationhood, they experience an identity conflict.

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273   Ibid., 35.

Building up on Altman's argument, I would also like to suggest that a generic change is not only a linear process (socio-political events –> linguistic manifestations –> cinematic representations), but it is also a process of representations moving from a micro-level to a meta-level. As already mentioned before, a lot of research has been conducted on the meta- level representations of the myths, but a detailed analysis of the micro-level, focusing on the evolution of the protagonist and the inner conflicts he/she undergoes as a part of this process has been missing. The suggested genres of Devotional, Historical, Social, Muslim social, Masala, Romantic, along with the meta-concept of Parallel Cinema are defined largely based on the cinematic representations and treatments of a variety of plots and issues as well as the production and aesthetics of a film at a meta-level. Even the time frame in the 1970s and 1980s that was characterised by the 'Angry Young Man' phenomenon, the films were categorised under the banner of Masala film. Considering this gap in research, especially in the light of the nature of the contemporary societies we live in, the conflicts that challenge them and an interconnectedness between the conflicts as well as societies, it was necessary to look into individual-focussed representations which portray the happenings in a society at an individual, micro-level.

A film that consciously looks at the internal journey of a protagonist at this micro-level and looks at it as a response to the events and happenings around him/her in any given plot, while unravelling the correlation between the meta- and the micro-level can be considered to be a film befitting the category of "Cinema of Identity Conflict". (I am consciously using the term category instead of genre, the reasons for which I have provided towards the end of this part.) The films falling under this category can fall under various traditional genres like Masala film, Social film, Gender film etc. while consciously interrogating the individual journeys of the protagonists and showing their struggles with themselves, with the society and the value systems which define their lives and their individual evolution. I am not talking here about just identifying broad societal trends,

I am talking about looking at the multitude of individual journeys, within the framework of one single film and how these individual journeys are contributing to a change in the cultural understandings and perceptions of the protagonists.

Grant further looks into the complex role a myth plays in the context of the creation of genre. He says,

> Traditionally, the term 'myth' refers to a society's shared stories, usually involving gods and mythic heroes, that explain the nature of the universe and the relation of the individual to it. Such mythic narratives embody and express a society's rituals, institutions and values. […] In mass-mediated society, we huddle around movie screens instead of campfires for our mythic tales. Comparable to myths, genre movies may be understood as secular stories that seek to address and sometimes seemingly resolve our problems and dilemmas, some specifically historical and others more deeply rooted in our collective psyches. […] In their mythic capacity, genre films provide a means for cultural dialogue, engaging their audiences in a shared discourse that reaffirms, challenges and tests cultural values and identity.[274]

Films that fall under the category of "Cinema of Identity Conflict" are secular stories as understood by Grant. These stories seek to address a variety of questions that we face – as an individual as well as a society. Considering the unique nature of genres in Bollywood and their interconnectedness as well as frequent overlaps in terms of genre, it would be wrong of me to say that only films falling under the category of social cinema are suitable to be classified into this category. However, the categories of the Historical and the Devotional can be certainly excluded from being considered here in light of the fact that these films have several restrictions

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274   eIbid., 29-30.

like being associated with a fixed time frame, historical accuracy, limitations in portrayal of religious myths considering religious sensitivities, etc. Most importantly, through their inherent narrative restriction of being situated in the past, they have limited or no influence on the protagonist in changing or altering his/her understanding of culture in the contemporary context (unless the filmmaker decides to use the historical to comment on the contemporary like in *RDB*).

It wouldn't be odd for a film falling under the category of "Cinema of Identity Conflict" to consist of elements of other genres, including the usage of a song and dance sequence if they can relay the encoded social message more effectively. Films like *Swades* or *Article 15* have employed the use of song-and-dance or song sequences in order to signify the societal, cultural contexts relevant to the narrative at the given point. A film like *Parched*, on the other hand, while bearing signs of being a film falling under the category of Parallel Cinema, has still employed the popular song-and-dance sequence, item-song strategy while ensuring that its usage is justified. *KPC* and *RDB* on the other hand, being typical Masala films, contain elements of multiple genres. What is common to all of them is the internal journey and the evolution of the protagonist(s) and the evolution in his/her position pertaining to their understanding of culture.

Over the course of this thesis, I realised that the static concept of Genre, as it has been widely understood, is not suitable to look at today's cinema. Firstly, because the origins of the term genre are strongly rooted in the evolution and history of Hollywood and other cinematic cultures in the West. Secondly, the term genre has been often perceived to be a static construct with defined characters and in my opinion, this parameter is hugely ill-fitting when we look at the manner and the pace in which our socio-political, cultural contexts are changing. Since the "Cinema of Identity Conflicts" cuts across various genres leading to the emergence of subgenres, one could draw the conclusion that the Cinema of Identity Conflict may well not be a genre in the classical sense. Instead, it functions as a meta genre which interferes with the classical narrative practice and leads to the

discovery of films that could fall under this category. The consideration and an in- depth engagement with this category as a stand-alone category is way more important than any attempt to fit it into any of the traditionally popular genres of cinema. It is a dynamic meta concept, an open-ended extension of the concept of Genre which allows us to dismantle different established, classical genres while also instigating us to look at genres as fluid concepts and not static. The films that can be classified into this category are secular narratives as understood by Grant and focus on the politics of identity construction. To identify films belonging to this genre, the primary question that needs to be asked is how a protagonist undergoes a profound shift in his/ her position concerning questions of belonging, equality based on religion, caste, gender etc. over the course of a film.

Last but not least, the criteria I have pointed out here that help in identifying a film falling under the category of "Cinema of Identity Conflict" are not limited only to Bollywood productions. Films coming from other film cultures like *Almanya* (2011) or *Parasite* (2019) could also be considered as films falling under this category. *Almanya*, a German production telling the story of a Turkish immigrant family focuses on the search of a homeland, the issue of belonging across three generations. The narrative focuses on how the identities of multiple protagonists in a *Figurenensemble* evolve and how each of them has a different understanding of belonging. The filmmakers have also employed two languages to portray the feeling of being torn between two worlds. The narrative in the case of *Parasite* focuses on the individual journeys of each member of the two *Figurenensembles* (Family Kim and Family Park) which constitute the *Figurenmosaik* in the film. Their identities are constantly being negotiated over the course of the film. The process of their evolution in correspondence with their external surroundings represents some of the realities of today's society in South Korea in a very vivid fashion. In my understanding, though this category may be small and even restrictive in terms of the films that could qualify to befit this category, it is nonetheless important to acknowledge and understand the presence of this category since these films are important.

These films can be read as a commentary on the socio-cultural, political issues of our times. They are individual stories, representative of the numerous challenges, changes and negotiations of cultural paradigms of our times.

To understand the challenges modern societies face, it is necessary to understand the individual journeys, transitions and transformations. Just like culture, identity constructions cannot be singular, hierarchic and fixed. It is necessary to understand that an individual (as well as the society) in today's time and age will constantly be in the process of becoming and that it would be meaningless to attempt to assign them fixed, rigid identities. The films falling under the category of "Cinema of Identity Conflict" are truly representative of our modern day, diverse societies.

Illustrations

Chapter 4.1.1

IMG. 8, RDB, Ashfaqullah Khan applying Soorma

IMG. 9, RDB, Ram Prasad Bismil taking a ritual bath

IMG. 10, RDB, Shivram Rajguru inside prison

IMG. 11, RDB, Bhagat Singh reading Lenin

IMG. 12, RDB, Entering a Gurudwara

IMG. 13_Ritual dip in the Gurudwara

IMG. 14, RDB, Defense Minister Shastri
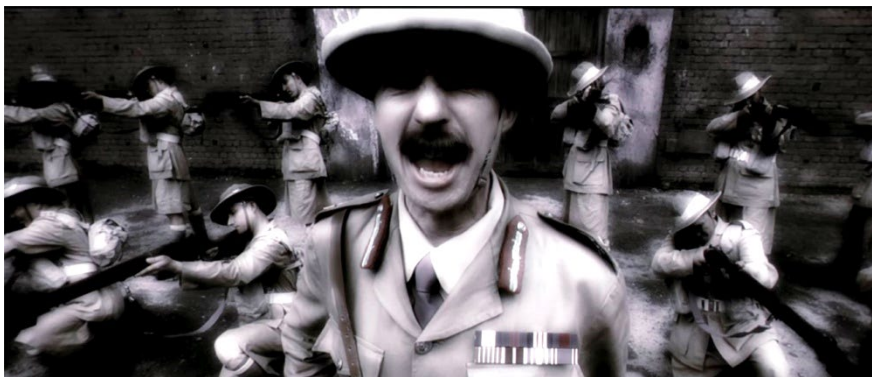
IMG. 15, RDB, Colonel Dyer

IMG. 16, RDB, Aslam's father praying in the mosque

IMG. 17, RDB, Sadhu offering Arghya

IMG. 18, RDB, Praying for acceptance of the sacrifice

IMG. 19, RDB, War Memorial Amar Jawan Jyoti

IMG. 20, RDB, Saffronizing public spaces

IMG. 21, RDB, Conversation at the party office

IMG. 22, RDB, Area with a Muslim majority

IMG. 23, RDB, Conversation with Aslam's family

IMG. 24, RDB, Karan at home

IMG. 25, RDB, DJ's mother eatery

IMG. 26, RDB, DJ's terrace

IMG. 27, RDB, Gurudwara in DJ's Backyard
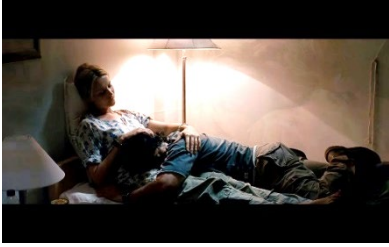
IMG. 28.1, RDB, DJ asleep 1

IMG. 28.2, RDB, DJ asleep 2

IMG. 28.3, RDB, DJ asleep 3

IMG. 28.4, RDB, Trapped protestors

IMG. 28.5, RDB, General Dyer ordering 1

IMG. 28.6, RDB, Trapped children

IMG. 28.7, RDB, General Dyer ordering 2

IMG. 28.8, RDB, Defense minister ordering 1

IMG. 28.9, RDB, General Dyer ordering 3

IMG. 28.10, RDB, Defense minister ordering 2

IMG. 28.11, RDB, Ajay 1

IMG. 28.12, RDB, Defense minister ordering 3

IMG. 28.13_Ajay 2

IMG. 28.14, RDB, Defense minister bidding adieu

Chapter 4.1.2

IMG. 29, KPC, watching over Ali

IMG. 30, KPC, Muslim boy entering a Hindu compound

IMG. 31, KPC, Cracks in a bridge

IMG. 32, KPC, Election campaign in a Muslim dominated area

IMG. 33, KPC, Election campaign in a Hindu dominated area

IMG. 34, KPC, Omkar staring down

IMG. 35, KPC, Ishaan dead
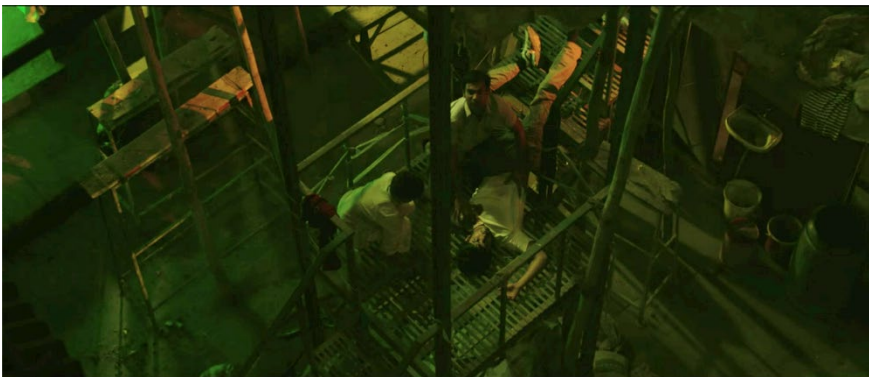
IMG. 36, KPC, Govind looking at Omkar

IMG. 37.1, KPC, Moving car 1

IMG. 37.2, KPC, Moving car 2

IMG. 37.3, KPC, Moving car 3

IMG. 37.4, KPC, Omkar in rear view mirror

IMG. 37.5, KPC, Garland in the car

IMG. 37.6, KPC, Godhra train accident in the news 1

IMG. 37.7, KPC, Gohdra train accident in the news 2

IMG. 37.8, KPC, Watching the Godhra news in the party office

IMG. 37.9, KPC, Grieving Omkar 1
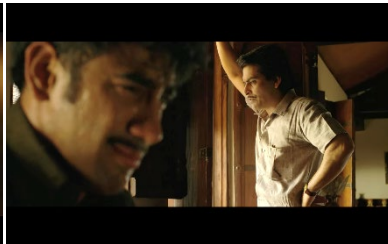
IMG. 37.10, KPC, Grieving Omkar 2

IMG. 37.11, KPC, Empty temple premises

IMG. 37.12, KPC, Incitement at the party office 1

IMG. 37.13, KPC, Incitement at the party office 2

IMG. 37.14, KPC, Reflection of Omkar and Ishaan

IMG. 37.15, KPC, Reasoning with Omkar

IMG. 37.16, KPC, Omkar retorting back

IMG. 37.17, KPC, Falling apart

Chapter 4.1.3

IMG. 38, Newton, Election campaign

IMG. 39, Newton, Newton's house

IMG. 40, Newton, Newton, Ambedkar and a window

IMG. 41, Newton, Military presence outside an election booth

IMG. 42, Newton, Newton in front of a blackboard

IMG. 43, Newton, Looking outside

IMG. 44, Newton, Standing on the curb
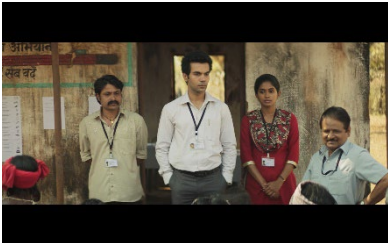
IMG. 45.1, Newton, Interacting with the villagers 1
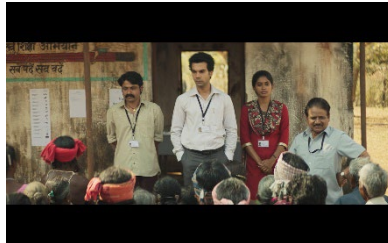
IMG. 45.2, Newton, Interacting with the villagers 2

IMG. 45.3, Newton, Interacting with the villagers 3
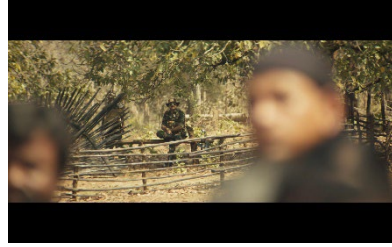
IMG. 45.4, Newton, Interacting with the villagers 4

IMG. 45.5, Newton, Interacting with the villagers 5
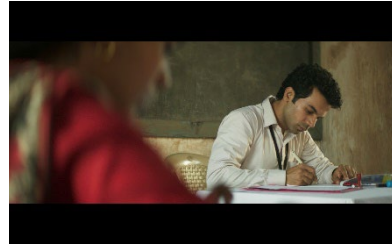
IMG. 45.6, Newton, Election process 1
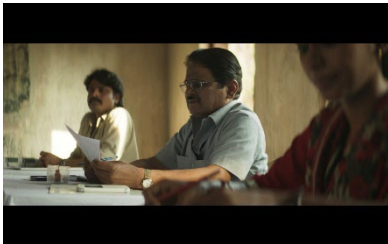
IMG. 45.7, Newton, Election process 2

IMG. 45.8, Newton, Election process 3

IMG. 45.9, Newton, Election process 4
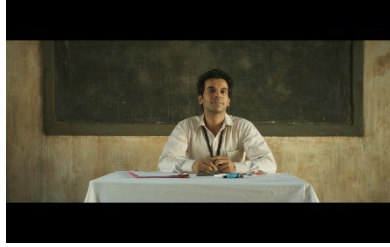
IMG. 45.10, Newton, Election process 5

IMG. 45.11, Newton, Election process 6
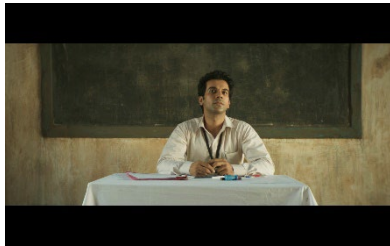
IMG. 45.12, Newton, Election process 7
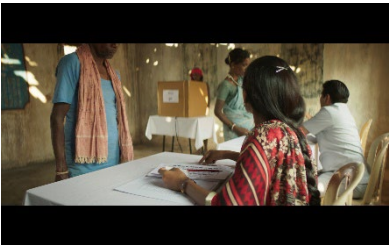
IMG. 45.13, Newton, Election process 8

IMG. 45.14, Newton, Election process 9

IMG. 45.15, Newton, Election process
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IMG. 45.16, Newton, Explaining
elections to the villagers 1

IMG. 45.17, Newton, Explaining
elections to the villagers 2

IMG. 45.18, Newton, Explaining
elections to the villagers 3

IMG. 45.19, Newton, Explaining
elections to the villagers 4

Chapter 4.2.1

IMG. 46, Swades, Rejecting non-bottled drinking water

IMG. 47, Swades, Screen acting as a divider

IMG. 48, Swades, Journey to see Haridas

IMG. 49, Swades, Holding on to bottled water

IMG. 50, Swades, Getting closer to being one of the locals

IMG. 51, Swades, Looking down at the boy

IMG. 52, Swades, Looking up at Mohan
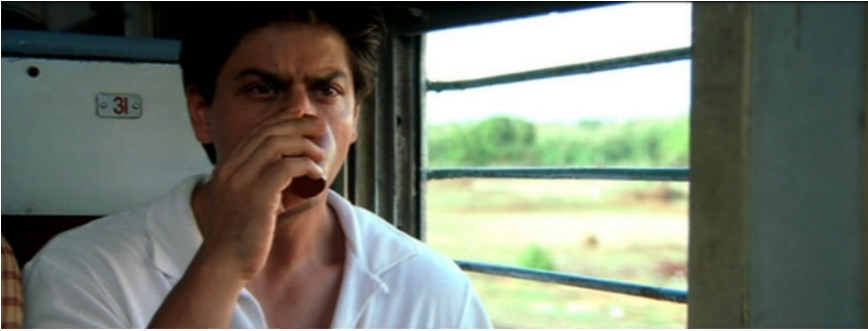
IMG. 53, Swades, Drinking non-bottled water

IMG. 54, Swades, Feeling dejected

IMG. 55, Swades, Clearing up the mulch

IMG. 56, Swades, Light

IMG. 57, Swades, Feet on a carpeted floor in the US

IMG. 58, Swades, Feet in the water in India

IMG. 59, Swades, Transformation is complete

IMG. 60.1, Swades, Journey to meet Haridas 1

IMG. 60.2, Swades, Journey to meet Haridas 2

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IMG. 60.3, Swades, Journey to meet Haridas

IMG. 60.4, Swades, Interacting with Haridas 1

IMG. 60.5, Swades, Interacting with Haridas 2

IMG. 60.6, Swades, Interacting with Haridas 3

IMG. 60.7, Swades, Interacting with Haridas 4

IMG. 60.8, Swades, Interacting with Haridas 5

IMG. 60.9, Swades, Interacting with Haridas 6

IMG. 60.10, Swades, Interacting with Haridas 7

IMG. 60.11, Swades, Interacting with Haridas 8

IMG. 60.12, Swades, Interacting with Haridas 9

IMG. 60.13, Swades, Interacting with Haridas 10

IMG. 60.14, Swades, Thinking about Haridas' situation 1

IMG. 60.15, Swades, Thinking about Haridas' situation 2

IMG. 60.16, Swades, Bidding goodbye 1

IMG. 60.17, Swades, Bidding goodbye 2

IMG. 60.18, Swades, Return journey from Haridas 1

IMG. 60.19, Swades, Return journey from Haridas 2

IMG. 60.20, Swades, Return journey from Haridas 3

IMG. 60.21, Swades, Return journey
from Haridas 4

Chapter 4.2.2

IMG. 61, Parched, Deserted bus stop

IMG. 62, Parched, Women with covered heads

IMG. 63, Parched, Letting the head cover slip

IMG. 64, Parched, Finalising a bride

IMG. 65, Parched, Watching porn

IMG. 66, Parched, Stowed away doll

IMG. 67, Parched, Attempting physical intimacy

IMG. 68, Parched, Looking at the doll through the veil

IMG. 69, Parched, Intimate moment between Raani and Lajjo

IMG. 70, Parched, Intimate moment between Janaki and Lajjo

IMG. 71, Parched, Looking outside through a window

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IMG. 73, Parched, Rejoicing in the moonlight

IMG. 74, Parched, Forced intimacy

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IMG. 76, Parched, Travelling without a veil

IMG. 77, Parched, Letting go of the veil

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IMG. 78.2, Parched, Driving to pick up Raani 2

IMG. 78.3, Parched, Raani

IMG. 78.4, Parched, Raani leaving with Lajjo

IMG. 78.5, Parched, Janaki
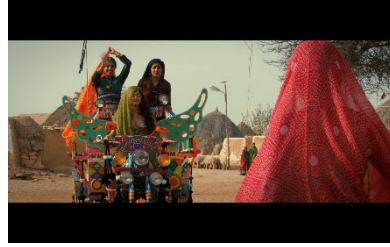
IMG. 78.6, Parched, Raani ready to leave
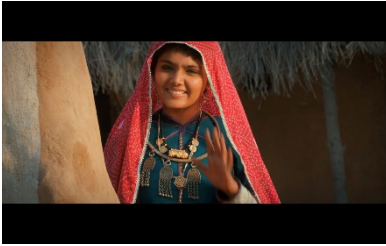
IMG. 78.7, Parched, Curious Janaki

IMG. 78.8, Parched, Four women travelling together 1

IMG. 78.9, Parched, Four women travelling together 2
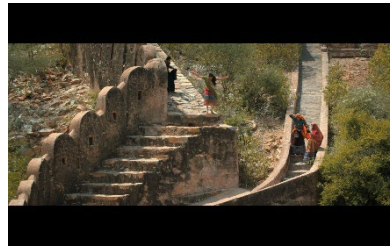
IMG. 78.10, Parched, Four women together at the fort 1

IMG. 78.11, Parched, Four women together at the fort 2

IMG. 78.12, Parched, Discussion between Lajjo, Bijli and Raani 1

IMG. 78.13, Parched, Discussion between Lajjo, Bijli and Raani 2
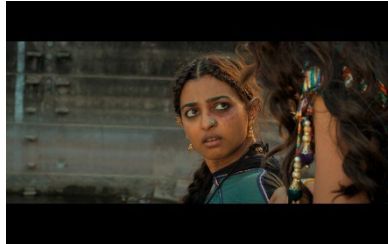
IMG. 78.14, Parched, Discussion between Lajjo, Bijli and Raani 3

IMG. 78.15, Parched, Discussion between Lajjo, Bijli and Raani 4
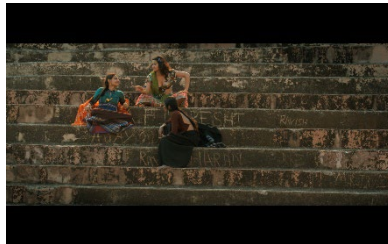
IMG. 78.16, Parched, Discussion between Lajjo, Bijli and Raani 5
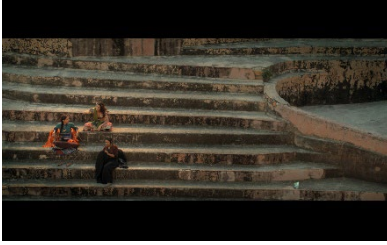
IMG. 78.17, Parched, Discussion between Lajjo, Bijli and Raani 6
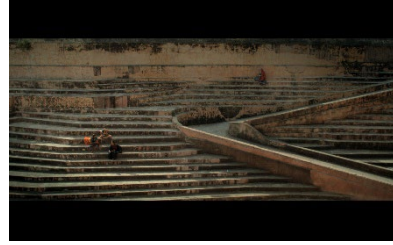
IMG. 78.18, Parched, Discussion between Lajjo, Bijli and Raani 7

IMG. 78.19, Parched, Discussion between Lajjo, Bijli and Raani 8

IMG. 78.20, Parched, Four women together at the fort 3

IMG. 78.21, Parched, Four women together at the fort 4

IMG. 78.22, Parched, Four women together at the fort 5

Chapter 4.2.3

IMG. 79, Article 15, Singing under a shelter in the rains

IMG. 80, Article 15, A bus passing during the rains

IMG. 81, Article 15, A young girl in the bus

IMG. 82, Article 15, Ambedkar

IMG. 83, Article 15, Cruising along the highway

IMG. 84, Article 15, Discovery of India

IMG. 85, Article 15, Caste hierarchies at play

IMG. 86, Article 15, Talking at an eye level

IMG. 87, Article 15, Manual scavenging

IMG. 88, Article 15, Political flags at an election rally

IMG. 89, Article 15, Political colours in a public space

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IMG. 90.1, Article 15, Ruins of a school 1

IMG. 90.2, Article 15, Ruins of a school 2

IMG. 90.3, Article 15, Nishad approaching

IMG. 90.4, Article 15, Gaura and Nishad meet

IMG. 90.5, Article 15, Ayaan watching from a distance 1
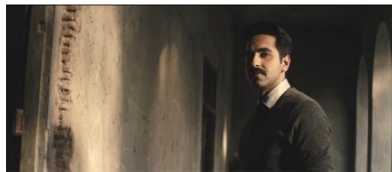
IMG. 90.6, Article 15, Ayaan watching from a distance 2

IMG. 90.7, Article 15, Hole in the wall

IMG. 90.8, Article 15, Nishad talking to Ayaan

IMG. 90.9, Article 15, Conversation between Ayaan and Nishad 1

IMG. 90.10, Article 15, Conversation between Ayaan and Nishad 2

IMG. 90.11, Article 15, Conversation between Ayaan and Nishad 3

IMG. 90.12, Article 15, Conversation between Ayaan and Nishad 4

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Filmography

This is a list of the films I watched with the concrete aim to see which of them would be suitable for my research and allow me to look at the questions I have posed.

I have also mentioned the films (international as well as Indian) which have influenced my understanding of identity and the journey of the Hero.

Primary Films:

Rang De Basanti. Directed by Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra. India: 2006. Netflix.

Kai Po Che. Directed by Abhishek Kapoor. India: 2013. Netflix.

Newton. Directed by Amit Masurkar. India: 2017. DVD.

Swades. Directed by Ashutosh Gowariker. India: 2004. DVD.

Parched. Directed by Leena Yadav. India: 2015. YouTube.

Article 15. Directed by Anubhav Sinha. India: 2019. Netflix.

Other Films:

1942. A Love Story. Directed by Vidhu Vinod Chopra. India: 1994.

3 Idiots. Directed by Rajkumar Hirani. India: 2009.

Aandhi. Directed by Gulzar. India: 1975.

Almanya. Willkommen in Deutschland. Directed by Yasemin Samdereli. Germany: 2011.

Amu. Directed by Shonali Bose. India: 2005.

Angrezi Medium. Directed by Homi Adjania. India: 2020.

Bandini. Directed by Bimal Roy. India: 1963.

Bend it like Beckham. Directed by Gurinder Chadha. USA: 2002.

Bombay. Directed by Maniratnam. India: 1995.

Border. Directed by J. P. Dutta. India: 1997.

Charulata. Directed by Satyajit Ray. India: 1964.

Court. Directed by Chaitanya Tamhane. India: 2014.

Dangal. Directed by Nitesh Tiwari. India: 2016.

Deewar. Directed by Yash Chopra. India: 1975.

Delhi-6. Directed by Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra. India: 2009.

DevD. Directed by Anurag Kashyap. India: 2009.

Dil Chahta Hai. Directed by Farhan Akhtar. India: 2001.

Dil Dhadakne Do. Directed by Zoya Akhtar. India: 2015.

Dil Se. Directed by Mani Ratnam. India: 1998.

Dil to Pagal Hai. Directed by Yash Chopra. India: 1997.

Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge. Directed by Aditya Chopra. India: 1995.

Dor. Directed by Nagesh Kukunoor. India: 2006.

Dostana. Directed by Tarun Mansukhani. India: 2008.

Earth 1947. Directed by Deepa Mehta. India: 1998.

English Vinglish. Directed by Gauri Shinde. India: 2012.

Fandry. Directed by Nagraj Manjule. India: 2013.

Fire. Directed by Deepa Mehta. India: 1996.

Fiza. Directed by Khalid Mohamed. India: 2000.

Gadar. Ek Prem Katha. Directed by Anil Sharma. India: 2001.

Garm Hava. Directed by M. S. Sathyu. India: 1973.

Ghare Baire. Directed by Satyajit Ray. India: 1984.

Gunjan Saxena. The Kargil Girl. Directed by Sharan Sharma. India: 2020.

Gully Boy. Directed by Zoya Akhtar. India: 2019.

Haider. Directed by Vishal Bhardwaj. India: 2014.

Hindi Medium. Directed by Saket Chaudhary. India: 2017.

Hum Aapke Hai Kaun. Directed by Sooraj Barjatya. India: 1994.

Hum Saath Saath Hai. Directed by Sooraj Barjatya. India: 1999.

Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham. Directed by Karan Johar. India: 2001.

Kal Ho Naa Ho. Directed by Nikhil Advani. India: 2003.

Kaksparsh. Directed by Mahesh Manjrekar. India: 2012.

Kapoor and Sons. Directed by Shakun Batra. India: 2016.

Kuch Kuch Hota Hai. Directed by Karan Johar. India: 1998.

Kya Kehna. Directed by Kundan Shah. India: 2000.

Lagaan. Directed by Ashutosh Gowariker. India: 2001.

Lajja. Directed by Rajkumar Santoshi. India: 2001.

Lakshya. Directed by Farhan Akhtar. India: 2004.

Lipstick under my Burkha, Directed by Alankrita Shrivastava. India: 2016.

LOC Kargil. Directed by J. P. Dutta. India: 2003.

Maachis. Directed by Gulzar. India: 1996.

Mahanagar. Directed by Satyajit Ray. India: 1963.

Manto. Directed by Nandita Das. India: 2018.

Masaan. Directed by Neeraj Ghaywan. India: 1998.

Midnight's Children. Directed by Deepa Mehta. India: 2012.

Mission Kashmir Directed by Vidhu Vinod Chopra. India: 2000.

Mission Mangal. Directed by Jagan Shakti. India: 2019.

Mother India. Directed by Mehboob Khan. India: 1957.

Mr. and Mrs. Iyer. Directed by Aparna Sen. India: 2002.

Mulk. Directed by Anubhav Sinha. India: 2018.

My brother Nikhil. Directed by Onir. India: 2005.

My Name is Khan. Directed by Karan Johar. India: 2010.

Om Shanti Om. Directed by Farah Khan. India: 2007.

Padman. Directed by R. Balki. India: 2018.

Parasite. Directed by Bong Joon Ho. South Korea: 2019.

Pardes. Directed by Subhash Ghai. India: 1997.

Pinjar. Directed by Chandra Prakash Dwivedi. India: 2003.

Queen. Directed by Vikas Bahl. India: 2013.

Raazi. Directed by Meghna Gulzar. India: 2018.

Roja. Directed by Mani Ratnam. India: 1992.

Sairat. Directed by Nagraj Manjule. India: 2016.

Sholay. Directed by Ramesh Sippy. India: 1975.

Thappad. Directed by Anubhav Sinha. India: 2020.

The Dirty picture. Directed by Milan Luthria. India: 2011.

The Namesake. Directed by Mira Nair. India: 2006.

The Reluctant Fundamentalist. Directed by Mira Nair. India: 2012.

Toilet. Ek Prem Katha. Directed by Shree Narayan Singh. India: 2017.

Tumhari Sulu. Directed by Suresh Triveni. India: 2017.

Udta Punjab. Directed by Abhishek Chaubey. India: 2016.

Umbartha. Directed by Jabbar Patel. India: 1982.

Uri: the surgical strike. Directed by Aditya Dhar. India: 2019.

Veer Zaara. Directed by Yash Chopra. India: 2004.

Virasat. Directed by Priyadarshan. India: 1997.

Zanjeer. Directed by Prakash Mehra. India: 1973.

Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara. Directed by Zoya Akhtar. India: 2011.

List of tables

The Becoming of a Hero

Identity conflicts, a prominent feature of our times, a phenomenon of belonging somewhere yet belonging nowhere, are increasingly finding their way into cinema. This book looks at the representations of identity conflicts in India on the canvas of Indian cinema, connecting them with broader socio-political developments in contemporary India.

Starting with the historical background of how political developments in Europe like the emergence of Nation states, secularism, modernity influenced socio-political developments in India in the past century, the book looks at how those developments have shaped modern India. While looking at the cinematic representations of a variety of identity conflicts through the lens of cultural and political analysis, it provides insights into how the construct of an Identity and the inherent conflicts associated with it evolve and manifest themselves through the medium of a film.