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From Mangoes to Missile Strikes: Cinema and the Political Aesthetics of Modi's India

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Abstract

This article examines how popular Hindi cinema has become integral to the political aesthetics of Narendra Modi's India. Focusing on Modi's strategic proximity to Bollywood through celebrity interviews, public endorsements of controversial films, election-timed hagiographies, and militarized spectacles, it argues that cinema now growingly operates as an infrastructure of governance rather than a cultural expression. Tracing a trajectory from ostensibly “apolitical” media performances such as the Modi–Akshay Kumar interview to films like *The Kashmir Files*, *The Kerala Story*, and *Uri: The Surgical Strike*, the article shows how cinematic narratives are mobilized to manufacture affect, stabilize nationalist truth claims, and pre-empt journalistic or historical scrutiny. Particular attention is paid to the feedback loop between cinematic representation and political rhetoric, wherein slogans, war-room imaginaries, and heroic masculinities migrate seamlessly from screen to statecraft. Situating these developments within the broader “saffronization” of public knowledge, the article contends that Bollywood is increasingly training audiences to recognize enemies, rehearse outrage, and internalize a grammar of permanent retaliation. What emerges is not merely propaganda cinema but a mode of rule in which spectacle substitutes deliberation and representation collapses into authority.

Keywords: affective politics; authoritarian populism; cinematic propaganda; political aesthetics

“Do you like to eat mangoes?” This question, which has now become iconic in its absurdity, continues to haunt me. Narendra Modi is the first prime minister in India's history to complete an entire decade in office without holding a public press conference, a fact that speaks volumes about his preferred mode of political communication. Even more telling of his authoritarian populist style, described as “one-way communication ... delivering the message directly to the people,” is the fact that one of his first public interviews was conducted not by a journalist but by his favourite Bollywood celebrity, Akshay Kumar.¹

Labelled insistently as “non-political,” the interview took place in the midst of parliamentary elections and opened with the now-infamous question, “Do you like to eat

¹ Palshikar 2019.

mangoes?”² Its purported “apolitical” nature was questioned by a handful of commentators and scholars, who noted its careful timing and staging.³ Far from innocuous, it was a calibrated public relations initiative designed to bolster Narendra Modi’s image as an accessible, selfless leader dedicated to the nation (while relegating journalistic scrutiny).

Modi’s Bollywood

Kumar is not alone. From orchestrated photo-ops and Instagram posts with prominent actors and producers to film endorsements during election campaigns, Modi has consistently leveraged popular cinema as a soft propaganda tool. A revealing example is a selfie on the PM’s Instagram from January 2019, where the PM met with a 14 member delegation to discuss “nation building.”⁴ A significant section of Bollywood has consistently amplified and defended Modi’s political project of authoritarian populism: Hindutva. Hindutva transcends mere political rhetoric. It is a vainglorious, muscular, totalizing vision that seeks to collapse Indian culture into Hindu dominance, retrofitting history and identity to serve the idea of a Hindu *rashtra*.⁵ The term “Hindutva” was popularized by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, the ideological patron of the current ruling party, the BJP.⁶ In a paradigmatic sense, Hindutva emphasizes a Hindu cultural dominance that often marginalizes minority communities, particularly Muslims and now increasingly Christians.⁷

Along with Kumar, actors such as Kangana Ranaut and Anupam Kher, have been Modi’s most vocal supporters for this ideological project. Ranaut’s allegiance won her a parliamentary seat. Her rhetoric has at times proven excessive even for the ruling party, prompting public rebuke, most recently during the second round of farmers’ protests in 2024.⁸ However, the more insidious connivance lies not in shoutouts or celebrity selfies, but in how cinematic narratives and aesthetics are being quietly retooled to speak in the idiom of Hindutva. All three actors are associated with a cluster of films that amplify Modi’s Hindu nationalist vision, whether by othering Muslims or reworking history in majoritarian terms. Through what scholars have come to call the growing “saffronization” of public knowledge, with saffron being the colour that has come to embody Hindutva, Bollywood is also training audiences to recognize enemies, to feel outrage, and to speak the language of nationalist resolve before these affects are reactivated by the state itself.⁹ In this process, pluralist histories and democratic contestation are displaced by a Hindu majoritarian vision of the nation grounded in othering, suspicion, militarized masculinity, and permanent internal threat. The films pushing these ideological narratives are then endorsed and legitimized by the state.

Endorsements

Beyond favouring certain actors and filmmakers, Modi has actively endorsed particular films. These endorsements are not incidental or lackadaisical. These films reflect his politics.

² Modi 2019. Yes, the citation is from the PM’s own YouTube channel. He is also famous for becoming the first global leader with 20 million subscribers. (“Modi becomes first global leader to have 20 mn subscribers” 2023.)

³ Mitra 2021, 282–98; Shailaja 2019.

⁴ Scroll.in 2019.

⁵ Hindu *Rashtra*, meaning Hindu nation, refers to a theocratic state envisioned by Hindutva ideologues in India.

⁶ Jaffrelot 2015, 108–10.

⁷ Kumar 2013, 458–69; Menon 2020.

⁸ Hindustan Times 2024.

⁹ Dey 2025.

Fortunately, there are emergent discussions on Bollywood's alignment with Hindutva politics through textual and star-centric analysis.¹⁰ However, it is also important to reiterate cinema more as a cultural infrastructure shaped by proximity to state power, endorsement, and repetition. The following examples should not be seen as a catalogue of propaganda films but rather as part of a larger cultural landscape that promotes and normalizes a Hindu nationalist view of India.

At times, the PM has positioned himself as an impresario of "cinematic truth," legitimizing films accused of ideological distortion through the authority of his office. These endorsements illustrate a consistent strategy in which Modi selectively amplifies and elevates certain films as urtexts of national truth and celebrations of Hindu nationalist resolve, while insulating them from critique. In May 2023, while campaigning for the Karnataka assembly elections, Modi publicly invoked *The Kerala Story* (2023), a controversial low-budget Hindi film promoted as a "true story" about young women from Kerala being enticed to join the Islamic State (ISIS) after converting to Islam. Despite the filmmakers' claims of extensive research, the film was widely criticized as propaganda designed to incite religious anxiety and Islamophobia. In the aftermath of the controversies, the producers were compelled to add a disclaimer describing the narrative as "fictionalized and dramatized."¹¹ Nevertheless, Modi praised the film on the campaign trail for exposing "ploys to make the country hollow from within," framing it as a cautionary tale about terrorism.¹²

This was not the first time the PM publicly defended a controversial film dubbed Islamophobic by the critics. In March 2022, Modi stood up for another contentious film, *The Kashmir Files* (2022), during a BJP parliamentary meeting. The Anupam Kher starrer presents a fictionalized account of the 1990 exodus of Kashmiri Hindus, repeatedly characterizing the events as a Hindu genocide by Kashmiri Muslims (a framing that does not accurately reflect the historical context). Demurring criticism, Modi accused detractors of conspiring to suppress "the truth," castigating what he described as an ecosystem hostile to free expression.¹³

The list of controversial films made by Modi's supporters and ideologues that he has endorsed is extensive. While some remain objects of endorsement, others move closer by embedding Modi himself (or his opponents) into their narrative. This is exactly where the thin line between cinema and electoral campaigning fades, and spectacle becomes a mode of governance rather than representation.

Electoral mythmaking

The 2019 elections witnessed the release of two such films on the same day memorably described as "propaganda overkill."¹⁴ The first film, *The Accidental Prime Minister* (2019), sought to discredit the outgoing Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (played by Modi supporter Anupam Kher) by casting him as a powerless puppet eclipsed by Congress's dynastic politics. One of the film's co-writers condemned it as "a terrible film, with a malicious script,

¹⁰ Gehlawat 2024.

¹¹ Ananthakrishnan 2023.

¹² Indian Express 2023.

¹³ Indian Express 2023.

¹⁴ Bhutto 2019, 26.

opaque funding and Kher aping the late Manmohan Singh.”¹⁵ Despite this internal dissent, the BJP’s official Twitter (now X) account promoted the trailer and lauded the film.¹⁶

In the same election year, the biopic *PM Narendra Modi* (2019) offered an even more direct cinematic intervention. Widely characterized as a “deification,” a “hagiography,” and even a “hagiography for dummies,” the film leaves little room for criticism.¹⁷ Its blatantly absurd fabricated narrative about Modi’s life actually makes it more politically revealing than analytically subtle. The Election Commission of India intervened to delay the film’s release until after the polls, citing the need to preserve a “level playing field.”¹⁸ Despite this, actor Vivek Oberoi, a vocal BJP supporter who portrays Modi, denied any intention of influencing voters or promoting a “political agenda.”¹⁹ This stance may appear incongruous given that his father, Suresh Oberoi, the film’s producer, has been a BJP member since 2004. These depictions extended beyond theatrical release as streaming platforms followed suit with series such as *Modi: Journey of a Common Man* (2019), which stretched this hagiographic impulse across two seasons and multiple episodes, while *Mission Mangal* (2019), starring Akshay Kumar, went even further by incorporating a cameo by the actual PM himself.

Surgical propaganda: Beyond hagiographies

If the hagiographic cinema tried to sanctify the leadership, the events following the September 2016 terrorist attack were already shifting it towards militarized spectacle. The attack on an Indian Army brigade headquarters in Uri, Jammu and Kashmir, which martyred 19 soldiers, was described by the BBC as the deadliest assault on security forces in the region in two decades. The repatriation of the soldiers’ bodies and their last rites were churned into continuous media events, saturating television news and print coverage igniting a wave of vengeful nationalist sentiment and demands for retaliation.

On September 28, 2016, the Director General of Military Operations announced that Indian forces had carried out surgical strikes across the Line of Control.²⁰ An editorial in *Economic and Political Weekly* noted that both Pakistan and the United Nations disputed India’s account, suggesting that the strikes functioned as a domestic performance for nationalist consumption.²¹ The episode was packaged into a triumphant national narrative and a year later, a prominent Bollywood producer announced a film based on the events.

In the 2019 election year, 10 days prior to the release of the film, *Uri: The Surgical Strike* (2019) (referred to henceforth as *Uri*), Modi gave an exclusive interview to ANI, one of his favoured media outlets, where he emphasized his personal involvement in the 2016 surgical strike operation. He described his oversight of the operation in striking detail, detailing his supervision of troop training, mission planning, and real-time monitoring of the strikes.²² Released amidst this charged political climate, the film’s success was a surgical convergence between media narration, military action, and electoral timing.

¹⁵ Sinha 2025.

¹⁶ BJP 2018.

¹⁷ Gupta 2019; Sen 2020; Thakur 2019.

¹⁸ Indian Express 2019.

¹⁹ ABP News 2019.

²⁰ Indian Express 2016.

²¹ Economic and Political Weekly 2016.

²² ANI News 2019.

Framed as a tribute to the Indian Army, the film opens by foregrounding the Uri attack and the subsequent surgical strikes as the inauguration of “a new India.” Crucially, it does not confine insurgency to Indian-administered Kashmir but stages separatist violence in the Northeast, producing a concatenation of internal enemies and recalibrating the cinematic grammar of national security. The opening sequence follows a retaliatory operation led by Major Vihaan Singh, culminating in the now-familiar call-and-response slogan “*How’s the josh?*” (How’s the enthusiasm). This establishes the film’s jingoistic register from the outset.

Vihaan’s success is publicly commended by figures clearly modelled on Narendra Modi and Ajit Doval (National Security Advisor), and his request for early retirement is rebuffed through an explicit conflation of national service and maternal duty. Private loss and familial sacrifice are consistently refigured as national resolve, preparing the affective ground for retributive violence. The scene depicting the soldier’s funeral is staged in close alignment with the televised spectacle of repatriations in 2016.

The film’s war-room sequences, modelled on real political actors and decision-making structures, further blur the boundaries between reality and representation. Here, the National Security Advisor (modelled on Ajit Doval) proposes surgical strikes as the natural response of a “new India” that will strike enemies “at their heart.” This cinematic reconstruction bears a striking resemblance to Modi’s real-world interview with ANI, in which he described his personal oversight of the operation in granular detail. The ontic line between cinematic fiction and documented political narrative grows conspicuously thin. In doing so, the film elevates the term “surgical strike” into a lingua franca of nationalist assertion and consolidates Modi and Doval as the aggressive governing duo of the “new India.” Several subsequent films such as the Tamil film *FIR* (2022) and Hindi series such as *Shoorveer* (2022) featured iterations of this pairing.

The feedback loop is completed when cinematic affect migrates back into political rhetoric. Following the film’s release, Modi repeatedly appropriated its slogans in public appearances, most notably at the inauguration of a new wing at the National Museum of Indian Cinema where he asked the audience “*How’s the josh.*”²³ The appropriation was intentional, sealing the symbiotic relationship between Bollywood spectacle and the governance of the “new India.”

What appears at first as cinematic excess of Instagram selfies, celebrity interviews, patriotic spectacle, and jingoistic dialogues ultimately reveals a deeper political logic. It is not a proliferation of nationalist films. Hindi cinema has had a plethora of those, but what is alarming is the transformation in the cultural conditions under which politics itself is made intelligible. Modi has strategically positioned himself within and around Bollywood (both visually and discursively) as a figure of cultural and political authority. His demonstrable proximity to specific Bollywood films, actors, and filmmakers, including instances of direct cinematic representation, shows that in post-2014 India, cinema is coming to set the stage for power and its legitimization. It is reorganizing historical memory, foreclosing pluralist imaginaries, and rendering democratic disagreement suspect. In such a context, Bollywood’s entanglement with state power is not a peripheral cultural concern but a central site where the nation is continuously staged, disciplined, and naturalized even before the state needs to intervene at all. Bollywood, in this condition, is becoming less a cultural industry than an infrastructure of governance that might eventually collapse representation into rule.

Rajat Sharma is a researcher and filmmaker. A PhD candidate at Hong Kong Baptist University, his research examines popular cinema in South Asia through decolonial, queer, and cultural-historical frameworks, with particular attention to the entanglements between cinematic form, state power, and affective publics.

²³ Dubey 2019.

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