

January 23rd, 2020

HPPD7008: Principles and Roots of Islam

Semester 1: Assignment: 2

Word count: 3000

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The ‘Muslim’ Versus The ‘Hindu’; An Analysis of Changing Trends of Portrayal of Muslim Characters in Indian Commercial Movies.

Introduction

Commercial films reflect society as they serve as influencers to social trends and attitudes. India has been a pluralist nation. Its cosmopolitan culture, pluralistic attitude, and energy pulsate in its every being. A large crowd of India belongs to the middle- class office goers for whom commercial cinema is one of the major means of escapism in the current economic depression that the country is going through. It also serves as one of the affordable forms of entertainment for its very family-oriented culture. Thus, media that is consumed impacts a large part of the crowd and finds its way to conference rooms and dining table discussions within organizations and families. As films are voraciously consumed and celebrated, film celebrities as per their celluloid image are worshipped or hated with a passion. They carry a larger than life image and their on-screen perspectives and prejudices have an infectious effect on the overall culture in societies.¹ Thus, it is not unusual to find media depicted in local fashion, the dialect of the crowd and attitude towards communities. Thus, it is no doubt that any change in media depiction will find its impact on the culture, attitude, mentality of the masses. Using Johan Galtung’s ‘Theories of conflict’, this paper shall analyze the ‘Hindu versus Muslim’ ideology as enacted through the medium of commercial movies in India. The paper will explore the historical context which led to the divide between the two communities and through the theory, expound goal dimension, reduction and reinterpretation as part of the political agenda of the ruling party. Exploring cultural violence, the paper will also evidence the steady pace of misrepresentation of Muslim character on-screen coinciding with the rise of the political power of the Hindu political party; ‘Bhartiya Janata Party’ (BJP). In 2014, BJP won a full majority

¹ Ahmed, A.S. 1992. *'Bombay Films: The Cinema as Metaphor for Indian Society and Politics'*, Modern Asian Studies, 26: 289-320

and became the ruling political party of the nation. This time though the definition of the ‘other’ could was not only exaggerated but aided with distorted historical facts and directorial imagination to turn the Muslim image into a magnified ‘demon’. Further, this paper exemplifies the extreme cultural violence adopted by the BJP after 2014 through the cinema to demonize the Muslims. Towards the end, the paper warns against the detrimental impact of stereotyping on the Muslim community compromising the country's pluralist societies and secularist ideology. Finally, it calls on the film fraternity and citizens to rise and see beyond the political misrepresentations and question themselves.

This paper will first explain the theory of conflict given by Johan Gultang.

Theory of conflict and its Manifestations

Johan Galtung advocated the theory of conflict. He espouses that “*Politics is not a random process, there is an element of goal-directedness...There is an everlasting effort to realize goals, to implement programs written in goal language, which leads to conflicts, including conflicts over the definition of these programs.*”² Gultang advocates, that there is a goal that every political party needs to realize. It could be personal, political or social. Ideally, it should be a social goal of equality, justice, and prosperity of each of its communities which leads to the growth of the nation.³ However, here stems the conflict. If the goal is fulfilling of religious ideology, then the goal of the majoritarian party may not compatible with the goal of each of its communities. If the ruling majority belongs to one single religious community, then that community becomes the majoritarian community dictating the rules of the nation. In order to realize its religio-political goals, it may either ignore the goals of other sister communities or

² Galtung, J. 1973. *Theories of conflict; DEFINITIONS, DIMENSIONS, NEGATIONS, FORMATIONS* (: University of Hawai'i)

³ Ibid, p. 159.

turn the nation against one of its communities. In that manner when it creates the 'other' it also receives the support of everyone else who does not form part of the 'other'.⁴

Context and Goal directedness in Indian Political Scenario

To understand the religiopolitical goal of Indian contemporary politics, it is first important to understand the parties under conflict. The two parties are, one, the Hindu community who is currently the ruling political party of the nation and the second is the Muslim community which has a marginalized existence 13.4% in the country.⁵ The right-winged pro-Hindu 'Bhartiya Janata Party' stem their religious ideology before the independence of the country, around the 1940s.⁶ India has been a country with many religions. As it has been invaded by Afgan kings it also became a home and birthplace of many Muslims. In subsequent years both communities dwelled harmoniously together without much awareness of differentiation between them.⁷ The awareness was brought about the British as it grouped Indian population according to their religious identity. Over time it also resulted in the India- Pakistan division. The policy of division between communities left its claws in the psyche of some extremist groups.⁸ Bhartiya Janata party stems from one of the Hindu extremist group; 'Rashtriya Sevak Sangraha' (RSS).⁹ They believe that India belongs to the Hindus and the Muslims are either invaders or converts, thus essentially the 'other'. Thus, they should have no qualms to turn back on their original faith which was Hinduism.¹⁰ India gained independence in 1947 and congress came in as major political party while BJP which was then connected to the RSS held a very low representation

⁴ Spodek, H. 2010. 'In the Hindutva Laboratory: Pogroms and Politics in Gujarat, 2002 on JSTOR', Modern Asian Studies, 44: 349-399

⁵ Rauf Abdul Taha. 2011. 'Violence Inflicted on Muslims: Direct, Cultural and Structural on JSTOR', Economic and Political Weekly, 46: 69-76

⁶ Anonymous 2018. *BJP Gujarat, Bhartiya Janata Party* ()

⁷ Talbot, C. 1995. 'Inscribing the Other, Inscribing the Self: Hindu-Muslim Identities in Pre-Colonial India on JSTOR', Comparative Studies in Society and History, 37: 692-722

⁸ Spodek, H. 2010. 'In the Hindutva Laboratory: Pogroms and Politics in Gujarat, 2002 on JSTOR', Modern Asian Studies, 44: 349-399

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Anonymous 2018. *BJP Gujarat, Bhartiya Janata Party* ()

in the parliament, However, over the years, BJP gained prominence and many of the regional political parties joined them and formed the 'National Democratic Alliance' (NDA) and in the 1990s received major number of seats in the parliament.¹¹ From 1990s an unpleasant change can be witnessed in the social, economic policies and cultural 'out-casting' against Muslim minorities.¹² Further, this paper outlines the steady pace of acceleration of cultural violence where the policy of 'othering' can be seen in its celluloid manifestations.

Cultural, Structural and Direct violence:

Johan Galtung's theory of conflict outlines three types of violence; direct, structural and cultural. Direct violence is evident and inflicted physically on individuals. Structural violence is inflicted through changes in the set of structures of a nation. Through policies, legal systems that marginalize some groups and incapacitating them from rising. Finally, cultural violence on a marginalized group is expressed through religion, ideology, art, science, media, and education.¹³ The scope of this paper is limited to only outlining cultural violence through the medium of commercial Indian films.

Cultural violence and its application in the Indian political scenario:

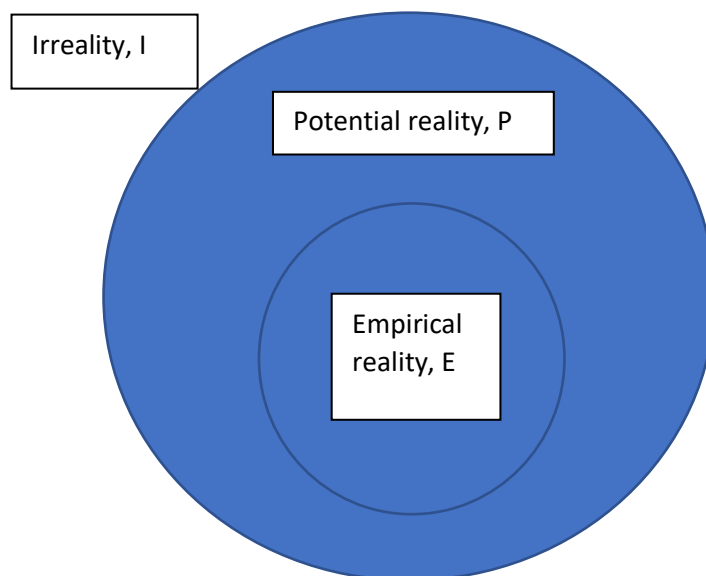
According to Galtung, contradiction is an approach to conflict.¹⁴ They can be explained through the below illustration;

¹¹ Rauf Abdul Taha. 2011. 'Violence Inflicted on Muslims: Direct, Cultural and Structural on JSTOR', Economic and Political Weekly, 46: 69-76

¹² Spodek, H. 2010. 'In the Hindutva Laboratory: Pogroms and Politics in Gujarat, 2002 on JSTOR', Modern Asian Studies, 44: 349-399

¹³ Oudenhoven, R.J.v. 2015. 'The Application of Galtung's Model of Violence to Understanding Violence in the Caribbean Context', Academia.edu

¹⁴ Galtung, J. 1973. *Theories of conflict; DEFINITIONS, DIMENSIONS, NEGATIONS, FORMATIONS* (: University of Hawai'i)



I: Ireality- “What is impossible, and is not”

P: Potential reality- “What is possible, but is not”(yet)

E: Empirical reality- “What is possible, and is.”¹⁵

Galtung explains one of the ways to overcome a contradiction in a conflict is to ‘transcend’ it.

¹⁶ “To transcend a contradiction, so empirical reality, which was once a contradiction, is no longer is”. This can be done by making what is potential (not (yet) a reality), into empirical reality. This requires conflict negation.¹⁷ One can erase a conflict by negating the presence of

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 12.

¹⁶ Ibid, 13

¹⁷ Ibid, 108

the 'other'. The 'other' or the opposite party can be negated through tools like reductionism, regression, and reinterpretation.¹⁸ Cultural stereotyping leads to misrepresentation and reductionism of the 'other'. But it requires to create the 'other' and bring awareness of the 'other' in the masses. An easy way to do this is through re-interpretation. Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), the current ruling political party reinterpreted the homeland (India) as their holy land, 'Bharatmata'. (mother India).¹⁹ Addressing the homeland as a goddess or in the form of an idol alienates the Muslims as theologically Muslims do not believe in idol worship. Afgan Kings had invaded India and set up their empire contributing to India's much rich culture and civilization. Many Muslims were either converted and later born here. Thus, today, India is the birthplace and homeland of Muslims too. However, according to Hindu extremist groups, Muslims are only the invaders aka 'alien' the 'other'. Other faith communities (other than Muslims) believers in idols worship, thus are accepted as 'junior Hindus'.²⁰ The 'other' is subsequently made from good to bad, bad to ugly and finally from ugly to a demon which the country needs to be rid of. Reinterpretation of ideology allows for structural, cultural and direct violence by making it legal. For example, killing a human being is punishable, but killing an opposite force on the country's border is legal.²¹ Re-interpretation makes the whole country a border and a Muslim as an opposite force, essentially a terrorist. The paper further opens the process through which the Muslims came to be slowly misrepresented and stereotyped into a terrorist, the country needs to be vigilant against, and everyone else (who is a non-Muslim) now metamorphoses into a good patriot who needs to defend his nation against these demonic figures. Cultural violence on the Muslim community was thus unleashed through the medium of movies. The paper will further establish and explicate this with subsequent examples.

¹⁸ Ibid, 86

¹⁹ (Rauf Abdul Taha 2011: 69-76)p. 71

²⁰ Rauf Abdul Taha. 2011. 'Violence Inflicted on Muslims: Direct, Cultural and Structural on JSTOR', Economic and Political Weekly, 46: 69-76

²¹ (Galtung 1973: 159). 86.

Cultural violence through re-interpretation and subsequently creating the caricature of the ‘other’:

In the 1950s and 1960s, many movies were made which portrayed the Muslims in its authentic and cultural ambiance. As any Muslims were descendants of royal courts before colonization, much of the Muslim culture was of the aristocracy. The *Nawabs* (the princes) whose provinces were annexed by the British held on to their goodwill, generosity and luxurious *haveli*’s (Palaces). These became the ambiance and setting of many movies like *Alam ara*, *Shah Jahan*, *Mumtaz Mahal*, *Mere Mehboob*, *Bahu Begam*, *Chaudhvi ka Chand*, *Laila Majnoon*, etc. These movies characterized the courteous and polished language, elegant and ceremonial traditions and soul-stirring music depicting the authentic culture and zeal of a Muslim household.²² Around the 1970s came along movies which brought about communal harmony which served as a balm to the bygone days of India- Pakistan partition. Movies like ‘Amar, Akbar, Anthony’ celebrated religious diversity and pluralistic attitude of the country. The Movie ‘*Sholay*’ (1975) depicts a harmony between Hindus and Muslims, while Muslim *Imam* martyres his only son to fight a Hindu dacoit.²³ It was one of the most celebrated movies igniting a zeal to fight against social evils. Among the last of these ‘good’ Muslim genre movies were; *Henna* (1991), *Sanam bewafa* (1991) and *Khuda Gawah* (1993).²⁴

The ‘good Muslim’ image was very short-lived. If the mainstream cinema is to be believed, then after the onset of the 1990s good Muslim may have unexpectedly become scarce in the country. Further Islam observes that in the later years the Muslim image came to be replaced with that of a ‘*Bhai*’ or an underworld ‘*don*’ which was a bearded man, in skullcap donning a

²² H.M., S.K. 2016. ‘*Metonymies of Fear: Islamophobia and the Making of Muslim Identity in Hindi Cinema*’, *Society and Culture in South Asia*, 2: 233-255

²³ Islam, M. 2007. ‘*Imagining Indian Muslims: Looking through the Lens of Bollywood Cinema*’, *Indian Journal of Human Development*, 1: 403-422

²⁴ H.M., S.K. 2016. ‘*Metonymies of Fear: Islamophobia and the Making of Muslim Identity in Hindi Cinema*’, *Society and Culture in South Asia*, 2: 233-255

kurta. Almost instantly one would be able to notice gun lurking from his kurta pockets. This image was created around the end of the 1980s and 1990s and it coincided with the NDA backed BJP coming to power during the 1990s. According to Islam and Kumar H.M, these kinds of images were thrust on the unsuspecting layman consciously by the majoritarian political party.²⁵ The 1990s started with Movies like ‘Border’ (1997) based on the 1971 India-Pakistan war. Ironically not a single Indian Muslim soldier is seen in the movie fighting the Pakistan army.²⁶ It is also the first time that Pakistan was named in a movie and represented openly in cross- border terrorism. After this came along movies like ‘Gadar- the Hero’, and ‘Love story of a spy’.²⁷ The character designated to Muslims were of traitors, spies, and *jihadis* (the fundamentalist) - the potential terrorist. Further Movies like *Fanaa*, *Kurbaan*, and *New York* all three movies based on the theme of terrorism and attacks of September 2011 cemented the threat of the world against Muslim radicals fanning the Islamophobia wave.²⁸

Antonio Gramsci writes on political ideology. He states, that the position of power allows for hegemonic practices. He explains that the cohesion of the modern capitalist order stems primarily from hegemony, the spiritual and cultural supremacy of the ruling classes. Through the manipulation of the mechanisms of socialization such as media, the churches, the schools, they manage to foist their own values and beliefs on the unsuspecting populace.²⁹ This can be evidenced through a caricature of Muslims as presented in the contemporary movies released after 2014 when the BJP rose to power as the ruling party. The paper unpacks a few examples; Films like ‘*Padmavat*’ (2018) have distorted historical facts and presented it to the audience in a narrative that shows Muslim rulers as a deviant debauchee. The movie is based on a Hindu

²⁵ H.M., S.K. 2016. ‘*Metonymies of Fear: Islamophobia and the Making of Muslim Identity in Hindi Cinema*’, *Society and Culture in South Asia*, 2: 233-255

²⁶ (Islam 2007: 403-422).

²⁷ Ibid, 410.

²⁸ Zafar, A. 2018. ‘*Portrayal of Muslims in Bollywood Movies*’, Researchgate: 97-106

²⁹ H.M., S.K. 2016. ‘*Metonymies of Fear: Islamophobia and the Making of Muslim Identity in Hindi Cinema*’, *Society and Culture in South Asia*, 2: 233-255

princess 'Padmavati' which some consider as a fictional character. She is desired by a real-life Mughal king Allauddin Khiljee. Allauddin Khiljee was among the great *Sultans* of the Mughal era ruling Delhi - the capital of India. He brought about strategical changes in Delhi's tax system and market mechanisms and saved India from the deadly Mongol invasion.³⁰ Instead of a savior, in the film, denigrates his sexuality and portrays him as an ambitious, barbaric, and whimsical traitor, who is seen lusting for a Hindu princess Padmavati amidst treacherously plotting to kill her husband and take over the kingdom.

Movie 'Kesari' (2019) features a Sikh Indian soldier fighting a battle against the Afgan tribes. Kesari means color Saffron which is the representation color of the ruling Hindu party. The film is based on the historical 1857 battle of Saragarhi where the Indian troops which were then under colonial siege fought against the Afgan troops who were fighting for their independence against the British³¹. The film was disguised to portray the Hindu Sikh community valiantly fought against the barbaric Muslim community where they are martyred. The battle itself follows a similar narrative of grotesque and barbaric imagery of the Pashtun, fanatic, jihadi Afghans deceitfully fighting the cultured, ethical, loving brethren of 'Indian' troops.

'Uri' – The surgical strike' (2019) follows a similar nationalist theme. The film is based on the gallant response to the country's arch – rival nation Pakistan. As the contemporary Bollywood narrative speaks, entire Pakistan seems to be brimming with only militant jihadis who run terror camps with the singular objective of destroying the entire Indian population who are according to them are only *Kifirs* (non-Muslims). Uri takes the audience through the brilliance of the surgical strike of 2016 launched on Pakistan on the behest of Indian Prime minister Modi. It

³⁰ Moreland, H.W. 1926. '*Sher Shah's Revenue System on JSTOR*', The journal of Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, 3: 447-459

³¹ Shaikh, N. 2019. *The Hate That Bollywood 'Markets & Sells' Against Muslims* ()

categorically makes Mr. Modi the Saviour and all Indian soldiers as valiant Hindu's fighting against the illiterate, backward, ignorant, and fanatic Muslim militants.

'Haseena Parker' (2017); is another movie based on the life of Indian Muslim gangster's sister who also makes a mockery of the police and legal systems to find her way in becoming another 'Bhai' or gangster in the process.

Tanaji (2020) is another example of the distortion of historical facts and historical personalities brandishing of the right-wing favorite theme; 'heroic- Hindu soldier- fighting- against -the- barbaric -uncouth -Muslim -invader'. The film is based on the battle of Sinhagad fort of the year 1670 between Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb through his Hindu general 'Udaybhan' against Shivaji a historical Hindu King through his trusted commander 'Tanhaji'. The film story illustrates Udaybhan (a Hindu) who only attires himself in Muslim costumes and speaks Urdu (the language of the Muslims) as he is a general of the Muslim empire. The plot is predictable; noble courageous Marathas (The Hindus') opposed to opportunistic, deceitful, invaders- Mughals (Muslims). Their general (Udaybhan) is a tormentor who throws cold water on sleeping prisoners, tortures and kills Hindus for committing a minor error in their palace duties. As quoted by one reviewer, The movie, "speaks directly to our hyper-nationalistic climate. The history is dubious (and) the politically problematic. It feeds into what seems to have become Bollywood's preferred stereotype of the enemy: all savage, brutal, ruthless 'outsiders'." ³²

Impact of Marginalization:

Jews were stigmatized and it led to the holocaust, Africans were illustrated as abnormal and enslaved.³³ By stereotyping, we dehumanize people, at times an entire race.³⁴ As Gultang

³² Mas, R. 2020. *Find Out What Film Critic Rajeev Masand Has To Say About Tanhaji: The Unsung Warrior* ()

³³ Shaheen, G.J. 2003. 'Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People on JSTOR', The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 588: 171-193

³⁴ Ibid

demonstrates, we then justify violence against them.³⁵ Prejudice stems from feelings. Ghareeb notes, that “It has been said that the press cannot tell people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling them what to think about”.³⁶ Shaheen writes, “by repetition even a donkey learns.”³⁷ Shaheen evidences that Hollywood makes you think all Arabs wear a headdress, own an oil well sport a machine gun. Bollywood is moving closer. After a number of movies brewing the same narrative of the ‘invader’, the same picture of a Muslim as a ‘pre-Islamic barbarian’, the same plot of a Muslim as who yells ‘Allahu Akbar’ and bombs the Hindu temple, it will become difficult to imagine a Muslim who will not be so. Today the Muslims themselves suffer an inferiority complex and are afraid to reveal their identity, the least people judge them and alienate them from the group.³⁸ Where are we heading as a human race? Is this another holocaust in the making? What does it mean to be an Indian? What does it mean to be a Human? India has been a secularist nation since its inception. Its constitution upholds the religious rights of all its people. India has been a pluralist nation and over the years has been celebrating diversity in all its cultural, traditional and religious forms. To be an Indian is synonymous with being pluralistic. Can identity politics and false interpretation be allowed to disintegrate our long-standing cultural heritage? To be Human is to ‘reason’ the be able to ‘see beyond’ what is visible, to be sensitive, to be empathetic, to be responsible, for ourselves and for our brethren. Are we being responsible? Shaheen writes that the many reasons that people continue this tradition of humiliation towards the Muslim race is due to ‘silence!’³⁹ Neither from the audience nor the film critics to speak up for the stigmatized race. “To see is to make

³⁵ Galtung, J. 1973. *Theories of conflict; DEFINITIONS, DIMENSIONS, NEGATIONS, FORMATIONS* (: University of Hawai'i)

³⁶ Ghareeb, E. 1982. 'Review on JSTOR', Political Science Quarterly, 97: 358-359

³⁷ Shaheen, G.J. 2003. 'Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People on JSTOR', The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 588: 171-193

³⁸ Sonalkar Sudhir. 1993. 'The 'Muslim Problem': A Perspective on JSTOR', Economic and Political Weekly, 28: 1345-1349

³⁹ Shaheen, G.J. 2003. 'Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People on JSTOR', The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 588: 171-193

possible new ways of seeing”⁴⁰ To speak up for what is right is to be responsible. Politics follows its own agenda, its own games. Games that may stigmatize and annihilate a community. It is the duty of the film community to rise above the political game and bond the mass rather than aid in their division. It is the responsibility of the public to see beyond what is shown, analyze, and question the players. Are we being responsible? Are we being truly Indian? Are we being human?

Conclusion

In conclusion, the essay through Galtung’s theory attempted to understand the political agenda of the ruling political party; BJP. Through the reinterpretation of potential reality, into an empirical reality, the identity of the Muslims as the ‘other’ is inserted in the psyche of the people. Through exemplars of Bollywood movies, the article evidenced cultural violence on the Muslims through the distortion of historical facts and misrepresentation. It was demonstrated that the Muslims were prejudiced and stereotyped in an image of an ‘invader, barbaric, inhuman, treacherous, deceitful group’. These hegemonic practices are also one of the known capitalist practices of the powerful majority. It is a means to achieve their political agenda of making the country a ‘Hindu -land’ where Muslims are ‘othered’. Towards the end, the paper has tried to highlight the detrimental effects of this practice on the pluralistic norm of the society which could repudiate the country’s secularist ideology. Finally, the paper calls on the film community and masses to ‘see through’ the political games and stand up for their secularist identity, being ‘responsible’ and being ‘human’.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 192

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