



Hindi War Films and Indian History

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ABSTRACT

War films is a genre of Cinema not just in India but generally overall. Combat scenes and the patriotic fervour have always seemed to enthrall audiences. In India, war films hold a special place when the Cinema of India is studied. The paper begins by looking into the War films as a genre of Cinema on the global level.

As Indian cinema is vast and multilingual, we can see war films being made in almost all major Indian languages. For the paper, war films that have been in Hindi language have been chosen. The war films are not to be confused with documentaries. War films have been classified according to the period they depict, ranging between Historical dramas to those which highlight the Indian Army or patriots from the Army. The paper is an overview of five such films that have been popular with the masses.

Each film will be studied in its own context to certify their background, their role in deepening the Indian nationalism sentiment and how they were accepted by the masses. The paper is an attempt to highlight the role of Hindi cinema in the spread of nationalism in India.

Keywords: Hindi cinema, Indian Nationalism, Indian Society and Culture, Popular culture, War and History.

INTRODUCTION

Not many academicians have taken a deep interest in the study or research of War films, especially as a genre in Indian cinema; it is almost unexplored, albeit not completely. War films, whether in India or abroad, have always fascinated audiences. Unlike the west, war cinema in India holds a much deeper sense than to just highlight the might of men or simply show the historical truth - it focuses on elements such as that of nationalism, family, and history. Hence, it is not surprising that the research of war films is generally taken up by film scholars or academicians of the humanities and social sciences field. It has been debated across the history of war films, there has been a tendency of filmmakers to showcase the grander perspective of things over personal. National glory, political supremacy and military strength are constantly the highlights of any war film.

OBJECTIVE AND METHODOLOGY

War films is a genre of Cinema not just in India but generally overall. Combat scenes and the patriotic fervour have always seemed to enthrall audiences. For the paper, war films that have been in Hindi language have been chosen. The paper is an overview of five such films that have been popular with the masses. Each film will be studied in its own context to certify their historical background and also, their role in deepening the Indian nationalism sentiment. The paper is an attempt to highlight the role of cinema in the spread of nationalism in India. War films are not to be confused with documentaries.

DEFINITION AND BACKGROUND

Before we begin to study war films, we first look into the genre. According to Film Reference Encyclopedia, a war film can be defined as: "The war film as a genre is best defined as a movie in which a fictionalized or fact-based story is told about an actual historical war. Fighting that war, planning it, and undergoing combat within it should fill the major portion of the running time. This would include biographies of combatants, such as the World War II heroes and movies set inside combat but which remove their characters from the conflict through visualized flashbacks. This definition eliminates the home setting, the war as background or single episode movie, the military camp film, the training camp movie, and the biography that does not contain actual combat. To define the war film, it is thus necessary to establish parameters, the first of which is to separate fact (documentaries and newsreels) from fiction (created stories, even if based in fact), and to determine how



much fighting must appear on screen to constitute designating a movie a war film. Some movies have war as a significant background but do not depict any combat. Some have combat sequences as an episode in the larger story, the Civil War, the Reconstruction period and post-war problems.”¹ In the West, William Wellman’s ‘Wings’ (1927) became the First World War I romantic drama, which even won the Oscar; not to forget the famous movie - *The Pianist* (2002).

Gita Viswanath in her book, *The Nation in War: A Study of Military Literature and Hindi War Cinema* (Cambridge Scholars publication, 2014) studies war films and seeks to examine the notions of nation and nationalism in war narratives and focuses on war memoirs and war films and the ways in which they engender the nation. She explores the family-nation relationship, for understanding of structures that validate participation in war and the idea of the mother producing sons for the motherland. Apart from Gita Viswanath , Karan Gabriel has written an article titled “Manning the Border. Gender and War in ‘Border’.” *Economic and Political Weekly*. 11 April 1998. (828-832) in this article he mainly talks about gender and war. Adrian M. Athique (2008) has written an article titled *A Line in the Sand: The India–Pakistan Border in the Films of J.P. Dutta* (*South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 31:3, 472-499) in which he discusses visualisation and narrative construction of the India Pakistan border, and human interactions across that liminal space, as depicted in two films directed by J.P. Dutta, *Border* (1997) and his subsequent feature *Refugee* (2000).²

Some scholars view war films as a record of military technological development, as films portray the early methods of warfare, such as the bloody trenches of the first world war to the atomic bomb being dropped on Hiroshima. Other scholars, especially Military historians, debate that films or documentary series such as the famous HBO series, *Band of Brothers* (2001) arouse conflict by endorsing war nostalgia, making the audience biased and refreshing modern memory to the events long gone. While others view it as a medium to glorify an imperial colonial regime. According to Piers Brendon, “War films, on which the official censors always kept a beady eye, crucially helped to sustain pride in British greatness as the exhausted country tried to win the peace while beset by grievous new troubles. In 1945 Britain was virtually bankrupt, facing what John Maynard Keynes called an “economic Dunkirk.” The British Empire started to disintegrate, losing the Indian jewel in its crown in 1947. The Cold War began and with it came the threat of nuclear annihilation. The yellow press harped on the twin dangers of state socialism and Commonwealth immigration.”³ Brendon further highlights that women are not given dominant roles in war movies, albeit there might be exceptional cases, as they are portrayed as the weaker gender. War has always been associated with men and ‘man-power’ (read macho) action-packed tales of valour and sacrifice. The Music in such films plays a primary role in setting the emotion, usually melancholic and a symbol of the darkness of war.

WAR FILMS IN HINDI CINEMA

Like Hollywood, Hindi cinema offers a variety of war films, which can be subdivided based on the plot. In India, war films hold a special place when the Cinema of India is studied. As Indian cinema is vast and multilingual, we can see war films being made in almost all major Indian languages. There are a few war films which depict wars in the historical era, from as early as 1965, the year *Sikandar-e-Azam* was made to recent years when films like *Panipat* and *Manikarnika* (2019) and *Tanhaji* (2020) have been made. These films glorify heroism and nationalism, through the portrayal of a historical character, at times to the ultra-level. They are deep-rooted in History but not always in truth. Many times, they shift from Historical truth to create Historical fiction. However, this can be a topic of its own, which is not the main theme of this article.

Apart from the type of war films mentioned above, the war films that have been chosen and highlighted in this article, are those which depict more realistic portrayals of the horrors of war. These war films are based on the numerous battles India has had to fight in its past. The audience sits in the theatre watching the bloodshed, immersed in the experience while removed from the actual battle zone. Although these big screen productions are horrifying to watch, yet at the same time they are spell-binding. Despite the fact that they too are events from the past, what we study as military history, they are not costume dramas and based on only one main historical character. These are contributions of men who joined the Indian Army, or have sacrificed their lives for the nation. From the variety of films that we can find in this category, some of the

¹War Films by Film Reference Encyclopedia. <http://www.filmreference.com/encyclopedia/Romantic-Comedy-Yugoslavia/War-Films-DEFINING-THE-WAR-FILM.html#ixzz7sXHRDuqP>

²Adrian M. Athique “A Line in the Sand: The India–Pakistan Border in the Films of J.P. Dutta” *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 31:3, 472-499). 2008

³Piers Brandon, *A crop of new war films wallows in misguided nostalgia* - New films about the Second World War peddle fantasies of national greatness—and capture the mood of Brexit Britain. *Prospect Magazine*, June 22 2017. <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/new-war-films-wallow-in-misguided-nostalgia>



war films that have been short-listed for the study of the research article are - *Border* (1997), *LOC Kargil* (2003), *Lakshya* (2004), *URI* (2019) and *Sher Shah* (2021). Before we analyse the films, we shall briefly look into the plotlines of each film.

Border, 1997- was a multicast film, directed by J.P. Dutta, based on the 1971 Indo-Pakistan battle and has been termed as the best Indian War film. The film is about the three wings of the armed forces — the army, the navy and the air force. During production and filming, both the Indian Army and Air Force provided vehicles, rifles, and machine guns as well as uniforms and tactics used by the Pakistani Army during the Battle of Longewala. T-55 tanks resembling Chinese origin Pakistani Type-59s, weapons of the 70's era like Bren machine guns and SLRs as well as Air Force Planes like Hawker Hunters and MiG-21s were shown. All the actors were extremely nostalgic and felt elated and honoured to be a part of such an epic war movie. After the filming was completed, director Dutta said, "Border has a gigantic canvas on which I have tried to bring some real-life characters alive. It was shot on actual locations in the deserts of Rajasthan. For me, Border was like fighting a war."⁴

LOC Kargil, 2003 - was also a multicast Bollywood war film by director J.P. Dutta is based on the battle of Kargil fought between India and Pakistan. The film is based on the Indian Army's successful Operation Vijay that was launched in May 1999 in the wake of the Pakistani intrusion and occupation of the strategic heights in the Kargil sector to flush out the Pakistani intruders from the Indian side of the Line of Control (LoC). Just like J. P. Dutta's previous war movie *Border*, the Indian military provided technical and material assistance during the production and filming of *LOC Kargil*. Weapons depicted were those used in the Kargil war, like different variants of the INSAS rifle family as well as Swedish Bofors Haubits FH77 artillery guns and BM-21 Grad multiple rocket launchers. Indian Air Force planes like SEPECAT Jaguars in bombing roles and helicopters like Mil Mi-17s and HAL Cheetahs were shown in casualty evacuation roles. Pakistani artillery depicted were Indian field guns and 81 mm mortars. SLRs stood in for the G3 rifles used by the Pakistan Army. Upon release, *LOC* received a mixed response critically and commercially. With a running time of 255 minutes, it is one of the longest Indian films ever made and fifth in terms of running time.⁵

Lakshya, 2004 - A Bollywood war drama, directed by Farhan Akhtar. It is a fictional account of Lt Karan Shergill, a soldier in the Indian Army who leads his squad to victory over the Pakistani troops, inspired by the Kargil war. This film is based on the 1999 India-Pakistan Kargil war on Tiger Hill. Hrithik Roshan (the male lead playing Lt Karan Shergill) an aimless and lazy boy from Delhi who joins the Indian Army and transforms himself into a soldier to make his girlfriend Romila Dutta proud of him gradually transforms into a young soldier, dealing with the loss of a friend and teammate, focussing on the sacrifices they make to fight for the country, leaving families behind, while most stay home and talk about it. Based on the 1999 Kargil War, the film was highly appreciated by the masses.⁶

URI, 2019 - Directed by Aditya Dhar, who also wrote the script, the film focuses on Vihaan Singh Shergill, an army major who is at his best when out in the field. We see him first in one such operation, where he leads a mission to bomb a militant hideout. One of the newer versions of war films, it was a blockbuster based on the life, agility and tactics of the Indian Army; showcasing the real-life surgical strike and its successful conduction/operation. The war film draws a leaf out of Kathryn Bigelow's gritty movies. "Uri: The Surgical Strike" is shorn of heavy background music, has smart action sequences and the requisite fist-pumping dialogue that are the hallmark of this genre. Militants bomb and attack an Indian army camp in Uri in Kashmir, and the personal cost of war comes home to Vihaan. Dhar depicts the pain and suffering of a soldier's family when they lose their loved ones. The desire for payback leads Vihaan to volunteer for the "revenge mission", an audacious plan devised by Govind (Paresh Rawal) which involves Indian forces going into Pakistani territory to hit suspected militants preparing to infiltrate into Indian-administered Kashmir. A well-made action sequence towards the end, which is raw and effective, highlights the dark side of war and the human cost of it are barely dealt with.⁷

⁴ J P Dutta: Making BORDER was like fighting a war". 13 November 2004. Archived from the original on 13 November 2004. Retrieved 6th February, 2023.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20041113193956/http://www.screenindia.com/may30/border.htm>

⁵Read more by Jahanara Kabir, LOC - Kargil, How Real? The Hindu web archive, 18th January, 2014.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20050114075806/http://www.hindu.com/mag/2004/01/18/stories/2004011800140500.htm>

⁶Read more at Film Companion - Lakshya <https://www.filmcompanion.in/readers-articles/lakshya-movie-netflix-17-years-a-war-within-hrithik-roshan-preity-zinta-farhan-akhtar>

⁷Shilpa Jamkhandikar, Movie Review - Uri - the Surgical Strike, Reuters, 11th January, 2019.

<https://www.reuters.com/article/movie-review-uri-idUSKCN1P50MT>



Shershah, 2021- The newest addition to the list, the movie was released on Amazon Prime, based on the life of Param Veer Chakra Awardee Captain Vikram Batra. There are numerous films that highlight his character and show his valour, this film was a look into his personal life as well. Capt. Vikram Batra, was a brave Indian soldier who had sacrificed himself to save his country. His story was globally recognized after the release of this film. Coming to Shershah, director Vishnu Varadhan and his writer Sandeep Srivastava have shown Captain Vikram Batra (Sidharth Malhotra) in his growing up years, finding the love of his life Dimple Cheema (Kiara Advani), before he is finally posted at the 13 JAK Rifles as a Lieutenant. The film's overall tone is obviously high on patriotism. Many combat scenes don't reflect the large canvas that the film is set up on, perhaps more deserving of a big screen experience. By those standards, 'Shershah' ranks higher than most of the recent war dramas and tells an inspiring story that needs to be told. The source material of this film is so strong that it is bound to grip you once the men in uniform take it upon themselves to drive out the enemy and reclaim our land. 'Shershah's biggest victory is its effort to recreate one of the most important chapters of our recent history with characters, who lead the way to a rousing climax.⁸

CONCLUSION

Bollywood Hindi Cinema that caters to a large audience has not perfected the genre of war films. According to Sameer, war films were few as India as a nation did not have to face a war like situation till 1962. One of the first film which can be located in war genre is Chetan Anand's Haqeeqat. It was made in 1964 just after the Indo-China war. Haqeeqat was marked by the narrative of shame that India has to face after being defeated by China. Result of the Sino-Indian conflict was that India lost badly. Therefore it was crisis of war that created the necessity of a war films. So It could be safe to argue that necessity to making war films only arises because there is a crisis like situation called war. But Bollywood never had to make a proper war film till the making of Haqeeqat. In a proper sense, not all war films can be seen as war films. While we may use the term "war cinema" broadly. It could be problematic if we categorize every film which highlights India Pakistan tension as a backdrop to be counted under war genre. Indian war films work around the idea of family being the epicentre of the narrative. Filmmakers like Chetan Anand, J.P. Dutta and Farhan Akhtar all trace out the family being the driving influencer of characters. There are several scenes in these films where love and cause of the nation often comes in the way of the family and the protagonist readily accepts the nation as his first and foremost priority. The Melodramatic Form of war films and its epic scale and rhetorical acting style of the characters locate these films under the category of melodramas and also add to the political potential of these narratives.

War films are popular and liked by everyone as war movies generally depict a real story and have such emotions and reality that they can catch your eye even if you are not present in reality in the battleground. Have you ever wondered why after watching a war film, one tends to swell with pride and emotions? They arouse the feelings of Nationalism and Patriotism, reminding us not just about our national heroes and their sacrifices but also about how we as the people of a nation should take pride in our Military forces. It is an appeal to the youth, because there is no deny that films are catered towards the youth, to join the armed forces and do something for the nation.

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