

Valorous Hindus, villainous Muslims, victimised women: Politics of identity and gender in *Bajirao Mastani* and *Padmaavat*

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This article analyses the different tropes through which two recent Hindi (Bollywood) historical films, *Bajirao Mastani* (2015) and *Padmaavat* (2018), both directed by Sanjay Leela Bhansali, create idealized pasts that speak to contemporary Indian politics.

The analyses presented in this paper will follow a cultural historical approach. It will consider memory, in this case social memories relating to particular legends, as a category of cultural history. The aim of this paper is to examine how shared memories related to two specific legends have formed communal identities, including particular socio-religious groups and excluding others and how “images of the past commonly legitimate a present social order.”¹ Another cultural historical aspect that the article addresses is the process through which local group identities constructed around certain myths transcended their geographical boundaries, as they were adapted from oral and print mediums to so called “historical” films meant for a national audience. In case of the two films under discussion, this resulted in producing on screen “a symbolic narrative of the Hindu nation, one which rendered other identities subordinated to this privileged one.”²

1 Connerton 1989: 3.

2 Vasudevan 1995: 2809.

INTRODUCTION

Bajirao Mastani is set in late medieval Maharashtra, while *Padmavaat* tries to bring alive a legend relating to early medieval Rajasthan. It is significant that both films are set in medieval India, which in popular perception is remembered as an era of „Islamic despotism“. This representation is partially a legacy bequeathed by British colonial historians, who were often administrators posted in India who acted as on-the-spot hobby scholars. They presented this era as a dark one, characterised by the purported tyranny of Islamic emperors based in Delhi. Underlying this representation was the anti-Islamic bias of Victorian England which increased as British colonial interests clashed with Islamic regimes in parts of Asia in course of the 19th century.³

Muslim imperial dynasties ruling most of the Indian subcontinent were also characterised by these colonial historians as “foreign” since their origins could be traced outside India.⁴ These historians omitted to mention that not only were these Islamic dynasties settled in India for hundreds of years, but also that unlike the British, they considered India to be their home. Therefore, the Muslim dynasties did not siphon wealth off Indian shores. The colonial historians tended to present Hindus as benevolent and passive, who could be persecuted for centuries by “Muslim despots”. The underlying message was that the British colonizers “saved” the Hindus from Muslim tyranny.⁵

These colonial scholars also tended to represent the struggles of certain regional groups like the Rajputs and the Marathas against the centralised authority of the Islamic (Mughal) emperors based in Delhi during the medieval times as instances of Hindu nationalist resistance to Islamic rule, though such oppositions were motivated by political and territorial ambitions rather than religious nationalism.

These views of the pre-colonial past were disseminated among English educated Indian elite in course of the 19th century. By the end of 19th century, these elite groups, comprising mostly Hindu upper caste/class men, became imbued with nationalist ideals. Regional resistance to Mughal rule, already portrayed with heroic overtones by colonial historians, began to

3 Beckerlegge 1997: 245.

4 Mukhopadhyay 2013: 3.

5 Trautmann 2004: 66–67.

be represented by trans-regional Indian nationalists as proto-nationalist struggles.⁶

This nationalist interpretation of India's medieval, "Islamic" past was invoked for a non-elite, popular audience through novels and theatre. As the colonial state clamped down on freedom of expression through the *Vernacular Press Act* of 1876, novels and dramas meant to instil popular nationalism often presented acts of regional Hindu resistance against centralised Muslim rule as stand-ins for anti-colonial sentiments. The historical film in India was in some ways a continuation of these literary, theatrical and visual perspectives of the past.⁷

In post-independence Indian cinema, particularly the commercial Hindi films produced in Bombay or the so-called Bollywood cinema became a primary mediator of the national consciousness of the newly formed nation.⁸ Films made in the Nehruvian era (1947–1964) – called so after the first prime minister of independent India, Jawaharlal Nehru's tenure – projected India's past as a pluralist one, in which Hindus and Muslims were both equally integrated in the Indian nation. However, though films in this era tried to champion the concept of Hindu-Muslim unity, popular stereotypes about the "Islamic medieval age" did not disappear. Probably due to the post-colonial nation's need to focus exclusively on the present, historical films as a genre almost disappeared from the national cinematic oeuvre for a few decades from the 1970s.⁹

During the 1980s, the rise of *Hindutva* (literally: "the essence of being Hindu") or Hindu nationalist politics that aims to transform India from a pluralist to a religiously homogenous state, brought history back into national discussion. Ethnic insurgencies demanding secession from the Indian union through violent agitations began to take place in different parts of the country like Kashmir and North East during this decade. The cycles of violence resulted in political uncertainties that made many Indians long for a strong authoritarian state with a dominant Hindu ethos as the unifying basis of the nation.¹⁰ *Hindutva* politics seemed to offer exactly such a unifying

6 Mukhopadhyay 2013: 3.

7 Mukhopadhyay 2013: 61–62

8 Chakravarty 1993.

9 Chakravarty 1993: 61–62.

10 Mubarki 2014: 255–267.

majoritarian ethos. This brand of politics reached a high point after a Hindu nationalist mob destroyed a 16th century mosque at the north Indian town of Ayodhya in December 1992. The destruction of the mosque unleashed a wave of Hindu Muslim riots in different parts of India, leading to a consolidation of communal identities. The tolerance and secularist ethos promoted during the Nehruvian era was seen by many as completely inadequate in dealing with the politically volatile situation.

At the same time, Nehruvian socialist economy gave way to unbridled consumerism following the liberalisation of India's economy in 1991, leading to the growth of an affluent Indian middle class, among whom the messages of Hindu nationalism found a certain resonance.

Bombay film industry answered the market demands created by the changes in political-economic situation by projecting a kind of ethnic nationalism on screen through visually spectacular films that equated Indianness with Hinduness. The film *Jodha Akbar* (2008) directed by Ashutosh Gowariker, was the first significant film of the new millennium which brought these contemporary concerns to the screen through the prism of medieval history. The two films under discussion continue this trend.

BAJIRAO MASTANI IN HISTORICAL MEMORY

Bajirao Mastani is adapted from the Marathi novel *Rau*, written by N.S. Imandar (1972). It is about a popular tale of love between two historical figures, Bajirao I (1700–1740), general and Peshwa (prime minister) to king Shahu of Maharashtra, and Mastani, believed to be a daughter of the Hindu king Chhatrasal and his Iranian mistress.

The film portrays the Peshwa's relationship with Mastani in the face of opposition from his orthodox Brahmin family and the local Brahmin community. Mastani is considered to be unworthy of the Brahmin Peshwa due to her mixed parentage. She is eventually kept under guard by the family of Peshwa while he is away on a military campaign. The film ends with the illness and death of Bajirao during this campaign and the simultaneous, inexplicable death of Mastani in captivity.

Bajirao I is considered by many to be the greatest Maratha leader after the iconic king Shivaji (1627–1680), who was promoted by Indian nationalists as a Hindu nationalist icon from 19th century onwards. The extolling of Bajirao as avenger of Hindu pride started from mid-19th century onwards

when Marathi speakers began searching for a nationalist past.¹¹ This was the backdrop to the publication of the first play about the doomed romance of Bajirao and Mastani, written by N.B. Kankar in 1892. The popularity of this drama led to the publication of plays and novels on this theme, well into the 20th century.¹²

The inadequacy of historical information on Mastani was supplemented by imagination in such representations which portrayed her with many attributes – beauty, mixed parentage, adherence to the syncretistic *parnaami* sect which did not distinguish between castes or religions. In popular imagination, she became an exotic Iranian beauty, a temptress who was equally accomplished at horse riding and dancing, at the same time being a loyal wife and a heroic mother.¹³ Bajirao's military achievements also came to be magnified.¹⁴

Imandar's novel *Rau* belongs to this literary tradition. But it can also be situated in the political context in which it was written. The novel appeared not long after the violent Bhiwandi riots between Hindus and Muslims in 1970, in which the Hindu/Maratha chauvinist outfit, *Shiv Sena*, was accused of committing acts of brutalities against Muslims.

By the time Bhansali's film appeared in 2015, *Shiv Sena* had become entrenched as a Hindu far right party, which consistently formed electoral coalitions in Maharashtra with the more moderate Hindu nationalist *Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)*. This alliance was temporarily broken in the Maharashtra state elections in 2014. *Shiv Sena* initially refused to join the *BJP* government but eventually did so as a junior partner. This political situation seems to cast its shadow on Bhansali's film.

BAJIRAO THE HINDU NATIONALIST LEADER

Bajirao Mastani opens with the disclaimer that the film does not claim to be historically accurate and that it does not intend to hurt the sentiments of any community. The first scene makes the need for a disclaimer clear. Bajirao (Ranveer Singh) is shown on horseback commanding his army, while

11 Deshpande 2007: 82; 93.

12 Chari 2015.

13 Chari 2015.

14 Deshpande 2007: 30–31.

the voiceover claims that the Peshwa's sword was like lightening, his determination was like the Himalayas, his appearance reflected the vigour of Chitpavan Brahmins and his dream was to hoist the Maratha flag in Delhi.

Bhansali's *Bajirao* seems to emerge from the pages of the book, *Hindu pad-padshahi*, written by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, one of the pioneers of Hindu nationalist politics. Savarkar wrote: "Bajirao after the conquest and settlement of Gujarat, Malva and Bundelkhand [...] was not likely to cry halt there forever. His aim was a consolidated Hindu Empire that should embrace all Hindustan in its sweep."¹⁵

This Hindu nationalist interpretation becomes evident as Bajirao expresses his ambition of fulfilling king Shivaji's dream of *Hindu Swaraj* (Hindu sovereign rule) and breaking the yoke of "foreign" (which can only be interpreted as Muslim) rule.

Shivaji's iconic status remains undisputed in popular memory, though scholars point out that his use of Hindu symbols and religious idioms to legitimise his rule was aimed more at Maratha chieftains and less at the Muslim rulers, with whom his enmity was political rather than religious.¹⁶ The *Swarajya* (literally sovereign kingdom) espoused by Shivaji did not represent an absolute sovereignty over specific territories but referred to Maratha claims to revenue that frequently overlapped with Mughal claims. The Marathas in course of the 18th century established their sovereignty over large parts of India, but they did so without denying the legitimacy of Mughal domination.¹⁷

IDEALIZED REPRESENTATION OF MARATHA POWER

Bhansali uses a range of visual tools to project the notion of a united, powerful and centralized Hindu Maratha "empire", though such a "normative centralised authority was hardly a reality in the 17th and 18th century".¹⁸ The court of Shahu looks staggeringly opulent, comparable to the Mughal court at its prime. Historians claim that Shahu was indeed influenced by the

15 Savarkar 1981: 124.

16 Shirgaonkar 2010: 12; 14.

17 Shirgaonkar 2010: 12; 14.

18 Deshpande 2007: 42.

Mughal royal lifestyle and tried to emulate it, but his display of wealth and power always moderate. However, Shahu's court appears insignificant compared to the optical extravaganza that is Shaniwarwada, the residence of the Peshwas built by Bajirao at Pune. This representation seems to be Bhansali's own, since Shaniwarwada was described by European observers as "meagre specimen of architecture"¹⁹ compared to the North Indian palaces which the Peshwas tried to emulate.²⁰

One wonders if such ostentation mise-en-scene glorifying the Maratha polity can be ascribed only to Bhansali's well known penchant for grandiose visuals or to an urge to bring alive a Hindu aesthetics of power on celluloid. The repletion of Hindu religious iconography in the Shaniwarwada, like an oversized, awe inspiring image of the elephant headed god Ganesh hovering behind the Peshwa's throne certainly hints at the latter possibility.

The film shows an expanding Maratha kingdom completely independent of the Mughal emperor in Delhi and advancing the cause of Hindu nationalism, through images of the saffron flag (saffron being the colour associated with political Hinduism) spreading over large tracts on a map of India. This is indeed a Hindu nationalist fantasy: Shahu willingly remained a tributary of the Mughals. Bajirao, despite profiting at the cost of the Mughals, professed his allegiance to the Mughal emperor as late as in 1739.²¹

Hindu valour and religious pride are manifested through scenes of Bajirao leading his cavalry headlong into battle. This is a cinematic innovation, since Maratha tactics did not entail direct confrontation but severing the supply lines of their opponents, mostly by raiding the surrounding cities and lands. The Marathas were seen more as ruthless plunderers than as Hindu liberators by the people of the raided territories.²²

19 Shirgaonkar 2010: 23.

20 Shirgaonkar 2010: 23.

21 Gordon 1993: 127–129.

22 Gordon 1993: 127–129.

BRANDING THE “OTHER”

The evocation of a Hindu nationalist past on screen necessitates “othering” the Muslims through exoticization, marginalization and demonization, as scholars Kalyani Chadha and Anandam P. Kavoori have pointed out.

Muslims have been traditionally represented as the “Other” in Indian mainstream commercial films. Even in the secular Nehruvian era, Muslims were mostly depicted in terms of their exoticism, particularly in historical films where Muslim elites were portrayed in lavish sets and captivating court dances as representatives of a lost aristocratic world. In the films of 1970s and 1980s Muslim characters were increasingly marginalized. They were cast in limited roles to depict certain Muslim stereotypes like the Imam or the courtesan. With the rise of Hindu nationalism, a series of ultra-nationalistic films dating from the early 2000s brought the Muslim characters back on screen, typically as “anti-nationals,” by conflating Islam with terrorism and Muslims with Pakistan”.²³

In this film, Mastani (Deepika Padukone), from the time she forcefully enters Bajirao’s camp dressed as a sword-wielding soldier, entreating military help, is signified as the “Other” – not just in terms of ethnicity/religion, but also through gender codes.

During the nationalist movement, women’s roles as chaste wives and devoted mothers came to be idealized by many of the upper caste men who were leading this movement. Women as wives and mothers represented home, which was construed as a spiritually pure inner domain of India that was untouched by British colonialism since family lives continued to be based on indigenous traditions.²⁴

Mastani is introduced in the film as an antithesis/Other to this feminine ideal. She fights side by side with Bajirao; the battle is won. As Bajirao spends the next few days at king Chhatrasal’s place, the couple falls in love. The exoticization of Mastani entails her possessing fighting as well as dancing skills. She performs before Bajirao at her father’s court a resplendent song and dance sequence that recalls Bollywood films from the so-called “courtesan genre”.²⁵ Like the female protagonists of such films, Mastani is beautiful and alluring, exudes sexuality and independence of

23 Chadha; Kavoori 2008: 131–145.

24 Sarkar 2001: 43.

25 Chakravarty 1993: 269–270.

spirit but is “pure” at heart, offering her love to only one man to whom she stays true despite great personal sufferings.²⁶ Bhansali uses aspects of courtesan films, in which most of the leading ladies were Muslims, to shape Mastani’s identity.

While Mastani wears a “Hindu” dress at her father’s court to celebrate the Hindu festival Holi, the dance, which she performs after travelling to Pune to offer herself to Bajirao, is more pronouncedly Islamicate. This sequence is set in an opulent hall with mirrors, reminiscent of the Mughal *sheesh-mahal*. Mastani’s reflections in the mirrors all around “reinforces the notion of slave woman as spectacle”.²⁷

In this dance, Mastani wears manifestly Islamic costume and jewellery and dances to vaguely Arabic music, playing a string instrument that is popularly associated with “Islamic” rather than “Hindu” musical traditions.

Though Mastani’s mixed parentage is referred to early on – she once calls herself a Rajput and her father claims that she prays to Krishna as well as to Allah – the film progressively renders her inflexibly Muslim. She is thus doubly marginalised: as courtesan “she represents a socially unacceptable sexual but non-reproductive femininity”.²⁸ As Muslim she is positioned outside the great Hindu nation that the Peshwa intends to defend.

THE NATION AS GODDESS

This “Otherness” of Mastani comes to the fore as a contrast to Kashibai, Bajirao’s wife (Priyanka Chopra). Indian anti-colonial movement imagined the emergent nation as a mother goddess, *Bharat Mata* (literally: Mother India), a distinctly gendered and Hindu imagery. Though early nationalists imagined *Bharat Mata* as serene and peaceful, the image was gradually co-opted by the Hindu nationalists who envisaged her as carrying a saffron flag and riding a lion, reminiscent of the goddess Durga.

Unlike Durga, however, Bharat Mata does not actually fight. It is implied that she needs to be protected by her sons. Kashibai seems to personify Bharat Mata as she dances with the saffron flag and wears a military headgear. This iconic representation had no bearing to her constrained posi-

26 Dwyer 2006: 116–122.

27 Chakravarty 1993: 172.

28 Dwyer 2006: 118.

tion in the Brahmin patriarchy that was Peshwa rule, just as the imagery of the lion riding mother goddess as nation did not empower ordinary Indian women. Presumably because she represents *Bharat Mata*, Kashibai is not sexualised in the film. Also, presumably due to the same reason, Kashibai is depicted as the noblest among the three protagonists.

Mastani in comparison suffers a steady stream of humiliation. In course of the film, her overt sexuality and agency – so-called courtesan like traits – disappear, being replaced by docile submission to Hindu patriarchy. The gendered and communal codes of this film conflate in a scene where Bajirao comes to meet Mastani on a stormy night. Mastani, covered in black from head to foot, appears stereotypically Islamic. Bajirao warns her that by entering a relationship with him, she would get neither status nor respect, only social ostracism. Mastani assents to the demeaning conditions and the Peshwa proclaims her to be his second wife. Henceforth, Mastani lives in precarious subservience to the Peshwa who fails to provide her with either dignity or physical safety as his family attempts to eliminate her.

Mastani seems to be emblematic of the model Indian minority, living in self-effacing isolation, which is interrupted temporarily when Kashibai invites her to take part in a Hindu ceremony and presents her a sari and other hallmarks of Hindu married women. As she accepts the Hindu tokens and her implied social inferiority to Kashibai, Mastani is allowed to be a guest at Shaniwarwada. She thus becomes a peripheral citizen of the Hindu nation. The two women form a bond by dancing together at the Peshwa's palace, signifying their joint obedience to the leader of the Hindu nation. Such a bond also appears to legitimize polygamy.

Kashibai is not shown to reciprocally participate in the festival of Id with Mastani. It is the Peshwa who defies Brahmin orthodoxy by celebrating Id with Mastani and proclaiming that he has no enmity towards Islam. He plays mid-wife, delivering Mastani's son whom he names Shamsher Bahadur (a historical character) after the Brahmins refuse to accept the newborn as a Hindu. The film uses these elements from both scholarly history writing and popular memory to produce a complex narrative, which resists straightforward communalization. However, communal tropes persist, for example, with colour codes. The colours green and black, associated with Islam, repeatedly symbolize the enemy. The film ends with Bajirao hallucinating in his death bed about invading enemy forces carrying green flags and wearing black costumes.

Bajirao signifies the ideal Hindu leader of contemporary India, who is ready to protect the “good” among the religious minorities from the excesses of Hindu fundamentalists, while ruthlessly vanquishing the “bad” elements, or the insubordinate Muslims like the Nizam, who has been demonized as a treacherous villain in the film. History notes that Bajirao and Nizam enjoyed a cautious friendship till their political ambitions came in the way.²⁹

The rift between Bajirao’s iconoclastic majoritarianism and the bigotry of the Brahmins can be interpreted in *Bajirao Mastani* as the differences between the hard-line *Hindutva* of the *Shiv Sena* and the more moderate politics of the *BJP* which won not only the state elections in Maharashtra but also the national elections in 2014.

PADMAAVAT: MYTH AS HISTORY

While *Bajirao Mastani* presents a somewhat nuanced and complex narrative mirroring the beginning of Hindu nationalist political ascendancy in India, Bhansali’s latest film, *Padmaavat* seems to uncritically project a Hindu nationalist discourse that dominates most of the political and cultural space in today’s India.

Padmaavat claims to be inspired by the eponymous ballad written by the Sufi poet, Malik Muhammed Jayasi, in around 1540. One of the central characters of the narrative is queen Padmavati of Mewar, Rajasthan, whose legendary beauty led the Muslim emperor Alauddin Khilji to lay siege on Chittor, the capital of Mewar. Alauddin Khilji is a historical character, who conquered Chittor in 1303. Padmavati is not mentioned in any historical sources but she is assumed to be a historical character in Indian, particularly Rajput cultural memory.³⁰

In Jayasi’s *Padmaavat*, Ratansen, the prince of Chittor, learns of the incredible beauty of Padmavati, the princess of Sinhala (presumably Sri Lanka) from his parrot, Hiranman. Intending to win her, he travels to the distant island. After a series of adventures, he marries her and brings her to Chittor. When Ratansen banishes a wily Brahmin, Raghav Chetan, from his

29 Wink 1986: 73.

30 Sreenivasan 2007: 222–224. The historiography of the *Padmaavat* legend provided here follows Sreenivasan’s outline.

court, the vengeful pundit approaches Sultan Alauddin and urges him to capture the queen. After a long siege of Chittor, Alauddin offers a truce. Ratansen invites Alauddin to his palace, where the Sultan manages to steal a glimpse of the beautiful queen. Intending to possess her, Alauddin imprisons Ratansen through treachery. The king is subsequently rescued by Gora and Badal, two noblemen of Chittor. In the meantime, Devpal, the Rajput ruler of a neighbouring kingdom sends a marriage proposal to Padmavati, which she refuses. After his freedom from captivity, Ratansen learns of Devpal's marriage proposal and declares war on him. Both kings die in the ensuing battle. Padmavati and Nagamati, Ratansen's first wife, commit *sati*, i.e. they immolate themselves on the funeral pyre of Ratansen. Alauddin resumes his siege and conquers Chittor. The men of Chittor perish fighting him and the women commit mass immolation or *jauhar*.

Jayasi claimed that his *Padmavat* was an allegorical Sufi tale, in which the parrot, Hiranman, symbolised a spiritual guru, Padmavati the eternal wisdom which can be obtained through love (as Ratansen did) and not by force, which Alauddin unsuccessfully tried. The poem, dedicated to the reigning emperor Sher Shah, probably also reflected Rajput anxieties about Sher Shah's expansionist policies. Between late 16th to early 18th centuries, several renditions of the *Padmavat* legend were written and circulated in various parts of India. The legend had a particular resonance in medieval Rajasthan, where Rajput rulers felt threatened by the territorial annexations of the Mughal emperors of Delhi.

Unlike Jayasi's *Padmavat* which focussed more on the adventures of Ratansen before marrying Padmavati, the Rajput narratives revolved around the conflict of the Rajput king and the Muslim emperor. In such chronicles, Alauddin Khilji was demonised as an uncivilized, immoral Muslim invader, a contrast to the brave and virtuous Hindu Rajput royalty. King Devpal disappeared altogether, since the focus shifted to a Muslim versus Hindu binary. Among the Rajput narratives, the version written under the auspices of the Sisodia clan, which ruled Mewar, assumed particular importance. This was probably because the Sisodias, in their search for a heroic past to legitimise their political ambitions, claimed Padmavati as their ancestor.

The Sisodia version was given colonial legitimacy by James Tod, Resident of the East India Company at Udaipur from 1818–1823, through his book, *The Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan* (1829). Tod's version was

taken up as history by English educated nationalists in early 20th century, particularly in Bengal, where this tale was adapted to suit a patriotic quest for a glorious past in order to forge a national community. Bengal was at the time in throes of the nationalist *swadeshi* (literally: indigenous) movement that developed as a response to the threat of partition of Bengal in 1905 by the colonial ruler. Several fictional versions of this legend were published in Bengali, where the queen was presented as an icon of Hindu feminine virtues and a symbol of national honour.

As already mentioned, the nationalist movement recast the middle and upper class/caste Hindu women as the spiritual and pure inner essence of the Indian nation.³¹ Padmavati/Padmini came to symbolise the Mother Goddess/Nation who combined both victimhood and feminine power in her act of self-immolation. This glorification of her suicide reflected the emergent nationalist gender code, in which women's bodies came to symbolise the nation's virtue.

Following Tod's version as well as their imbibed anti-Islamic prejudices, the Bengali nationalist writers also demonized Alauddin Khilji as a villainous and lustful Muslim invader, a contrast to the courageous and honourable Rajputs who seemed to represent the entire Indian/Hindu nation. These qualities of the Rajputs, attributed to them by British colonizers and propagated by the Rajputs themselves, eventually became integrated in nationalist political discourse.

Though Bhansali's film claims to be inspired by Jayasi's poem, it follows the lines of Tod and the nationalists. This film also opens with a disclaimer about historical authenticity and communal sentiments. An additional disclaimer announces that the film does not want to glorify *sati* and such practices. As with *Bajirao Mastani*, the disclaimers are preventive measures.

A STUDY OF CONTRASTS

The film introduces Alauddin Khilji (Ranveer Singh) as a ruthless, rapacious savage, who looks unkempt and wild and is a screen stereotype of the "barbaric Muslim invader". Bhansali stresses on the Afghan origins of Alauddin Khilji by locating him in a hillside fortress with ominously dark and bleak interiors, conjuring up a sinister atmosphere. The Khilji royal

31 Chatterjee 1990: 233–253.

palace in Delhi is similarly gloomy, suggesting malevolence. By contrast, the lush tropical jungle in Sinhala where the king of Mewar, Rana Ratan Singh (Shahid Kapoor) meets princess Padmavati (Deepika Padukone) presents the island as an abode of Buddhist nirvana, though medieval Sri Lanka was neither purely Buddhist nor completely pacific.³²

This is a story of the subterranean chemistry of Alauddin and Padmavati, who never directly meet but who are locked into a relationship of desire and its negation. The two parallel lives on screen mirror the way the ideal Hindu nation is constructed through exclusion and inclusion. Alauddin is shown to be a Muslim invader who remains an outsider to the nation, while Padmavati, the princess from a distant island, quickly wins over the hearts and minds of the Rajputs. The film allows her to assimilate while denying him the opportunity, though historians claim that Khilji created the first real Indian empire after the Mauryas of ancient India, where he ensured political unity.³³

As a contrast to Muslim evilness, Rajput glory is brought out through opulent, well-lit interiors of the fort of Chittor. Alauddin is depicted as bestial and uncouth, gnawing into mounds of meat. Notably, meat eating has a negative connotation in the cultural politics of *Hindutva* which erroneously claims vegetarianism to be a pure Hindu practice. The Rajput king is presented as a sophisticated and presumably vegetarian diner. A homo-erotic relationship between Alauddin and his slave Malik Kafur (a historical character) is portrayed as another proof of the sultan's depravity. Malik Kafur was a historical character, whose relationship with Alauddin supposedly had a sexual dimension. Such relationships were neither uncommon nor prohibited in pre-colonial India.³⁴

Repetitive, dramatic monologues on Rajput honour and chivalry are spouted regularly, mostly by Ratan Singh, who apparently epitomises these virtues. Though he completely ignores his first wife, Ratan Singh is portrayed to be respectful to women whereas Alauddin is shown to treat women merely as objects of lust. Ratan Singh lets Padmavati take the audacious decision to show herself, albeit as mirror reflection, to Alauddin, in violation of the prevalent norms of female seclusion. This agency given to

32 Gier 2014: 45–66.

33 Salam 2017.

34 Kugle 2002: 30–46.

Padmavati is the legacy of the Bengali nationalists. In the early Rajput renditions of the legend, the queen had no autonomous voice.³⁵ The mirror scene appeared first in Tod's account and has become iconic ever since.³⁶ During the film's shooting, the Rajput fundamentalist group *Karni Sena* protested against this scene, claiming that depiction of the Muslim emperor gazing at Padmavati's mirror reflection tarnishes her honour. Bhansali has placated this group by obscuring Padmavati's reflection with the vapours arising from a cup of concoction which she holds in her hand.

Rajput's integrity as foils to Muslim dishonesty is advertised through several narrative devices: Gora and Badal, who occupy significant places in the Rajput memorial culture, die heroic deaths fighting Alauddin's army. Ratan Singh is also made into a tragic hero: he is hit by arrows from behind as he almost wins a sword fight against Alauddin. Thus, Rajput defeat in battle thus turns into a moral victory.

In *Padmaavat* as in *Bajirao Mastani*, colours make political statements. Alauddin and his soldiers always wear black. His soldiers appear to be all Muslim, though imperial armies in medieval India were multi-religious and multi-ethnic. The Rajput army, apparently comprising only Hindus, turn out as a sea of saffron. The Khilji banner, deep green with a crescent moon, is reminiscent of Pakistan's flag. Bhansali seems to follow not only the early nationalist portrayals but also the recent Bollywood trend, where Indian Muslims are portrayed as outsiders whose loyalties seem to belong to a *jihadi* network whose centre is Pakistan.³⁷

GENDER CODES FOR GLOBAL BOLLYWOOD

Padmavati, like Mastani, is introduced to the film as a warrior princess on a hunt. Unlike Mastani and like Bharat Mata, Padmavati never fights. Contemporary Bollywood films, meant for an audience with global consumerist tastes, even in cases of cultural icons like film stars, currently face a dilemma. The "new Indian woman" is expected to follow the standards prescribed by the global beauty industry. However, it is not desirable that she by extension follows the "western" sexual and behavioural mores, since

35 Cherian 2017.

36 Sreenivasan 2007: 142–143.

37 Chadha; Kavoori 2008: 141–142.

such a way of life would threaten the patriarchal order of the Hindu family, which is an important site of the *Hindutva* ideology. New age Bollywood films have addressed this dilemma by presenting heroines who are beautiful according to international norms, but who remain committed to the Hindu patriarchal familiar norms.³⁸ Thus, while Padmavati looks like an international super model, she wears resplendent traditional Rajasthani dresses and jewellery that gives her an ‘ethnic designer’ look which is however not sexualised.

Mehrunnissa, Alauddin’s wife, represents the Hindu nationalist stereotyping of Muslim women as victimised, oppressed and ill-treated by men of their community and handled with distant respect by Hindu men.³⁹ Representations of traditional festivals in Bollywood films signify a community’s cultural identity and the role of women as preservers of this identity.⁴⁰ In this film, Padmavati takes part in a traditional dance in the women’s quarter, where the only man present is her husband. The Rajput queen is thus presented as a virtuous Hindu wife, unsullied by (other) male gazes. The scene of Padmavati playing Holi with her husband reinforces her role as a devoted Hindu wife, touching her husband’s feet in obeisance.

Padmavati’s identification with *Bharat Mata* is reflected in her comment, justifying her travelling to Delhi to free her husband that the goddess Durga had to come down to earth to fight the demon. This transgression of the prevalent gender code, found only in Tod’s version, is temporary.⁴¹ After returning to Chittor with her husband, Padmavati reverts to her place in the patriarchal cosmos. She asks for her husband’s permission to perform *jauhar* as a worst case scenario. The agency provided to Padmavati in the film is thus used to uphold the honour of the Hindu nation and its patriarchal codes.

38 Banerjee 2017: 8–11.

39 Agarwal 2002: 92.

40 Vishwanath 2002: 42

41 Sreenivasan 2007: 222–224.

GLORIFYING DEATH

The act of *sati* from Jayasi's narrative was replaced by *jauhar* in Tod's version. *Sati* or self-immolation by a widow on her husband's funeral pyre was an act associated with wifely chastity and devotion. The word refers both to the practice and the practitioner.⁴² *Jauhar* or mass immolation was usually performed by Rajput queens and noblewomen in exceptional circumstances, in order to avoid becoming booties to the enemy.⁴³ By late 19th century, the scorched earth policy of *jauhar* was conflated with the act of *sati* and presented by nationalists as Hindu feminine resistance to sexual aggression, usually from Muslims. This issue has a loaded connotation in contemporary India, where "love-jihad", a supposed campaign by Muslim men to seduce Hindu women, has become a rallying cry of the Hindu right wing to rouse anti-Muslim sentiments.

The elaborate and spectacular *jauhar* scene in *Padmaavat*, where scores of women, dressed in bridal red, move determinedly towards a raging fire, is a commemoration of a misogynistic code of honour in which women's bodies symbolise a community or nation's prestige and self-immolation is validated as preservation of purity. In order to render this morbid spectacle an aura of feminine empowerment through an invocation of *shakti* or feminine power associated with Hindu goddesses, the film shows women defiantly chanting *Jai Bhavani* ("Hail to goddess *Bhavani* or *Durga*"). The invocation of *Shakti* has a special purpose in contemporary *Hindutva* politics. It has been used to mobilise women in electoral constituencies as well as in violent campaigns against Muslims, where women have been very active in recent years.⁴⁴

The film ends with Padmavati's silhouette symbolically entering the fire. The earlier disclaimer is belied as the voiceover claims that because of her heroic act, Padmavati is venerated in India as a goddess. Indeed, there is a *jauhar mela* or celebration of *jauhar* in Chittor every year to commemorate the act of *sati* performed by Rajput women through the ages, among whom Padmavati/Padmini enjoys a special distinction.⁴⁵ The legend of Padmavati, so deeply entrenched in India's cultural memory, has been used

42 Major 2010: xix.

43 Sreenivasan 2007: 185.

44 Sarkar 2001: 281.

45 Harlan 1992: 186.

for political mobilization through the ages by different groups. Bhansali's *Padmaavat* recreates a narrative that brazenly propagates the Hindu nationalist politics of the past. The very brazenness with which this is done points to the political ambience of today's India.

CONCLUSION

The two films under discussion have created imaginary pasts on screen, which conform to the Hindu nationalist discourse dominating contemporary Indian politics. This article has analysed the different historical contexts and gendered representations that have shaped these versions of the past. The dangers of such portrayals, which do not provide space for adequate nuance or for complexities, cannot be overstated in a country like India where popular films often act as authenticators of existing prejudices among the audience, which can in turn contribute to violent acts targeting socially vulnerable groups. By unravelling the problematic politics of these films, the article hopes to disseminate awareness of these possible dangers.

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