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**DEPICTION OF NATIONALISM IN BOLLYWOOD MOVIES:  
A STUDY**

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**Abstract:**

The present paper analyses four Bollywood films, namely *The Accidental Prime Minister*, *Uri: The Surgical Strike*, *Sui Dhaaga* and *Manikarnika* that are released during the administration of the present Prime Minister of India, PM Narendra Modi. The research paper focuses on the portrayal of nationalism and religious identities in the selected films. The recurring theme in all three films remained to be nationalism.

**Keywords:** *Triumph of the Will*, *tea seller*, *Swachh Bharat Abhiyan*, *Patriotism*, *nationalism* etc.

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**Introduction:**

Bollywood films acquired a life of their own when freedom came. In the 1960s, it started to become apparent that the challenges India needed to solve were not merely internal; they sometimes needed military response. The Goa Liberation War (1961), Indo-China war (1962), and Indo-Pakistan war (1965) were of the 1960s (“India-China war of 1962,” 2016). Another Indo-Pakistan War was followed in 1971.

A string of military films followed this, including *Haqeeqat* (1964), *Humsaya* (1968), *Prem Pujari* (1970), *Lalkar* (1972), *Hindustan ki Kasam*

(1973), *Vijeta* (1982), and *Akraman* (1975). Late in the 20th century, films such as *Prahaar: The Final Attack* (1991), *Border* (1997), *LoC Kargil* (2003), *Tango Charlie* (2005), *Shaurya* (2008), *1971* (2007), and *Ghazi Attack* (2017) were created. These films were also based on the India-Pakistan wars. More films, such as *Lagaan* (2001), *Chak De India* (2007), *Bhag Milkha Bhag* (2013), and *Dangal* (2016), used sports to raise patriotic feelings (“INDIAN WAR AND PATRIOTIC MOVIES,” 2017). Patriotism did not lose its appeal on Bollywood even in the 21st century. This is proven by the fact that, in the year 2002, three Hindi

films were produced based on Bhagat Singh, a freedom fighter from the pre-independence era. Later in that decade more than ten films were released on similar topics (“Top ten patriotic Indian movies,” 2012)

In May 2014, India’s Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won a majority at a general election after 30 years of coalition governments, leading to the appointment of Narendra Modi as the 14<sup>th</sup> Prime Minister of India (India Times, 2014). Ever since his victory, PM Modi has been accused of using propaganda to win elections by his opponents and various print media publications. An example is the publication of an Indian magazine called Open with the cover story about the victory headlined ‘Triumph of the Will.’ This is also the name of a 1935 propaganda film by German auteur Leni Riefenstahl that was commissioned by the leader of the Nazi Party, Adolf Hitler (South China Morning Post, 2019).

In January of 2019 alone, three mainstream Hindi films directly channeled Modi’s positions, policies, or rhetoric (Jamkhandikar, 2019)

In the film, *The Accidental Prime Minister*, Modi’s predecessor Manmohan Singh is portrayed as a puppet of the prominent Nehru-Gandhi family, known to be first family of Indian politics as three of

its members have been prime minister (BBC, 2019) The BJP’s approval of the film was made quite clear when it shared a link to the trailer on its official Twitter account (BJP, 2018). The film revolves around the life of the current Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi. Modi starts his career as a *chaiwala* (tea seller) and later goes on to become a Sanyasi (Hindu religious mendicant) in the Himalayas. He returns to from the Himalayas and becomes the leader of a volunteer right-wing Hindu nationalist parliamentary organization and later joins his current party, the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP).

Modi is portrayed an extremely driven man who has a humble beginning, but he becomes the Chief Minister of Gujarat (Westernmost state of India), and later the Prime Minister of India, due to his hard work and determination. When he is young, he is shown fighting alongside the Indian Army against the terrorists in Kashmir region. When he takes the role of the Chief Minister of Gujarat, he portrayed as an excellent administrator who builds roads, bring employment opportunities and investment from abroad, eliminates corruption, and handled the 2002’s Gujarat riots gracefully.

Nationalism and religion are shown to be a huge part of Modi’s journey. From his formal education of Hinduism to

his association with Hindu Religious groups, and his physically fighting “terrorists” in Kashmir to his role as a “servant for his people and country”, there are numerous references to his ideological attitudes. The film also contains multiple songs that reference religion, the nation of India, and the determination of the protagonist. The film ends with Modi taking oath as the 14<sup>th</sup> Prime Minister of India.

The second film, *Uri: The Surgical Strike*, dramatized a secret operation conducted by the Indian military against Pakistan in 2016 (IMDB). In the film, a prime minister who is unnamed but looks like Modi is shown as a caring man who stays up late to see how the operation ended and congratulates the team. On January 19, 2019, when Modi officially opened the National Museum of Indian Cinema in Mumbai, he greeted the audience with a line from the film: “How’s the josh (energy)?” (South China Morning Post, 2019).

The third film is *Manikarnika*, an epic period drama based on the life of the queen of a 19th-century princely state who battled the British as part of a series of uprisings across colonial India that came to be known as the Revolt of 1857.

The difference between you and me is that you want to rule, and I want to serve my people,” the title

character says to a British officer in the film. (Chotiner, 2019)

This distinction between ruler and public servant is one that Modi likes to make when comparing himself to the Nehru-Gandhi is, often referencing his own humble background as a *chaiwala* (tea seller). Elsewhere in the movie, Manikarnika saves a calf from “becoming steak” for the British. Modi’s tenure as prime minister has been marked by a large number of horrific killings known as cow lynching, in which people are murdered on suspicion of eating beef or taking a cow for slaughter (BBC, 2019).

Cows are sacred primarily to upper-caste Hindus, yet beef is a cheap source of protein for many lower-caste communities. India is also home to the world’s second largest population of Muslims, as well as a small percentage of Christians. Both these communities eat beef. (Doniger 2019)

The Modi references do not end there. A biopic on the prime minister named PM Narendra Modi was also released right before Modi was elected as the Prime Minister for the second time (Thakur, 2019). Another film, *Mere Pyare Prime Minister* (My Dear Prime Minister), tells the story of a child from a slum who wants to build a toilet for his single mother. Toilets form an integral part of Modi’s

flagship *Swachh Bharat Abhiyan* (Clean India Campaign). Other films to broach the subject include 2017's *Toilet: A Prem Katha* (*Toilet: A Love Story*) about a young wife who demanded a toilet in her marital home, sparking a sanitation and social revolution. This film directly references Modi's toilet campaign while also expressing admiration for his controversial demonetization of the 500- and 1,000-rupee currency notes. (South China Morning Post, 2019)

Later, Indian cinema giant Yash Raj Films released *Sui Dhaaga* (Needle and Thread), appreciating Modi's *Make-in-India* and *Startup India* campaigns, with its against-all-odds narrative of a young couple's small entrepreneurial venture. One of the Modi's most resonant election campaign promises were that he would create 10 million jobs per year (IMDB). In 2018, Modi said 7 million jobs had been created in India, arguably the highest in his tenure as prime minister. Modi has indirectly admitted in a television interview that he considered someone selling small street snacks to be gainfully employed.

There has, in general, been a noticeable increase in nationalistic films over the past five or six years. In 2019 alone, more than ten Bollywood films on the topic of patriotism are being released. Mostly, this takes the form of the sports

drama, which offers a loving vessel for nationalism and its iconography unfurling the flag, singing the national anthem, and other such displays. Modern action films also often feature plots about threats to national security or the adventures of the country's many fighting forces. Moreover, even social dramas and love stories are seasoned with such themes; romantic heroes in some Hindi films work on projects of national importance, such as education or finding solutions to women's health issues.

Right-wing populism in democracies all over the world including the Philippines, Hungary, Poland, Turkey, United Kingdom, and the United States seems to be on the rise since the beginning of mid-2010's (Merelli, 2019). When Modi's right-wing Hindu nationalist party came into power in India in 2014, the ever-existing portrayal of nationalism in the Bollywood film industry seemingly increased. The cinema industry, which holds a lot of power over its audience, can serve as tool to influence and amend their thoughts and behaviors.

### **Conclusion:**

Thus the paper has provided an overview of the circumstances leading to the notion of nationalism, summarized in Bollywood movies and described the face

of Indian cinema since the inauguration of PM Modi.

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