

Cinematic Pasts, Political Presents: The Politics of Hindi Historical Films after 2014

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Following the National Democratic Alliance coalition government led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) coming to power in 2014, and particularly since January 2019, there has been a significant uptick in the production of historical films of a kind that can be distinguished from others. These Hindi-language feature films, 'Hindutva Historicals,' draw on historical narratives or construct politically charged visions of the past and present aligned with the ideology of the Sangh Parivar – a conglomerate of Hindu Nationalist organisations which include the BJP and is led by the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh. These films actively intervene in the construction of historical narratives by misrepresenting ideological opponents, glorifying Hindu heroes, and promoting a vision of Indian history rooted in Hindutva ideology. The article seeks to place these films within the broader historical and political context of the Sangh Parivar's project of writing Hindutva histories.
Keywords: historical film; India; Hindutva; RSS; right-wing film; film and history.

Passados cinematográficos, presentes políticos: a política dos filmes históricos em língua hindi após 2014

Na sequência da chegada ao poder, em 2014, do governo de coligação da Aliança Nacional Democrática (NDA), liderado pelo Partido Bharatiya Janata (BJP), e em particular desde janeiro de 2019, tem-se verificado um aumento significativo da produção de filmes históricos. Estas longas-metragens em língua hindi, os "Hindutva Historicals", baseiam-se em narrativas históricas ou constroem visões politicamente carregadas do passado e do presente alinhadas com a ideologia do Sangh Parivar – um conglomerado de organizações nacionalistas hindus que inclui o BJP e é liderado pelo Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh. Estes filmes intervêm ativamente na construção de narrativas históricas, deturpando os opositores ideológicos, glorificando heróis hindus e promovendo uma visão da história indiana enraizada na ideologia Hindutva. O artigo procura situar estes filmes no contexto histórico e político mais amplo do projeto do Sangh Parivar de escrever histórias Hindutva.

Palavras-chave: filme histórico; Índia; Hindutva; RSS; cinema de direita; cinema e história.

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Sahil Kureshi*

Introduction

Less than three years after the Lumière brothers held their Paris screenings, Georges Méliès exhibited a series of eleven short films on the recently concluded Dreyfus Affair in 1899. The production of historical films, thus, closely followed the advent of cinema. As Rosenstone notes, within the first two decades of the existence of motion pictures, films set in the past and based on historical events and characters were already a 'regular part of screen fare.'[1] Following the advent of sound, in the 1930s and 1940s, cinema, not only in Hollywood but also in the UK, France, and Italy, witnessed the widespread production of historical films, including 'biographical' and 'costume drama' subgenres. While the period immediately following the World War II is generally considered to be one of decline for historical films, from the late 1970s onwards, at least in Hollywood, historical films once again became

* Sahil Kureshi (sahil.kureshi@gmail.com). https://orcid.org/0009-0008-0745-0844. Ahmedabad University. Original article: 29-10-2025; revised version: 11-06-2026; accepted: 22-07-2026.

1 Robert A. Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History*, Third (London: Routledge, 2018), 11.

'popular and profitable.'[2] Similarly, in India, along with the 'mythological' and the 'devotional,' scholars have noted the 'historical' as one of the oldest genres, already significant by the early 1920s.[3] Early historicals like Manilal Joshi's *Prithvi Vallabh* (1924), V. Shantaram's *Netaji Palkar* (1927) and *Udaykaal* (1930) employed the historical genre to put forth anti-colonial or anti-communal messages.[4] The communally charged years of late colonialism witnessed the production of Rajput and Maratha historicals that were a 'heady mix of myth and history' which 'ended up reinforcing communal self-perceptions and colonial stereotypes' such as the 'myth of the martial races' and 'Muslim perfidy.'[5] Dwyer notes that there were, however, a significant number of historicals that promoted 'national integration of minorities, notably Muslims, mostly through presenting images of syncretic Mughal culture' like *Pukar* (1939), *Taj Mahal* (1941), and *Humayun* (1945).[6] This trend continued into the post-independence period with historicals of the Nehru years (1947-64) turning to the Mughal past as the discovery of the 'pre-colonial, secular, pan-Indian nation-state.'[7] These historicals were based on the Nehruvian ideas of Indian history and secularism, 'unity in diversity.'[8] While there was a sharp decline in the number of historicals produced from the late 1960s onwards, there has been a resurgence of such films since the early 2000s with films like *Asoka* (2001), *Lagaan* (2001), and *Mangal Pandey: The Rising* (2001).

Following the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) coalition government led by the right-wing *Bharatiya Janata Party* [Indian People's

2 Marcia Landy, ed., *The Historical Film* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2001).

3 Rachel Dwyer, *Filming the Gods: Religion and Indian Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2006), 113; Raita Merivirta, "Historical Film and Hindu-Muslim Relations in Post-Hindutva India: The Case of Jodhaa Akbar," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 33, n.º 5 (2016): 459.

4 Ira Bhaskar and Richard Allen, *Islamicate Cultures of Bombay Cinema* (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2009). Here 'communalism' is taken to mean an attempt at constructing religious identities and inciting ill will amongst different religious 'communities.'

5 Anirudh Deshpande, *Class, Power, and Consciousness in Indian Cinema and Television* (Delhi: Primus Books, 2009), 81.

6 Dwyer, *Filming the Gods*, 116.

7 Deshpande, *Class, Power, and Consciousness in Indian Cinema and Television*, 87.

8 Bhaskar and Allen, *Islamicate Cultures of Bombay Cinema.*

Party] (BJP) coming to power in 2014, and particularly since January 2019, there has been a significant uptick in the production of historical films of a kind that can be distinguished from others. These films, referred to here as Hindutva Historicals, either deal with historical subjects or are engaged in constructing a history of the present from the point of view of the *Sangh Parivar* [Family of Organisations] (Sangh) – a conglomerate of Hindu Nationalist organisations which include the BJP and is led by the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh [National Volunteer Corps] (RSS).

The 'critical role' of the history produced and taught by the Sangh has been noted by Tanika Sarkar who argues that the Hindu Right has been pursuing this project for over ninety years. Sarkar effectively describes the many means through which Hindutva history is created and disseminated – schools, textbooks, journals, front-organisations etc.[9] This article seeks to add Hindutva historicals to that list. The article is an attempt to inquire into the relationship of Hindutva Historicals with history and delineate their various significant textual and extra-textual elements. The article seeks to place these films within the broader historical and political context of the Sangh Parivar's project of writing Hindutva histories. The study attempts to demonstrate that these films serve as significant sites where history, cinematic form, state power, and ideological narrative converge to advance a Hindu nationalist vision of India's past and present. It must be noted, however, that while Hindutva Historicals are not limited in terms of language or platform, here the subject of study are Hindi language feature films. Thus, while the conclusions of this study might well be true for them, films made in other languages or Hindi language series released on Over-the-Top platforms do not form a part of the analysis. Finally, in attempting to establish the connections of the films with the Sangh, extra-textual elements have been utilised including *Organiser*, the organ

9 Tanika Sarkar, "How the Sangh Parivar Writes and Teaches History," in *Majoritarian State: How Hindu Nationalism Is Changing India*, ed. Angana P. Chatterji *et al.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 151-174.

of the RSS in English, news reports, engagements with the media such as interviews, press conferences, and posts on social media.

Finally, the method followed here has been that of choosing for analysis certain more prominent and representative films that best aid in understanding different elements and politics of Hindutva Historicals. Given that it was not possible, due to the sheer volume of productions, to include an exhaustive account or analysis of all Hindi language Hindutva Historicals that have been released since 2014 in the space of this article, the author had to develop a method. The process followed by the author was to create what according to the author was an exhaustive list of Hindutva Historicals released between May 2014 and January 2025 and critically view a significant majority of those films. From these viewings the author was able to delineate the recurrent themes, conspiracies, and linkages of Hindutva Historicals and Hindutva politics that form the core of this article. It was thought prudent to pick, for analyses, two or three big budget productions and/or commercially successful films related to each historical period and sub-genre of Hindutva Historicals discussed below.

Section I: Proto-Hindutva Cinema

The Sangh Parivar

The RSS, an all-male, Hindu Nationalist group with the eventual aim of establishing a *Hindu Rashtra* (Hindu nation) was formed in 1925. According to the RSS's chief ideologue, M.S. Golwalkar, the Hindu nation was said to have always existed, the task was to revive and revitalise it.[10] This was to be done through the development of a unified Hindu identity based on the myth of a shared culture, language, and history of all Hindus while preserving caste hierarchies and the simultaneous exclusion of the Hindu Nation's 'others' – Muslims, Christians, Communists etc.[11] While many different terms have been assigned to

10 Shamsul Islam, ed., *Golwalkar's We or Our Nationhood Defined* (New Delhi: Pharos, 2017).

11 Pralay Kanungo, *RSS's Tryst with Politics: From Hedgewar to Sudarshan* (Delhi: Manohar, 2017), 127.

it, each with its distinct flavour, for the purpose of this article the political-ideological project of the Sangh is referred to as Hindutva.

Prior to independence, there existed only the RSS and an organisation of women supervised by it. The RSS was banned on 4 February 1948, five days after Gandhi's assassination. The ban was withdrawn on 12 July 1949 only after the RSS adopted a written constitution, agreed to function 'openly,' and stay limited to the 'cultural' field. Despite this agreement with the Indian government, the RSS found a way to remain present in Indian politics through the establishment of front organisations, all 'drawing their legitimacy' from the RSS,[12] collectively referred to as the *Sangh Parivar*.[13] Although 'Sangh' and 'RSS' are often used interchangeably, for the purpose of this article, when the term Sangh is used, it must be taken to mean, not only the RSS but the entire collection of organisations of which the RSS is the central authority. The Sangh has since 1951 included an electoral front – the *Bharatiya Jana Sangh* [All-India People's Union] (BJS) [1951-1977] and the BJP [1980 onwards].

Proto-Hindutva Cinema

In the immediate aftermath of the communal strife that accompanied partition and independence, the Sangh's electoral front, with its associations to communalism, remained a marginal force. While the political legitimisation of the Sangh and its electoral front can be traced to the 1970s and its participation in the JP Movement and the Janata Party experiment,[14] which included the dissolution of the BJS, it was in the

12 For a list of Sangh affiliates, see 'Annexure One: List of Organisations Created by the RSS' in Shamsul Islam, *Hindu Nationalism and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (New Delhi: Media House, 2017).

13 Walter Andersen and Shridhar Damle, *The Brotherhood in Saffron: The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and Hindu Revivalism* (Boulder, Co.: Westview, 1987), 143.

14 The JP Movement was a political movement initiated by Jayaprakash Narayan (JP) in the mid-1970s in India. The movement was a significant factor leading to the imposition of the Emergency. In its aftermath, the **Janata Party**, formed from uniting various anti-Congress parties including the BJS, formed the central government in 1977. However, internal ideological rifts led to its disintegration by 1979. For more see Bipan Chandra, *In the Name of Democracy: JP Movement and the Emergency* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2003).

mid-1980s that the electoral rise of the Sangh truly began. Following the failure of the Janata Party, a new electoral front of the Sangh, in the form of the BJP, was established in 1980. Although it won only two seats in the 1985 Lok Sabha elections, large-scale communal mobilisations through various Sangh affiliates, especially the VHP and Bajrang Dal, particularly on the Shah Bano case, involving a Supreme Court ruling on Muslim personal law, and the *Ramjanmabhoomi* movement advocating for a temple at the site of *Babri Masjid* in Ayodhya, yielded massive electoral returns for the BJP.[15] The party won 85 seats in the 1989 elections and in the elections that followed the demolition of the Babri Masjid by mobs of Sangh supporters, the BJP won 161 seats and was able to briefly form the government. The party eventually came to power as the leader of the NDA coalition in 1999, remaining at the helm for the entire five year term.

Reflecting the shift in the polity in the late 1980s and 1990s, a similar shift has been noted by various scholars in popular cinema of the time with the production of pro-Hindutva films. Dwyer argues that it would have been 'surprising' if Hindi films 'did not manifest Hindutva ideology, just as nationalist and Nehruvian ideologies dominated earlier films.'[16] Similarly, Viswanath notes that the '90s film narratives run parallel to the changing political and social environment in India, generated by the growth and consolidation of right wing parties.'[17] *Roja*, one of the first successful films, with a different kind of villain, who could be specifically identified as Kashmiri and Muslim was contemporaneously noted as marking a shift towards Hindutva.[18] In line with this development, there was a proliferation of action-terrorism films in

15 For more see Asghar Ali Engineer, *The Shah Bano Controversy* (Bombay: Orient, 1987); A. G. Noorani, ed., *Destruction of the Babri Masjid – A National Dishonour* (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2015).

16 Rachel Dwyer, "The Saffron Screen? Hindu Nationalism and the Hindi Film," in *Religion, Media, and The Public Sphere*, ed. Birgit Meyer and Annelies Moors (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 274.

17 Gauri Viswanath, "Saffronizing the Silver Screen: The Right-Winged Nineties Films," in *Films and Feminism: Essays in Indian Cinema*, ed. Jasbir Jain and Sudha Rai (Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2002), 50.

18 Rustom Bharucha, "On the Border of Fascism: Manufacture of Consent in Roja," *Economic and Political Weekly* 29, n.º 23 (1994): 1389–1395.

the 90s which had largely Hindu characters with Muslims appearing as enemies, usually to depict terrorism aided by Pakistan.[19] The promotion and representation of Hindutva ideals was not limited to the action-terrorism genre of films and can also be observed in the other popular genre of the time – the "family drama". Vishwanath views the "family drama" films of the period like *Hum Aap Ke Hai Kaun*, *Pardes*, *Aa Ab Laut Chale* etc. as carriers of right-wing ideology. In a context of globalisation and corporatisation, noted below, these films tackled the 'insidious enemy that appear[ed] in the form of cultural invasion' espousing and promoting the Sangh's worldview and claims to Hindu/ Indian cultural superiority through, what Viswanath refers to as, "romantic nativism".[20]

Along with the rapid rise of Hindutva politics, the early 1990s also witnessed large scale economic liberalisation that had impacted film production. Following on the heels of liberalisation in various sectors in the early 1990s, in 1998, the BJP-led government granted 'industry status' to film production. This made the film industry eligible for state support as well as foreign funding and financing. Ganti sees, in the granting of 'industry status,' the vested interest of the BJP as the party's support base was 'petty traders and small businessmen' who comprised the 'vast distribution, exhibition, and finance apparatus for Hindi filmmaking.'[21] Bose argues that the implications of this on the film industry were a shift towards corporatisation and the re-invention of the film industry as a global player for diasporic consumption and investment.[22] Alongside this, there were also attempts by the BJP to actively influence Hindi cinema during the 1990s. Bose notes that 'frequent meetings were held, charter of demands presented and delegations sent by the BJP' in an attempt to 'influence and sometimes coerce the industry into adopting its Hindutva agenda.' There was a

19 Viswanath, "Saffronizing the Silver Screen," 42.

20 Viswanath, "Saffronizing the Silver Screen," 42–43.

21 Tejaswini Ganti, *Bollywood: A Guidebook to Popular Hindi Cinema* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 51.

22 Nandana Bose, "Between the Godfather and the Mafia: Situating Right-Wing Interventions in the Bombay Film Industry (1992-2002)," *Studies in South Asian Film and Media* 1, n.º 1 (2009): 23-43.

'secret deal' struck between the BJP and a 'Film Makers Combine' in which filmmakers accepted the demands that in films there would be 'no ridiculing Hindu sentiments' and that there would be no criticism of those involved in the Ramjanmabhoomi Movement. A delegation from the BJP 'Film Cell' is also supposed to have met the Chairperson of the film censor board with similar demands.[23] These attempts, however, met with only limited success.

Vishwanath is of the opinion that, in the 1990s, 'political compulsions may have forced... the BJP to put its hard-core issues on the backburner' but its 'hidden agenda' was 'cleverly hijacked by Bollywood filmmakers' and the 90s films could be 'read as cinematic translations of the rhetoric of the Hindu Right.'[24] This cinema that emerged during the 1990s was, however, still only proto-Hindutva cinema. It must be distinguished from the full-blown Hindutva cinema of the period under study which is unmediated and explicit in its embrace of the tenets of Hindutva and, as discussed below, has clear links with the Sangh and is frequently supported by the state. It must be emphasised that this paper does not focus on Hindutva cinema as a whole but on one of its most significant subsets – Hindutva Historicals.

Hindutva Historicals

The genesis of the Hindutva Historical can be traced to a film titled '*Buddha in a Traffic Jam*' (2016) [*Buddha*]. The film propagated a conspiracy theory of university campuses being infiltrated by a cabal of ultra-left revolutionaries it called 'Urban Naxals.'[25] Made in 2012, it remained unreleased in theatres and was initially screened in just a few campuses and film festivals. It was in the midst of student protests led by Left and Ambedkarite student groups and a government crackdown at University of Hyderabad and Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi,

23 Nandana Bose, "Between the Godfather and the Mafia," 34-35.

24 Viswanath, "Saffronizing the Silver Screen," 50.

25 It is a controversial term popularised in the 2010s. It has vague and politicised usage and is utilised to defame political opponents irrespective of their political or ideological inclinations.

in early 2016, that the film gained prominence. It was screened by the student front of the RSS that was opposing the student protesters, often with the director present, in a number of university campuses. The film was eventually released in theatres in May 2016. Following this, other films echoing the Sangh's worldview or laudatory accounts of government programmes like, *Toilet: Ek Prem Katha* (2017) [*Toilet*], *Indu Sarkar* (2017), and *Sui Dhaga* (2018), were released between 2016 and 2018. It was, however, 2019, that witnessed a slew of such films being released. Beginning with *Uri: The Surgical Strike* (2019) [*Uri*], a film lauding the military success of the government, this has continued unabated.

Hindutva Historicals cover a wide range of subjects across a period of many hundreds of years ranging, roughly, from the 11th century to the present. They include, but are not limited to, films set in the pre-colonial past, such as, *Samrat Prithviraj* (2022) [*Prithviraj*] and *Tanhaji: The Unsung Warrior* (2020) [*Tanhaji*]. Films which further conspiracy theories such as *Buddha*; *The Kashmir Files* (2022) and *Article 370* (2024) – the 'genocide' in Kashmir; *The Tashkent Files – Who Killed Shastri?* (2019) [*The Tashkent Files*] – Lal Bahadur Shastri's death as well as other conspiracies; *The Kerala Story* (2023) – 'love jihad'[26]. There are biographical films such as *The Accidental Prime Minister* (2019) on Manmohan Singh [*Accidental* PM], *PM Narendra Modi (2019), Swatantrya Veer Savarkar* (2024) [*Savarkar*], *Main Atal Hoon* (2024) [*Atal*] on Atal Bihari Vajpayee, *Emergency* (2025) on Indira Gandhi, and *Manikarnika: The Queen of Jhansi* (2019) [*Manikarnika*]. Finally, films which attempt to write the history of the present like *Toilet* (2017), *Mission Mangal* (2019), *The Vaccine War* (2023), *The Sabarmati Report (2024), Accident or Conspiracy: Godhra* (2024) [*Godhra*], and *Uri* (2019).

26 A contested term used to allege that Muslim men deliberately seduce Hindu women to convert them to Islam.

Section II: 'History' and the Hindutva Historical

Tanika Sarkar, while referring to Hindutva history propagated through other means notes that this history is driven by 'political needs, popular beliefs and myths and construction of memory work' and an assertion of their 'privileges against investigative history' such that the 'question of academic evaluation and cross checking, of ascertaining validity of narrative claims, methods and purposes, do not arise.'[27] In much the same manner, Hindutva Historicals are alternate histories based on questionable sources and evidence which in their existence are implicit challenges to any form of historiography, whether written or visual, that is based on the examination and analysis of legitimate sources following well defined and verifiable methods. This challenge is made explicit in some films, either within or outside of the film. For instance, towards the end of *The Tashkent Files* the lead character after posing a series of questions regarding the 'official' explanation for Shastri's death, based on dubious sources, lashes out, using a mix of Hindi and English:

> Nobody knows this because *koi yeh sab history me likhta hi nahi hai... pichle 50 saalo se yeh saare intellectuals ye saare historians ne humse jo jhooth kaha jo sach jo facts dabaye woh maine... unhpe sawaal uthaye...* (nobody knows this because no one bothers to write this history... I have questioned the lies and cover ups of all these intellectuals and historians have indulged in for the past 50 years...).

Similarly, a character in *The Kashmir Files*, a retired senior police officer, exclaims '*news hi fake hai to socho history kya hogi* (if the news is fake, imagine what history will be...).' In posing a challenge to conventional historiography outside the film, Akshay Kumar during promotions for *Prithviraj*, attacked history textbooks for only mentioning 'invaders' [read Muslims] and saying, 'hardly anything' about 'our culture.'[28]

27 Sarkar, "How the Sangh Parivar Writes and Teaches History," 172.

28 Aman Wadhwa, "Akshay Kumar Brutally Trolled for His 'History Textbooks' Remark,

While challenging conventional history, Hindutva Historicals utilise various methods to provide some form of historical credibility to their own narratives. The most common method, not unique to Hindutva Historicals, is through cutting documentary footage into the film to create the illusion of historical authenticity. One can find this in almost all Hindutva Historicals that are set in the colonial or post-independence periods with the use of such clips being particularly heavy in *Accidental PM*, *The Kashmir Files*, *The Tashkent Files*, *Buddha*, *Uri*, *The Kerala Story*, and *Emergency*. Another way in which historical legitimacy is sought to be established is through reference to the sources on which the films are based. In this, disclaimers, prologues, and epilogues play a key role. For instance, the disclaimer in *Savarkar* claims that the film is '...based on research, writings, various reports, articles, etc.' It also provides the names of multiple books as well as that of the 'consultant' and other authors that had 'verified' the facts. Similarly, films like *Manikarnika* and *The Tashkent Files* also provide the names of the so-called experts consulted. In attempting to garner historical credibility, *Accidental PM, Emergency,* and *The Vaccine War* emphasise on their being based on books written by people in the know. While the names of people or books are not always provided, there may be references to 'consultants' (*Atal*), and 'eminent historians' (*Tanhaji*). Alternately, films such as *The Kashmir Files* and *The Kerala Story* claim to be based on the 'video-recorded testimonials of the victims and their families.' Some films also reference their sources either through dialogue, montage or mis-en-scene. An illustrative example of this is *The Tashkent Files* in which, towards the end, highlighted portions of books and files are shown, while the lead character reads from a book as evidence to assert that Shastri's death was a conspiracy, that the KGB's influence in India was all pervasive, and that India was 'colonised' within ten years of his death.

Netizens Ask Him to Read NCERT Books," *DNA*, 1 June 2022, https://www.dnaindia.com/bollywood/report-akshay-kumar-brutally-trolled-for-his-history-textbooks-remark-netizens-ask-him-to-read-ncert-books-2957198.

However, while pulling no stops in their attempts to come across as credible sources of historical knowledge, Hindutva Historicals baulk from explicitly making this claim. Instead, given the unreliability of their sources, they make sure to leave ample room for plausible deniability. Thus, usually in the same disclaimers or prologues noted earlier, in which the sources are listed, care is taken to emphasise that the film 'does not claim accurateness or factuality of historic events' (*The Kashmir Files)*, 'does not warrant, represent or claim to be historically accurate' (*Tanhaji)*, or 'does not assert the truth of any of these narratives' (*The Kerala Story*).[29] It is highly unlikely that one would find any Hindutva Historical that does not attempt to shield itself from inquiry into what it goes great lengths to portray as fact and history. Armed in this manner, with seals of approval from consultants and historians, evidence gathered from mysterious files and records, and the unverifiable testimonies of tearful victims on one hand and having absolved themselves of the responsibility of providing historical evidence on the other, Hindutva Historicals go about concocting, obscuring, and fabricating saffronised histories.

To give probably the most conspicuous examples of this, *The Kerala Story* has a character make an emotional plea for victims of 'love jihad,' providing numbers that are presented in the film as facts. '30,000 girls are missing,' she says, a claim which at the very end is revealed to be one that 'cannot be verified.' *The Tashkent Files* in its 'historical' epilogue makes similar absurd claims, that appear in text, against Indira Gandhi and the Indian National Congress (Requisition) [Congress (R)],[30] including her receiving money from the KGB, that secret gifts for the Congress (R) from the Soviet Union's Politburo, that some Congress (R) candidates in the 1971 elections were KGB agents, and that 'million rupees' were sent by the Soviets to a 'newspaper supporting her.' All this appears on the centre of the screen while at the

29 It may be tangentially noted that a number of these films also claim to have been made 'in the larger interest of humanity and justice.'

30 The Congress split into two parties in 1969, one led by Indira Gandhi known as the Congress (Requisition) and the other, which included a number of powerful older regional leaders, called the Congress (Organisation).

bottom there appears 'Source: Mithrokin Archive.' After this long list of accusations and allegations ends, we are told that 'the Authenticity of claims made in this report is not proven.' Similarly, *The Kashmir Files*, having cleared itself from having to provide any evidence, trots out numbers and figures as facts, 4000 killed and 500,000 displaced, to establish the 'genocide' of Kashmiri Pandits in 1991. While estimates of those killed or displaced during the 1990s in Kashmir vary depending on the source, none of the even partially reliable ones provide figures that are close to those brandished as fact in the film. Thus, although referred to here as 'historicals,' these films exhibit a brazen disregard for historically established facts and have a penchant for conspiracies. They are what Parenti calls 'make-believe history.'[31]

Section III: Politics of Hindutva Historicals

In dealing with the past, Hindutva Historicals are closely aligned with the worldview of the Sangh. In them, we find the construction of narratives to suit the Sangh's version of history and its political exigencies. Sangh icons are glorified, while simultaneously those considered to be opponents or enemies are demonised and/or caricatured.

Muslims in Hindutva Historicals

Indian Muslims have long been considered by Hindutva ideologues to not be an authentic part of the Indian nation. Both Savarkar and Golwalkar strongly advocated the idea of Indian Muslims as outsiders, with Golwalkar including them in his list of the enemies of the nation.[32] After partition and independence, Sangh ideologues questioned the national loyalties of Indian Muslims and called for their 'Indianisation.'[33] Since, the mid-1980s, the Sangh has doubled down on perpetuating these ideas

31 Michael Parenti, *Make-Believe Media: The Politics of Entertainment* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992).

32 Islam, *Golwalkar's We or Our Nationhood Defined*; Jyotirmay Sharma, *Hindutva: Exploring the Idea of Hindu Nationalism* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2011).

33 Balraj Madhok, *Indianisation?: What, Why and How. By Balraj Madhok, S. Chand, Delhi. 1970* (Delhi: S. Chand, 1970).

which have reached their zenith under the present regime. Hindutva Historicals, resonate this understanding and reduce the pre-colonial past to simple binaries of Hindu versus Muslim, with Muslims being invaders, evil, savage, cruel, barbaric and sometimes moronic.

For instance, in *Prithviraj,* a Muslim marauder (Md. Ghori) faces off against a Hindu Rajput (Prithviraj) who is a protector of his motherland. In the film, Ghori himself tells us this in as many words. The Muslim is also shown as cruel and savage, established by the first scene where Prithviraj's eyes have been gouged out. In comparison, Prithviraj is merciful – he sets the vanquished and captured Md. Ghori free without doing him harm. The binary is reinforced throughout the film with Hindus shown in bright saffron and white, usually in sunlight and Muslims in darker shades and dim light. The epilogue hammers home the idea of a clash of civilizations claiming that Prithviraj's death ended the 'Hindu Empire' in Northern India. It locates the beginnings of Indian nationalism in the 'martyrdom' of the 'great Hindu Emperor,' claiming 'India' fought against 'foreign invaders and rulers' for 755 years before 'Delhi once again belonged to Mother India.' Furthermore, film promotions invited audiences to 'Come Celebrate India's Last Hindu Samrat.'[34] That Prithviraj was neither a 'Hindu nationalist,' having waged wars against Hindu Kingdoms in Gujarat and Bundelkhand, nor by any stretch the last Hindu king, many 'Hindu' dynasties existed for centuries after his death is of little concern.

In *Tanhaji*, it is a Maratha Hindu, Tanhaji, a commander for Shivaji, who faces Udaybhan, a lackey of the evil Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb. Aurangzeb's savagery is established in a sequence where he is shown playing 'human chess' with the Shah of Iran, incidentally also a Muslim. While Udaybhan is not a Muslim he is made to look and act like the archetypical Muslim – dressed in black, eyes darkened with kohl, he dances like the Muslims for his wedding festivities and eats partially roasted crocodile meat with a dagger. At the same time, the

34 Sidharth Bhatia, "Akshay Kumar's Hindu Samrat Goes Where No Other Bollywood Film Has Gone Before," *The Wire*, 2 June 2022, https://thewire.in/film/akshay-kumars-hindu-samrat-goes-where-no-other-bollywood-films-have-gone-before.

token good-Muslim on the Maratha side is portrayed as moronic and is a subject of ridicule. A film like *Manikarnika*, in which the primary antagonists are the British, and which could have been an opportunity to show Hindus and Muslims unitedly resisting the colonial oppressor, does not embrace the theme wholeheartedly. Instead, it exposes its ideological underpinnings by churning out the trope of the good and bad Muslim. While one of Manikarnika's main commander's is a Muslim, one of the 'traitors' who betrays Manikarnika's forces to the British is also a Muslim. The latter is sermonised to by the former on how those who betray the nation go to hell, establishing the good (nationalist)-bad (anti-national) Muslim dichotomy.

The representation of Muslims is much the same in films that deal with the more recent past. The most garish example being that of *The Kashmir Files*, a film about the alleged genocide of Kashmiri Pandits in the early 1990s. One of the lead characters, early on in the film, goes on a rant about the history of Kashmir and how Hindus were converted to Islam through atrocities and fear. There are scenes of barbaric terrorists forcing the widow of a Hindu man they have just killed to eat rice soaked in her dead husband's blood, a predatory maulvi who lusts after a Hindu woman, and a climax in which terrorists execute Hindu men, women, and children as the Muslim residents of a Kashmiri village look on in complicit approval. The film, in ostensibly portraying the gruesome acts of the terrorists, erases all distinctions – among different separatist groups, among violent separatist groups and parliamentary parties in Kashmir, between terrorist and Kashmiri, and terrorist and Muslim, leaving one with the simple conclusion that all Muslims are terrorists. Similarly, *The Kerala Story* explicitly and directly perpetuates and solidifies the image of Muslims as cruel, violent, terrorists, who indulge in 'love jihad.' In *Uri*, the only Muslims that we see are either in the army, the good Muslim, or are Pakistani or terrorists, the bad Muslim, the latter far out numbering the former. *Savarkar* has multiple sequences which portray the brutality of Muslim jailers in service of the British while also suggesting that there were forced conversions of Hindu prisoners. A primary character in *The Tashkent*

Files unleashes a tirade against Muslims which is allowed to continue to such a point that when the rebuttal comes it seems weak and hollow. The tirade is soon forgotten, the character retains credibility, and in its final hypothesis the film echoes the accusations made. In *Atal*, men in skull caps with beards, that is Muslims, are shown to be preparing to riot on the eve of independence, while RSS men go around the city trying to ensure peace.

Hindutva Historicals in this manner both promote a historical understanding that is espoused by the Sangh as well as aid in the contemporary demonisation of Muslims.

Glorifying, Caricaturising, and Concealing

Furthermore, Hindutva Historicals create straw versions of the Sangh's opponents and compare them with hyperbolic versions of Hindutva protagonists. Thus, in *Savarkar,* a visual and ideological caricature of Gandhi whose ideas of non-violence are criticised and frequently ridiculed is placed against Savarkar. The film goes about omitting, distorting, and inventing facts to portray Savarkar as a sort of father-figure for the non-Gandhian revolutionary movement. There is a heavy-handed emphasis, including a fictional meeting between Savarkar and Bhagat Singh, on how armed revolutionaries from Khudiram Bose and the Ghadarites to Bhagat Singh, and Subhash Chandra Bose were strongly influenced by Savarkar. Further, alongside *Savarkar*, films like *Atal*, *The Tashkent Files*, and *Emergency* portray Jawaharlal Nehru as power hungry, but also, using the war with China as an example, as incompetent, particularly in terms of foreign policy and military action.

Perhaps the most reviled figure in Hindutva Historicals of the post-independence period is Indira Gandhi. The biographical film on her vacillates between portraying her as weak and indecisive, especially in face of the crisis in Bangladesh, while at others as calculating and sinister. Conveniently brushing aside the facts that the BJS was not the major opposition party and that there were many other more important opposition leaders at the time, the film chooses to contrast a

flawed and incompetent Indira Gandhi in order to present Vajpayee as decisive, courageous and the tallest opposition leader of the early 1970s. In *The Tashkent Files*, a significantly more conspiratorial portrait is painted with Indira being accused of being on the payroll of the KGB, having engineered a 'coup' through the Emergency, and having turned India into a 'colony.' In *Atal*, the falling apart of the Janata Party within two years of its formation is explicitly blamed entirely on Indira's cunning interference.

In reference to more contemporary politics, while also caricaturising Manmohan Singh and presenting him as a pathetic and inept Prime Minister, the real villains of *Accidental PM* are clearly, the almost cartoonishly scheming, Sonia, Priyanka, and Rahul Gandhi. The Congress, in all its forms, both before and after independence, is also painted in the poorest light. The prologue text to *Savarkar* tells us that the Congress was a 'liaison body' formed 'between the educated natives and the imperialists' to keep in check the armed revolutionary movement started by Vasudev Phadke. For the period after independence, Hindutva Historicals like *The Tashkent Files* and *The Kashmir Files* blame the Congress for having covered up Shastri's 'murder,' having people who were KGB agents contest elections and become ministers, and for the 'Pandit genocide' in Kashmir.

While indulging in these uncharitable comparisons, uncomfortable truths related to the Sangh are either underplayed or simply swept under the carpet. This can be seen most clearly in the biographical films on Savarkar, one of the founding fathers of Hindutva, and Vajpayee, the most significant leader of the Sangh's electoral fronts before Modi. In *Savarkar*, there is no reference to his first aligning with the British government to counter the Muslim League and then later of the Hindu Mahasabha, under his leadership, running coalition governments with the Muslim League. The mercy petitions, written while he was imprisoned are explained away as tactical compromises. Instead, a myth, being propagated by the current government, about Gandhi having a role in writing the petitions is sought to be furthered. Similarly, *Atal*, through significant acts of omission, presents a sanitised life story side

stepping difficult issues. There is no mention of his opponents within the Sangh, like Balraj Madhok. In attempting to avoid any difficult issues, the film concludes in 1999, even before the beginning of Vajpayee's full term as PM. Thus, avoiding delving into inglorious episodes like the IC-814 hijacking,[35] the Parliament attacks,[36] and the 2002 Gujarat riots.

Similarly, that the Sangh or Savarkar had anything to do with Gandhi's assassination, despite Godse having been a member of both the RSS and the Savarkar's Hindu Mahasabha, is flatly denied. In *Savarkar*, the eponymous character is portrayed as a victim, arrested without proof of involvement in the plot to assassinate Gandhi. In *Atal*, the RSS, is presented as having nothing to do with the assassination and yet being a hapless victim of violent reprisals. Related to this, a very different version of the formation of the BJS, in which the RSS is lauded for its commitment to staying away from politics, is presented in *Atal*. It is made to seem as if the RSS voluntarily chose to be a cultural organisation and the formation of the BJS something unrelated to the restrictions placed on it after independence. This, as noted earlier, is far from the truth as the RSS, was in fact, forced into confining itself formally to the 'cultural sphere,' after it was banned for its involvement in Gandhi's assassination. The formation of the BJS was a way to maintain its presence in the sphere of electoral politics.

While the period of the Emergency is used in films like *The Tashkent Files, Atal, Emergency,* and *Indu Sarkar* to attack Indira and the INC and to simultaneously project the Sangh as having courageously opposed it, certain important details are glossed over. With the RSS banned and many of its leaders detained, the organisation sought to ingratiate itself to the government. Most prominently, the Sarsanghchalak, Balasaheb Deoras, wrote to Indira Gandhi from jail, a fact not

35 An Indian Airlines flight from Kathmandu to Delhi was hijacked in December 1999. It posed a major political challenge for the Vajpayee-led NDA government with the hijacking ending with the release of jailed terrorists.

36 In what was considered a major security and intelligence failure, on 13 December 2001, armed militants were able to attack the Indian Parliament.

denied by the RSS,[37] promising her that the RSS would be available for 'national uplift' if the ban were revoked.[38] Regarding the behaviour of the Sangh during the Emergency, Goyal notes, 'the RSS men did not turn out to be all that heroic and steadfast... quite a few scurried around to buy protection.'[39] This side of the Emergency story does not make it to the Hindutva Historicals.

Histories of the present

There are Hindutva Historicals, with their contemporary subject matter, which perform the task of writing a history of the present. In them one finds laudatory accounts of different actions, projects, and achievements of the government. Thus, *Toilet*, is relentless in its edification of the *Swachh Bharat Abhiyan* (Clean India Campaign), launched by the government in 2014. *Mission Mangal*, supposedly a dramatized retelling of India's Mars Orbiter Mission, is in fact a thinly veiled attempt at attributing the success of a mission launched under the previous government to Modi. *Uri* is not only a celebration of the armed forces but more significantly of the government. Modi and the Defence Minister at the time Manohar Parrikar, unnamed but identifiable, are portrayed as sombre and level-headed strategists. Similarly, *Article 370*, presents a justification for the abrogation of the article granting special status to Jammu and Kashmir in which Modi and Amit Shah, again identifiably portrayed, are the strategic masterminds because of whom Kashmir is now 'paradise regained.' These are in addition to two films that tell the story of the 2002 Gujarat riots through a Hindutva lens – *Sabarmati Report* and *Godhra*.

Moreover, Hindutva Historicals based in the somewhat distant past link themselves to contemporary Hindutva through exhibiting or

37 The petitions that Deoras wrote are justified as being in 'the spirit of dialogue' that have been 'misinterpreted by Marxists'. Shaan Kashyap, "RSS Stood between the Dictatorship and Democracy," *Organiser*, 1 July 2018, 14–15.

38 D.R. Goyal, *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (New Delhi: Radha Krishna Prakashan, 1979), 217–227.

39 Goyal, *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*, 120–121.

referencing its symbols and iconography. The most obvious are the visual and dialogue references to *bhagva* and *bhagva jhanda* (saffron colour and saffron flag). The colour and flag have been appropriated by the Sangh and dissociated from any of their religious or political meanings. Linked successfully to Sangh identity and Hindutva they are used in Hindutva Historicals to indicate the 'good' side, and references to them cannot but be read as addresses to the present. In *Tanhaji*, Shivaji's mother, after looking at a treaty in which numerous forts have been handed over to the Mughals, declares moral victory by pointing out that the cloth that the treaty had been written on was *bhagva*. The film is replete with references to and celebrations of the *bhagva* – the colour and the flag. The saffron flag is also conspicuously present in scenography of *Manikarnika*. In *Prithviraj*, an early sequence, with an out of context celebration of Holi does the job of filling the screen with saffron. What follows is a study in saffron with hardly a scene in which there are Hindu men present, that saffron is not. From the flags to the headgear that the men never seem to take off, the film is bathed in saffron.

There are other examples of political addresses to the present. Significant amongst these is the peculiar reference made by Prithviraj to the demolition of the Somnath temple by Md. Ghazni more than 150 years prior. Somnath has historically been utilised to gain political mileage most effectively by the Sangh. One of the VHP's *Ekatmata Yatra*s (Unity Processions) for 'Hindu Unity,' in 1983, began in West Bengal and ended at Somnath. Most prominently, it was a focal point for the Ramjanmabhoomi Movement with L.K. Advani beginning his Rathyatra, that whipped up communal frenzy wherever it travelled in the country, from Somnath in 1990. In another reference to the contemporary, *Manikarnika* has a ruler who prefers to do '*seva*' (serve) rather than rule; similar to the claims of Modi of being the *Pradhan Sevak* (Server in Chief) rather than the Prime Minister. While the question of the cow has long been a mobilisational issue for Hindu Nationalists, lynchings led by cow protecting vigilante mobs, carried out with impunity and explicit or implicit support of the Sangh, have

been rife since the 2014. In this context of 'cow protection,' the titular character in *Manikarnika* is shown to be protecting a calf from the beef eating foreigner by declaring it the property of her kingdom, further aligning the film to contemporary Hindutva politics.

Sangh connections

In addition to the themes, narratives, and treatment of issues, one can locate extra-textual connections with the Sangh in Hindutva Historicals, such as ones through the personnel associated with the films, endorsement by the Sangh as well as state recognition and support. In terms of personnel, there are the examples of director and producer of *Buddha*, *The Kashmir Files*, *The Tashkent Files*, and *The Vaccine War,* Vivek Agnihotri, who describes himself as a Modi supporter and is close to the RSS.[40] Actor Anupam Kher, who has featured in Hindutva Historicals like *The Kashmir Files*, *Buddha*, and *Accidental PM*, has for a long time been a supporter of the Sangh. Having stalled the release of a documentary in 2004 on Modi and the 2002 Gujarat riots, he has referred to Modi as a 'rockstar,'[41] and has said that he did not mind being called Modi's 'chamcha' (stooge).[42] Ajay Devgn, the lead actor and producer of *Tanhaji*, is another old BJP and Modi supporter who routinely campaigns for the BJP. A part of *Uri* and *Article 370*, Yami Gautam, is an outspoken Modi supporter, describing herself as a 'fan.'[43] The actor and director of *Manikarnika* and *Emergency*, Kan-

40 #IAmBuddha Team, "'The Tashkent Files': Authentic, Accurate and Vital Indian Document; Says RSS Chief Mohan Bhagwat," *I am Buddha Foundation*, 26 April 2019, https://iambuddha.net/2019/04/26/the-tashkent-files-authentic-accurate-and-vital-indian-document-says-rss-chief-mohan-bhagwat/; etimes.in, "Vivek Agnihotri at Times LitFest: People Don't like Me in Bollywood Because I Support Narendra Modi," *Times Entertainment*, 12 February 2023, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/entertainment/hindi/bollywood/news/vivek-agnihotri-at-times-litfest-people-dont-like-me-in-bollywood-because-i-support-narendra-modi/articleshow/97827768.cms.

41 Upala Sen, "The Bond between Modi and Some Filmmakers Is Not Accidental," *The Telegraph online*, 5 January 2019, https://www.telegraphindia.com/culture/the-bond-between-modi-and-some-filmmakers-is-not-accidental/cid/1680924.

42 PTI, "Don't Mind Being Called "Chamcha" of Narendra Modi: Anupam Kher," *Hindustan Times*, 12 March 2016, https://www.hindustantimes.com/india/don-t-mind-being-called-chamcha-of-narendra-modi-anupam-kher/story-98vyBaWqob1gXRm1q6dKoN.html.

43 Republic Entertainment Desk, "Everyone Is A Fan of PM Narendra Modi: Yami Gau-

gana Ranaut, is a BJP MP. Akshay Kumar, who has starred in *Toilet*, *Mission Mangal*, and *Prithviraj*, amongst other Hindutva Historicals such as *Gold* and *Kesari*, is a well-known sycophant of Modi. While not an exhaustive list, this serves to illustrate that those directly associated with the Sangh also feature prominently in Hindutva Historicals that have been discussed here.

Hindutva Historicals are also frequently endorsed or publicised by functionaries of the Sangh as well as through bodies and governments controlled by the BJP. For instance, Modi tweeted in support of *Toilet* calling it a 'good effort to further the message of cleanliness.'[44] The BJP twitter handle called the *Accidental PM*, a 'riveting tale of how a family held the country to ransom for 10 long years.'[45] The RSS called *The Kashmir Files*, 'more than a movie... a movement...' and a documentation of 'historical reality.'[46] The press reported that Modi had instructed everyone in the BJP's Parliamentary group to watch the film.[47] Amit Shah, after viewing *Prithviraj* with Akshay Kumar, called the film an important part 'in the journey of India's cultural revival which will take the country back to its glory days.'[48] Over and above such endorsements, Hindutva Historicals often receive state recognition through the waiver of entertainment tax by BJP led state governments.[49] This list includes films like *Toilet*, *Kerala Story*, *The Kashmir Files*, *Prithviraj*, *Mission Mangal*, *Tanhaji,* and *Uri*.

tam on Development in Kashmir, Shooting Article 370," *Republic*, 20 December 2024, https://www.republicworld.com/entertainment/bollywood/everyone-is-a-fan-of-pm-narendra-modi-yami-gautam-on-development-in-kashmir-shooting-article-370.

44 News18, "PM Modi Lauds Akshay's Toilet Ek Prem Katha Trailer," *News18*, 13 June 2017, https://www.news18.com/news/movies/pm-narendra-modi-lauds-akshay-kumar-toilet-ek-prem-katha-trailer-calls-it-a-good-effort-to-further-the-message-of-cleanliness-1430809.html.

45 Kamyani Sharma, "Supporting Role: How Bollywood Acted under the Modi Government," *The Caravan*, 1 April 2019, https://caravanmagazine.in/perspective/how-bollywood-acted-under-modi-government.

46 Webdesk, "The Kashmir Files: More Than a Movie... a Movement," *Organiser*, 17 March 2022, https://organiser.org/2022/03/17/72259/bharat/the-kashmir-files-more-than-a-movie-a-movement/.

47 Sanjay Kak, "The Dangerous 'Truth' of The Kashmir Files," *Al Jazeera*, 13 April 2022, https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2022/4/13/the-dangerous-truth-of-the-kashmiri-files.

48 Wadhwa, "Akshay Kumar Brutally Trolled for His 'history Textbooks' Remark".

49 Before a centralised Goods and Services Tax (GST) was implemented in 2017, an entertainment tax was imposed on films by individual states. Following the imposition of GST, when a

Conclusion: (Re-) Writing History through Film

That Hindutva Historicals often serve an immediate political purpose, is quite apparent. In them, many contemporary themes are addressed, opponents of the Sangh are misrepresented and vilified, and the Sangh's worldview is propagated. They are frequently released in the months leading up to important elections – *Uri*, *Accidental PM*, *PM Narendra Modi* and *The Tashkent Files* came out just prior to the Lok Sabha elections of 2019 and *Savarkar*, *Atal* and *Article 370* amongst many others were released in the lead up to the 2024 elections. Coming out close to elections and relaying the ideas and messages of the Sangh, they have served as additional propaganda tools. The wider significance of Hindutva Historicals can, however, only be appreciated in the context of the Sangh's project of re-writing history.

While the Sangh and its ideologues have always endeavoured to spread a Hindutva history, after the acquisition of state power, the Sangh's ability to do so has increased manifold. Although this was attempted during the BJP's initial stint (1999-2004), the project of re-writing history was taken up post-haste after 2014. There have been systematic attacks particularly on school curriculums at both the national and state levels. Between 2014 and 2018, 1334 changes were made to textbooks utilised by schools affiliated to the Central Board of Secondary Education. From 2019 onwards, a number of topics that did not fit into the Sangh's narrative including references to 2002 Gujarat riots, the Naxal movement and excerpts from the poems of revolutionary poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz were dropped from these textbooks.[50] In 2025, middle-school Social Science textbooks removed chapters related to the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughals. While, Haryana, a BJP ruled state, sought to parachute the RSS into India's struggle for independence, its history textbooks claiming that the organisation and its founders played a 'positive role' in 'awakening cultural nationalism

state announces a film tax-free, the state GST component is waived.

50 Scroll Staff, "Paragraphs on Gujarat Riots, Chapter on Mughal History Removed from NCERT Textbooks," *Scroll.in*, 17 June 2022, https://scroll.in/latest/1026397/paragraph-on-gujarat-riots-chapter-on-mughal-history-removed-from-ncert-textbooks.

and freedom struggle.'[51] Thus, as Audrey Truschke puts it, while the Hindutva acolytes 'cannot change what actually happened in the Indian past, but they can control what people know about it.'[52] It is in the context of this wider project of re-writing history that Hindutva Historicals must be placed.

Historical films, beyond being economically profitable and widely popular, are a primary access to the past. This has been widely noted in the context of advanced capitalist countries. For Stubbs, historical films were one of the 'principal ways' in which people 'formed relationships with the past.'[53] Parenti notes how for many Americans, these films, along with TV dramas, were the 'final chapter of history.'[54] O'Connor notes that historical films have 'arguably more influence than written history or teachers.'[55] Other scholars have also acknowledged historical films as being the primary source of 'historical' knowledge to a vast majority in both semi-literate and 'post-literate' societies.[56] In the Indian context, Deshpande has recognised the importance of historical films, calling them the 'preferred mode of receiving and understanding the past in contemporary [Indian] society.'[57]

Furthermore, films and historical films, in particular, have long been considered by the Right as pedagogically and politically important. Thus, D.W. Griffith, the director of *Birth of a Nation* (1915), one of the first successful historical films which also included the demonisation of non-white people and the portrayal of the Ku Klux Klan as saviours of the nation, was a 'virtual missionary' on the pedagogical

51 Vivek Gupta, "Haryana: Class 9 History Book Blames Congress for Partition, Lauds RSS, Hedgewar, Savarkar," *The Wire*, 12 July 2022, https://thewire.in/education/haryana-class-9-history-book-blames-congress-for-partition-lauds-rss-hedgewar-savarkar.

52 Audrey Truschke, "Hindutva's Dangerous Rewriting of History," *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* 24, n.º 25 (2020): 9, https://doi.org/10.4000/samaj.6636.

53 Jonathan Stubbs, *Historical Film: A Critical Introduction* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 3.

54 Parenti, *Make-Believe Media*, 68.

55 John E. O'Connor, *Image as Artifact: The Historical Analysis of Film and Television* (Malabar, Fla.: Robert E. Krieger Publishing Co., 1990), 7.

56 Marnie Hughes-Warrington, *History Goes to the Movies: Studying History on Film* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007); Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History*; Robert Brent Toplin, "The Filmmaker as Historian," *The American Historical Review* 93, n.º 5 (1988): 1210–1227.

57 Deshpande, *Class, Power, and Consciousness in Indian Cinema and Television*, 65.

role of historical films.[58] In Germany, as Weinberg notes, the Nazis were convinced of the potential of films to shape and manipulate the opinions and emotions of the public and produced films which inculcated or reinforced Nazi ideology.[59] In doing so, the historical film was frequently utilised with an early example being that of *Hitler Youth Quex* (1933). A film that celebrated the birth, life, and death of a symbolic Hitler Youth, which, according to Baird, was a Nazi historical that could serve as a 'textbook example of the use of poetic license in the mythical interpretation of historical reality.'[60] There is also the example of *Jud Süss (1940), an historical drama in which 'the Jew' was portrayed as a sexual, blood sucking beast, which is considered* 'one of the most notorious and successful pieces of antisemitic film propaganda produced in Nazi Germany.' Similarly, in fascist Italy, Landy notes how historical films created parallels between past and present with an emphasis on motifs such as 'the importance of the powerful leader,' 'the need for national unity, and 'the supremacy of Italian culture.'[61]

In a similar vein, Hindutva Historicals are, at the most fundamental level, in sync with the Sangh's broader attempt at re-writing history to suit its ideological and political needs. Hindutva Historicals take the Sangh's historico-political myths, beliefs, and ideas and mix them with the immensely popular medium of the Hindi film and spread them among people whose primary and often only interaction with history is through the historical film, in the process aiding in the wider project of re-writing history.

58 Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History*, 11.

59 David Weinberg, "Approaches to the Study of Film in the Third Reich: A Critical Appraisal," *Journal of Contemporary History* 19, n.º 1 (1984): 105–107.

60 Jay Baird, "From Berlin to Neubabelsberg: Nazi Film Propaganda and Hitler Youth Quex," *Journal of Contemporary History* 18, n.º 3 (1983): 496.

61 Marcia Landy, *Fascism in Film: The Italian Commercial Cinema, 1931-1943* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 228.

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