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Parmanu: the story of Pokhran (2018)- the saffronization of India's quest for a nuclear weapon

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ABSTRACT



Parmanu (2018) is a commercial action-cum-spy flick that recounts a highly stylized history of India's efforts to become a *Pokhran* nuclear weapons state through the narrative device of the Mahabharat, one of India's two great Sanskrit epics. In doing so, it renders India's quest for nuclear weapons in explicitly communal terms rather than national terms. *Parmanu* exemplifies Modi's co-optation of Bollywood for his personal gain and that of his party, the BJP. It also participates in the BJP's communal agenda of forging new, muscular image of India at home and abroad.

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Introduction

*Parmanu: The Story of Pokhran*¹ (dir. Abhishek Sharma; 2018), starring and produced by John Abraham and Diana Penty, promised to be a titillating action film that recounts India's 1998 quest for nuclear weapons under the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) government led by Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. The film explicitly purports to be based upon real events and represents itself as a docudrama based upon access to declassified documents and other materials inaccessible to ordinary Indians. Despite Abrahams' claim that 'about 15 to 20% of the film is fictional', *Parmanu* presents a highly stylized account of India's security predicament crosscut with international and domestic political considerations.² As one critic observed, 'This academically presented film is shown using declassified military documents and footage that is targeted at inciting patriotic feelings among cinema goers who rarely get to see a detailed chronicle of the history of nuclear tests in India'; however in fact it is a '130-minute assault on the

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senses', which 'is less about misinforming the viewer with misrepresentation of facts and more about the unintentional humo[ur] that it rubs in'.³

While the film may have failed in the eyes of elite film critics, the film successfully advanced the political and cultural agenda of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Hindu chauvinist party, the BJP. *Parmanu* politicizes and communalizes India's 1998 nuclear tests and establishes a narrative that only the muscular BJP had the requisite fortitude to challenge the international system and fulfill its manifesto pledge to bequeath to India a nuclear weapons capability.⁴ Here, I argue that *Parmanu* is a distinctively communal, Hindu nationalist retelling of India's quest for a nuclear weapon which erases the foundational contributions of India's premier nuclear scientist, Abdul Kalam, who was a Muslim. In doing so, this film successfully re-presents the nuclearization of India as a specifically Hindutva (Hindu chauvinist) project rather than a national project that originated in the earliest years of Indian statehood.⁵

I contend that this film exemplifies the deepening collusion between the current BJP-led government under Narendra Modi and India's Mumbai-based Hindi film industry often referred to as Bollywood.⁶ While Hindi films have often reflected the values of the Indian government, Modi has been the most assertive in cultivating Bollywood for his own political fortunes as well as promoting the BJP's re-imagined lean, muscular, hyper-virile Hindu man and concomitant powerful and assertive Hindustan flexing its muscles in the global arena.⁷ While the recent films of Akshay Kumar, the erstwhile action fiction heartthrob turned BJP enthusiast, most embody the willingness of Bollywood to promote, popularize and normalize the BJP and its politics,⁸ in *Parmanu*, 'John Abraham does an Akshay Kumar. He bats for the country, but more than that, he bats for a party – the one ruling us currently'.⁹

I organize the remainder of the essay as follows. Next, I provide a brief history of India's quest for a nuclear deterrent which provides the historical context for *Parmanu*'s storyline. In the third section, I provide a synopsis of the *Mahabharat* and review its various retellings in film and other media. Fourth, I detail the history of the BJP's cultivation of Bollywood going back to the late 1990s. Next I provide a synopsis of *Parmanu* and detail the political work it performs in the service of Modi and the BJP through its use of the *Mahabharat* to tell the story of India's nuclearization in explicitly communal terms. I conclude with a discussion about the implications of this saffronization of India's film industries for Indian politics in the near and medium term.

India's nuclearization: situating Parmanu

Under Prime Minister Nehru, India emerged as a prominent advocate for global disarmament in the 1950's. However, several significant events in the early 1960's pushed India to pursue a nuclear weapons capability

clandestinely, all the while maintaining its public stance as a proponent of disarmament. These events included India's defeat in the 1962 border conflict with China; China's 1964 nuclear test; the 1965 Indo-Pakistan war; growing Sino-Pakistan ties, and China's ongoing nuclear testing. These events also spurred India to launch an aggressive but unsuccessful diplomatic offensive to garner external security guarantees that would protect India from a Chinese nuclear attack. India sought a joint US-USSR guarantee as well as bilateral guarantees from United States and Britain. While American policy makers considered these Indian proposals, they were unconvinced that they would deter India from developing its own nuclear capabilities.¹⁰

The 1970s brought additional security concerns that pushed Prime Minister Indira Gandhi to approve a so-called peaceful nuclear explosion test in 1974. She was motivated in considerable measure by Washington's dispatch of the nuclear-powered carrier USS Enterprise to the Bay of Bengal during the 1971 Indo-Pakistan war to dissuade Indian military aggression against East Pakistan. A second precipitant was Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's demarche to the Indian Ambassador that Washington would be unable to support India should China enter the 1971 conflict with Pakistan. Gandhi viewed these American moves as rank intimidation. She argued that Washington would never have considered these maneuvers had India been a nuclear power. She was further encouraged by the international indifference to India's security concerns, which were exacerbated by China's nuclear testing through the 1960s and archrival Pakistan's pursuit of nuclear weapons which began in earnest after its defeat in the 1971 war.¹¹

Despite intelligence assessments that India had developed a nascent nuclear capability and had a growing interest in testing, India's 1974 nuclear tests at Pokhran took many by surprise. Even though several global nonproliferation efforts were well underway prior to the test, India's test led to an expansion in the international nuclear control regime. Despite this, the Indian 'strategic enclave' pressured nearly every subsequent prime minister to resume nuclear testing.¹² Such episodes are known to have occurred in 1982–83 during the premiership of Indira Gandhi, in 1995 under P. V. Narasimha Rao, and in 1996 under the 12-day government of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led by Atal Bihari Vajpayee. In 1997, Prime Minister I. K. Gujral too came under pressure from the scientists within the strategic enclave to test. In each case, the Americans detected Indian preparations and issued demarches, leading India to abandon their plans to test.¹³

Several proximate and distal factors persuaded Prime Minister Vajpayee to resume tests in May 1998. First, the 1974 test were inadequate for weaponization. Subsequently, scientists and others within the strategic enclave repeatedly pressured the government to resume testing. Second, while India believed the global nonproliferation noose was tightening around its neck,

the US Congress' passage of the 1995 Brown Amendment appeared to reward Pakistan for its proliferation efforts. Third, was the consolidation of the nonproliferation regime which India viewed as 'nuclear apartheid'. A fourth set of motivations pertained to events in South Asia itself, including Indian leadership's assessment that Pakistan was on a path of Islamic obscurantism that would have consequences for Indian-administered Kashmir as well as Pakistani advancements in nuclear weapons and delivery systems due in part to ongoing nuclear cooperation between China and Pakistan as well as China's own vertical proliferation. The final straw was Pakistan's successful test launch of a Ghauri missile on 6 April 1998, which could target most of India.¹⁴

Consequently, on 13 May 1998, 'when half of the world was sleeping; India's nuclear era emerged. Deceiving spy satellites of the United States and other countries, India secretly conducted a series of underground nuclear tests with five bombs in Pokhran, Rajasthan, and become the sixth nation to enter the exclusive nuclear-armed State club'.¹⁵ Importantly for this essay, the lead scientist behind these tests was Dr. Abdul Kalam, Prime Minister Vajpayee's scientific advisor. Kalam relayed the success of the tests to the prime minister. "It was a defining moment for both the country and Vajpayee, whose long-standing dream of converting India into a nuclear state was fulfilled by Kalam. Dr. Kalam delivered the world the first "Islamic bomb', but one that belongs to India-an India ruled by Hindu nationalists".¹⁶

In 2002, BJP Prime Minister Vajpayee nominated Kalam as his government's candidate for the Presidency. He won by a landslide. Kalam, a self-made scientist from humble origins in Tamil Nadu who rose to become India's best-known scientists and an advisor to multiple prime ministers, was widely revered across India for his unabashed belief in India's greatness and his belief in power politics. Some viewed his selection by the Hindu chauvinist party as a signal that the BJP government was serious about healing Hindu-Muslim tensions. However, detractors of the selection believed that he was a Muslim palatable to the Hindu majority because, unlike the majority of Muslims, he was a vegetarian who cited the *Bhagavad Gita* as often as he did the Quran.¹⁷

The Mahabharat and its retellings

The *Mahabharat* is comprised of some 100,000 Sanskrit stanzas spanning four recurring *yugs* (approximately an epoch): namely, Satya Yug, Treta Yug, Dvapara Yug, and Kali Yug. The first yug, that of truth, lasts some 1,728,000 years. With each subsequent yug, the universe deteriorates due to the imperfections of the passing one. The central event of the *Mahabharat* is the Great War, which occurs as the Dvapara Yug is ending. Structurally, the great war is inevitable because of the sudden death of Pandu, the King of the

Bharata empire with its capital Hastinapur. Who should accede to the throne? Pandu's older brother, Dhritarashtra, cannot be king because he was born blind, but he does become the regent while his own ambitious sons – who number one hundred – and those five legitimate sons of Pandu, collectively known as the Pandavas, come of age. His first-born son, Dhritarashtra, refuses to divide the kingdom or let his cousin become king. Raised together in the capital, the cousins belong to the warrior caste (*kshatriya*). They learn both the arts of warfare as well as the notion of *dharma*, or proper conduct.¹⁸

As Stewart notes, While structurally the great war is rooted in the conflict over accession, the immediate precipitant of the conflict is the outcome of a crooked game of dice during which Yudhishtira, the oldest of the Pandavas, loses all of his wealth – and that of his brothers – to Duryodhana, the eldest of the Kaurava brothers. In a final effort to recover their collective losses, he wagers and loses Draupadi – the famed wife in a polyandrous relationship with the five Pandavas.¹⁹ Once Duryodhana wins, he demands that Draupadi be produced whereupon she is dragged by her hair into the palace's great assembly hall and displayed for all to see. Duryodhana's brother, Dushasana, calls her a whore and a slave then attempts to denude her. Krishna, the deific advisor to kings, comes to her aid with a divine intervention: as each raiment is stripped away, another magically appears. Eventually Dushasana gives up in defeat, but Duryodhana obscenely offers her his bare thigh and requests her to sit on his lap. Bheem, the second of the Pandavas, vows to avenge this outrage. Draupadi wants savage revenge and ultimately Bheem delivers it. The great war ensued with each side supported by enormous armies from the vast reaches of the kingdom. The conflict lasted for 18 days and claimed millions of lives. Ultimately, despite *dharmic* shortcomings on both sides, the Pandavas under the guidance of Krishna prevails over the Kauravas.²⁰

Philip Lutgendorf observes that the *Mahabharata*, along with the *Ramayana*, perdure in contemporary India, both as multiform texts and as bodies of visual art and performance.²¹ There have been numerous filmic retellings of these epics in Hindi films as well as other vernacular films. While the first decade of indigenous Indian films was dominated by mythological tones, this genre virtually died out in 1931 with the advent of sound. After 1931, mythological plots were generally relegated to regional – especially southern – films. In Bollywood they were generally considered to be 'B-grade' releases targeting the 'niche markets of pious grandmothers and rustics'.²² Oddly, even though many filmmakers claim that virtually every Bollywood film can be traced back to either of these epics, there were few explicit treatments of either epic in contemporary Bollywood in the first decades after independence apart from Babubhai Mistry's 1965 *Mahabharat*.²³

The fortunes of *Mahabharat* in film began to change in the 1980s, coincident with the resurgence of Hindu nationalism that was beginning to

emerge as viable and growing political ideology with pan-Indian appeal.²⁴ In 1980, the Hindu nationalist BJP was established, under the leadership of Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Lal Krishan Advani, and Murali Manohar Joshi. This followed a split within the Janata Party,²⁵ a coalition of parties of which the BJP was a member, over the prohibition of elected Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS) officials participating in the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). The RSS is a grass-roots fascist national volunteer corps whose early founder MS Gowalker, inspired by Adolph Hitler's own fascism, claimed that "India belongs to Hindus and that the country's minorities should be treated along the lines of the Nazis' treatment of the Jews."²⁶ Organized around local *shaakhas* (branches), RSS acolytes learn martial arts while also embracing a Hindu chauvinist agenda.²⁷

In 1980, Bapu's retelling of the *Mahabharat*, *Hum Paanch* (We Five), was released. Set in rural Karnataka and featuring actors dressed in a mélange of regional clothing styles, the film had a distinct Pan-Indian feel. Here, the rural and downtrodden 'Pandavas' take down the ruthless and tyrannical landlord (*zamindar*), Pratap Singh. The narrative includes its own version of the Draupadi's violation to further reinforce the *Mahabharat* messaging, with characters remarking 'The Pandavas have taken birth again', and songs that invoke the Pandavas and their battle against the evil king.²⁸

That same year, director Shayan Benegal began producing big-budget melodramas, one of which was a *Kalyug* (1981), a story of two Indian industrial dynasties told as a re-presentation of the *Mahabharat*, starring Shashi Kapoor and Rekha.²⁹ Lutgendorf argues *Kalyug*, is a mirror of the *Mahabharat* due to its stylistic choices and narrative focusing on the moral turpitude of the Kalyug, a period of strife in Hinduism. Furthermore, Lutgendorf postulates that this is a '*Mahabharat roman à clef*, in which actual epic names, colloquialized according to normal Hindi practice are artfully combined with epithets (Dharam Raj for Yudhistira) and with commonplace names that lack *Mahabharat* associations yet carry ironic or allusive weight in this context'.³⁰ Despite the importance of Draupadi's disrobing in the *Mahabharat*, this film proffers a 'a token allusion to the epic humiliation of Draupadi' when tax-agents rifle through the undergarments of Supriya (played by Rekha), a wife of the Puran Chand business house (the Pandavas). Notably, this film lacks a Krishna character altogether, despite the centrality of Krishna to the epic.

Between 1988 and 1990, India's public broadcaster, Doordarshan, released a 94-episode television show called *Mahabharat* (dir. B.R. Chopra and Ravi Chopra; 1988), starring Harish Bhimani, Nitish Bharadwaj and Mukesh Khanna.³¹ The series was extremely successful and enabled Bharadwaj to translate his on-screen appeal into a national assembly seat as a BJP candidate in 1996 from a state he never visited. While he ultimately lost his seat in the 1999 general elections, he later worked for the BJP in Madhya Pradesh

and served as the BJP spokesperson until 2004.³² Seeking to capitalize on the commercial success of the 1988 series, a modern televised *Mahabharat* (dir. Siddarth Anan Kumar, Amarprith G, Mukesh Kumar Singh, Kamal Monga, and Loknath Pandey) drama was televised over 2013 and 2014 with a staggering 267 episodes over 28 seasons.³³ In 2013, a Hindi-language animated retelling of the *Mahabharat* (dir. Amaan Khan; 2013) was launched with several A-list actors, such as Amitabh Bachchan; Manoj Bajpayee; and Vidya Balan voicing characters in the film.³⁴ At the time of this revival of *Mahabharat*-inspired films, the Hindu nationalist BJP party swept all four state assembly elections that were being contested and would go on to sweep the 2014 general elections. The correlation is not causal: the film industry in India – as they are everywhere – is a well-oiled machine adroit at detecting changes in public taste.³⁵ Interest in filmic retellings of the *Mahabharat* perdure. In 2019, Amir Khan announced that he would make an animated retelling of the epic. While he shelved the project after two years amidst rumors of his unfavorable opinion of the ruling BJP,³⁶ director S. S. Rajamouli currently working on a 10-part retelling of the *Mahabharat*.³⁷

In addition to film, other mediums such as 'nautanki's' (drama/theatre) have woven the traditional narrative, historical antecedents, and characters of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* into their mass market performances for generations.³⁸ Although both the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* have strong Hindu foundations, the *Mahabharata* has proven more successful than the *Ramayana* in garnering interest and relatability from diverse religious groups because of its multi-textual and multi-thematic composition.³⁹ Therefore, adaptations of epics such as the *Mahabharata* are not just used as tools of mass commercialization, but also for cultural continuity and promoting nationalist sentiments within heterogeneous populations.⁴⁰

As Booth notes, retelling and adapting these epics to new diverse stories and mediums serves two primary goals: establishing familiar connective links between the film and the audience and promoting cultural continuity.⁴¹ The subjective and undefined nature of these epics, and their diversely interpreted central themes and storylines, permit facile reimagination and adaptation into extant socio-cultural and political environments.⁴² However, they are adapted in an analogical manner and form a secondary subtext.⁴³ Arguably, the *Mahabharat* inspires such adaptations because of its complexity and enormity as well as the cosmic time span it encompasses. Notably, throughout the 1930's and 1940s, 'genres of mythological, fantasy, and stunt film were often used as frameworks for stories that were frankly allegories about the freedom struggle – the subterfuge being necessary because the British ruthlessly censored all references to the independence movement'.⁴⁴ In this way a film about a hero or heroine 'rescu[ing] a people oppressed by a wicked tyrant who had usurped his brother's kingdom would apparently be recognized as subversive by audiences but could

escape the attentions of the censors'.⁴⁵ Importantly, as Thomas notes, a film need not slavishly adhere to particular details of the epic to be considered a retelling of the same; rather a film may dilate upon selected aspects which may be framed or highlighted within the cinematic conventions of the film. *Kalyug*, detailed above, exemplifies this in that it merely nods to the famed incident of Draupadi's disrobing and omits any references to the Krishna – or any other divine character – whatsoever.

While the BJP's deployment of the *Ramayan* is most well-known, it should be noted that Modi as well as other BJP officials have evoked this great war in their official capacities several times in recent years. During a virtual address to the Summit for Democracy, co-hosted by the United States in March of 2023, Modi claimed that the epic, along with the *Vedas*, proves that non-hereditary leadership first occurred in India. During the event, he opined that in the *Mahabharat*, 'the first duty of citizens is described as choosing their own leader' and the *Vedas* dated much earlier, 'speak of political power being exercised by broad-based consultative bodies'.⁴⁶ In 2020, speaking of India's efforts to defeat COVID, Modi declared that in the *Mahabharat*, the battle was done in 18 days. The war against COVID will take 21 days. Needless to say, that did not transpire.⁴⁷ In 2014, Modi addressed a gathering of doctors and other professionals at a hospital in Mumbai during which he spoke of the birth of Karna from the *Mahabharat*, who was not delivered from his mother's womb.⁴⁸ He asserted that the nature of Karna birth was clear evidence genetic science existed during the time of the *Mahabharat*. At the same event, he asserted that Lord Ganesha (the god with a man's body and an elephant head), proves that plastic surgery existed in ancient India.⁴⁹ Another BJP politician rebuffed any suggestions that the Americans created the internet arguing that the knowledge of satellite communication existed during the period of *Mahabharat*.⁵⁰ Equally odd, the Observer Research Foundation closely aligned with the current Indian government, described Modi's strategy with respect to Pakistan as evidence of the 'The Shishupala Doctrine', which the author describes as being taken from an incident in the *Mahabharat* when 'the divine avatar Krishna promises to forgive Shishupala, an impudent cousin, one hundred offences. At the occurrence of the hundred and first offence, though, the Krishna punishes Shishupala with death'.⁵¹

From silver screen to saffron screen?

Indian cinema has had 'a more profound influence on the articulation of nationalism', relative to print or state-controlled radio and television and Indian 'cinema's intimate relationship with the project of nationalism and patriotism began very early on'.⁵² *Raja Harischandra* (1913) was the first full-length film by Dadasaheb Phalke, considered to be the father of Indian cinema. This film, which drew upon the *Ramayan* and *Mahabharat*, was

'foundational to the construction of an Indian nationalism that was simultaneously anti-colonial and Hindu in character and a patriotism that was rooted in the discourse of *swadeshi* (self-sufficiency)'.⁵³ As Dwyer noted, mythologies were the founding genre of Indian cinema and this genre established a tradition of films that narrated the 'tales of gods and goddesses, heroes and heroines, mostly from the large repository of Hindu myths'.⁵⁴ Curiously, after the demise of the mythological genre and the rise of the melodrama, Indian films continued to entrench the imagined nation as Hindu despite Nehru's commitment to secularism.

Equally important, in the years following India's independence in 1947, film stars themselves played an important role in disseminating nationalist rhetoric. While Mahatma Gandhi may have derided popular cinema as morally corrosive and bereft of redeeming virtues, Nehru acutely understood the social capital of film stars despite his reservations about the tendency of Hindi films to pander to India's masses. Nehru had close personal ties with Prithviraj Kapoor, who was often dispatched abroad as a part of cultural delegations. Mitra dilates upon the degree to which Hindi films in this period were distinctly pro-establishment while the stars themselves lent political parties a much-needed glamour in the way they attracted large crowds to party events. When stars were past their cinematic prime, "politics afforded the opportunity to leverage their celebrity status, and subsequently, facilitated their reinventions from *abhineta* (actor) to *neta* (leader).⁵⁵ Up through the 1990s, Hindi stars tended to align with the Congress party which dominated up to this period – particularly in the northern and western states. However, star loyalties have shifted with the fortunes of the political parties. Amitabh Bachchan exemplifies this tendency. He joined politics at the behest of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, who was a close personal friend. While his time as a parliamentarian was brief, he continued to implicitly support the Congress and its initiatives. However, Bachchan has abandoned his Congress ties and is now a supporter of the BJP and Modi.⁵⁶

While Dwyer concluded that there was no strong evidence of Hindu nationalism in the Hindi film through 1990s,⁵⁷ other film scholars disagree. Mitra, among others, maintains that with the collapse of the Congress party and the ascendancy of the BJP in the 2000s, Bollywood's political loyalties decisively shifted towards the BJP. Mythological serials "inaugurated a new era not only in television but in politics as well, sanctioning 'Hindu nationalist initiatives in the name of the people'.⁵⁸ L.K. Advani, once the chief ideologue of the BJP, understood the power of film due to his tenure both as the film critic for the *Organiser*, a Rashtriya Swyamsevak Sangh-based magazine and as the Minister for Information and Broadcasting early in the 1990s. His expertise in exploiting the mythological genre was evident from his *rath yatras* (chariot tours) in which he transported in a Toyota truck that was rendered into Lord Ram's chariot

carrying Advani and others dressed as epic characters.⁵⁹ Shoesmith and Mecklai argue that the television serialization of both epics yielded a more accessible 'mythological soap opera', and illustrates how the doctrine of Hindutva and the mythological Ramrajya combined to form a powerful national popular philosophy that achieved two important objectives for the BJP. First, it mobilized a large section of the Hindu community to oppose the Muslim other. Second, the BJP captured the political terrain through a 'vernacular politics' that uses 'commodity images' and the visual media of film and television 'for expanding markets and audiences', and votes. It also served to secure the allegiance of the upper classes and business community in what has been described as an 'opportunistic alliance'.⁶⁰ The BJP effectively mobilized the vast constituency of film and television viewers into an 'electoral affiliation' by marking 'an aggressive, militant version of Hinduism, using the symbols of worship and by the "othering" of Muslims and Christian' by exploiting the idioms of Hindi film.⁶¹ This in turn permitted the BJP to proliferate its Hindutva agenda across Indian politics more broadly.

Concurrent with this ideological reorientation, Bollywood has reshaped conventional understandings of masculinity along the lines envisioned by Savarkar, the father of Hindutva. Savarkar called for a never-ending war with Muslims and Christians to reconquer an imagined India to establish a Hindu Raj. Savarkar articulated Hindu masculinity as violent and virile, and harbored deep loathing for purportedly effeminate men who 'should be annihilated and suffer super-savage cruelty'.⁶² Mubarki notes of this transformation of the avuncular, portly hero into a 'well-chiseled, voluminous, well-endowed male body' that emerged in the late 1990s, 'is a fulfillment of the orientation of the discourse of *Hindutva* and is intricately linked the rise of majority politics which is rooted in a constellation of events that occurred in the 1970s and 1980s'.⁶³ By extension, this muscular, hyper-virile Hindu man is the physical embodiment of a new that India that, under the BJP and Modi, contests the territorial, ideological and political *status quo* in favor of an aggressively revisionist agenda in its foreign and domestic policies.

Concomitant with the rising fortunes of the BJP and its Hindu chauvinist ideology, there has been an increasing number of Bollywood stars not only aligning with the party and its ideological agenda in their films but also contesting elections on the BJP ticket. Many of these stars were catapulted into politics because they had acted in the *Ramayan* or the *Mahabharat*. Stars would appear in their costumes, and they would be recognized instantly as important religious figures in the Hindu pantheon of gods and goddesses, which in turn enabled their electoral successes. The BJP enjoys the support of another pantheon that includes Dharmendra, Hema Malina, Kirron Kher, Paresh Rawal, Sunny Deol, Arun Govil, Deepika Chichalia, Arvind Trivedi, Nitish Bharadwaj, Anupam Kher, Raveena Tandon, Juhi Chawla and *Akshay*

Kumar. Some of these persons have successfully contested elections on the BJP ticket as well.⁶⁴

This alignment of Bollywood's stars with those of the BJP is not the product of passive collusion as generally occurred in earlier periods with the notable exception of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi who suspended democratic processes, imprisoned leaders of the opposition and ruled by diktat during the so-called Emergency (1975–77). During this period, she employed an effective "combination of censorship and patronage to control the film industry [with the result that popular] Hindi films such as *Kala Patthar* (Black Stone, Yash Chopra, 1979) advocated her policies such as the nationalization of coal mines.⁶⁵ Rather this current alignment is the outcome of assertive cultivation by the BJP, under Vajpayee and Modi, using a number of carrots and sticks.

First, the Vajpayee's government granted the filmmaking 'industry status', which made film-makers eligible for bank financing as well as other amenities such as reduced electricity rates. This also benefited the BJP's base which tends to draw from small businessmen and petty traders who are involved in film distribution and promotion and other services. This rendered India's popular films into an exportable cultural item for massive Indian diaspora as well as an 'international money-maker and a disseminator of Indian cultural values and neo-liberal economics around the world'.⁶⁶ This corporatization of Bollywood offered a number of benefits to the state. It extended the 'authority of state-supported financial institutions through a new set of rules imposed on the production and marketing of films' which permits the state to 'decide which films received financing whilst discriminating against those productions it didn't think fit for state sponsorship. This came strikingly close to resembling state patronage and signaled unprecedented level of intervention in the creative process at even the pre-production stages of film-making'.⁶⁷ Film scholar, Nandana Bose, claims that 'Unlike the Congress, which kept a public distance from the world of glamour, the BJP recognised that audio-visual mass media were powerful tools for communicating its ideology'.⁶⁸ During the post-liberalisation decade of the 1990s, "the BJP wooed Bollywood as if it were a hero in one of its formulaic plots, cajoling it into accepting curbs on its creative freedoms – including not criticising 'those involved in the Ayodhya movement' – in exchange for sops such as cheaper raw film and lower customs duty on equipment . . . [During the 1999 elections, the BJP] released campaign material through video cassettes, organised screenings of select films at which both actors and politicians were photographed together, and released perhaps the first ever Indian 'campaign film'—*Neta Bas Ek Atal Ho*".⁶⁹

Second, Modi's government, like previous governments, employs the array of laws that restrict freedom of expression which India retained from the British as well as newer innovations. Censorship occurs at federal and state levels. For example, in September 2019, the Shiv Sena (a Hindu chauvinist and

Marathi ethno-nationalist political party) filed a police complaint against Netflix arguing that several of its television shows (i.e. *Sacred Games*, *Leila*, *Ghoul* and *Patriot Act*) defamed India and hurt Hindus' religious sentiments. At the federal level, the Indian Ministry of Information and Broadcasting ordered that two scenes be removed from an Amazon series *Tandav* after right-wing groups and politicians claimed that they hurt religious and community sentiments.⁷⁰ In 2023, several scenes in a dance number in the film *Pathan* had to be changed to mollify outraged sentiments of India's right-wing.⁷¹

Third, the government, including state governments, can also accord tax-free status to films that articulate the government's ideological agenda. This has an impact upon the consumer who can see such films at a lower cost. Filmmakers value this status because 'it is seen as an endorsement by the government and can enhance the film's image and publicity. The status may not have a direct impact on the film's financial success but it is seen as a significant boost in the film industry'.⁷² While this is a historical practice for films that the government perceives as socially significant or have other positive impacts (i.e. tourism promotion or benefit a local industry), the films that have enjoyed this status under BJP-led states are those that are explicitly communal and incendiary towards India's Muslim population. Two recent controversial examples include Vivek Agnihotri's *The Kashmir Files* (2022), which purports to tell the saga faced by Kashmiri Hindus as they countenanced the brutality of Muslims in the early years of the Kashmir insurgency, and Sudipto Sen's *The Kerala Story* (2023), which purports to expose the terrors and traumas of an alleged love jihad in which Muslim men seduce Hindu women to convert to Islam and even lure them into joining Islamist terror groups such as the Islamist State. In the case of the former, several BJP-led states waived the goods-and-services tax on tickets and/or gave government workers time off to attend screening. Modi himself declared that the film has 'shown the truth' of Kashmir in the early 1990s. The filmmakers were invited to meet with the Prime Minister and other Hindutva politicians. As many feared, audiences 'erupted into anti-Muslim chants in theatres across India, and the Indian press has reported on violence against Muslims that the perpetrators admit was inflamed by the film'.⁷³ Similarly, several BJP-led states have accorded tax-free status to *The Kerala Story*, Prime Minister Modi as well as other BJP leaders have lent their support to the film and encouraged other states to do so as well. However, Trinamool-led Bengal banned the film fearing that it too would stoke communal violence.⁷⁴

Finally, first as Gujarat Chief Minister and then as the Prime Minister, Modi courted Bollywood with tremendous success. Modi met with several Bollywood A-listers (e.g. Salman Khan, John Abraham, Akshay Kumar, Amitabh Bachchan, and Sanjay Dutt) when he was the Chief Minister of Gujarat in 2014 and his 2012 meeting with Google hangout session with

Bollywood star Ajay Devgn was a critical part of his campaign to become minister.⁷⁵ Since becoming prime minister, Modi has met Bollywood illuminati, including producers and actors, numerous times in Mumbai or in Delhi. Modi posts pictures of himself with the stars and the stars post pictures of themselves with Modi. Both seem to enjoy the reciprocal benefits of the other's popular appeal.⁷⁶

The result of these various efforts has been an unprecedented alignment between Bollywood. For example, Bhatia explains the revival of the Hindi historical film (e.g. *Bajirao Mastani* (2015); *Raag Desh* (2017); *Padmaavat*, *Manikarnika*, *Kesari*, *Panipat* (2019) *Tanhaji* (2020)) in the last couple of years despite being out of fashion for years noting that whether they are set in the distant past or relatively recent times of turmoil, most present to the viewers a version of the past that's that is skewed towards the preferred narratives of Hindutva. In these films, the protagonists are brave, distinctly high-caste Hindu patriots while the antagonists are barbaric and foreign Muslim invaders. They advance the contemporary Hindutva narrative that Muslims are invaders and have no indigenous place in modern India.⁷⁷ In addition, several films have been made which exclusively promote Modi and his hyper-virile leadership and/or denigrate past and present political opposition (e.g. *Parmanu* (2018); *Uri: The Surgical Strike* (2019); *The Accidental Prime Minister* (2019); *P.M. Narendra Modi* (2019)). There have been several so-called Hindi social films that explicitly promote specific Modi policies, many of which feature Akshay Kumar (*Toilet: Ek Prem Katha* (2017); *Batti Gul Meter Chalu* (2018); *Sui Dhaga* (2018); *Mission Mangal* (2019)).⁷⁸

Reclaiming India's nuclear program as a Hindutva project

Parmanu's hero is Ashwat Rana, an officer in the Research and Analysis Wing⁷⁹ (RAW), during the Congress government led by Prime Minister Rao. In response to provocations by China and Pakistan in 1995, a meeting of principals is convened to discuss potential reprisals. Rana, who attends in his capacity as a RAW analyst, exceeds his brief when he suggests that India conduct a nuclear test. The bureaucrats in the meeting, including the Prime Minister's Secretary Suresh Yadav, mock Rana's proposal while proffering risible suggestions of their own such as issuing a toughly worded statement, refusing to dispatch badminton players, and halting the export of mangoes to China. These fictional offerings depict the Congress government as incompetent stewards of India's national security. To support his proposal, Rana provides a floppy disk which contains his important plans to ensure the requisite secrecy of the plans necessary for a successful test, which rely upon concealment and deception efforts to thwart the prying gaze of American satellites. One of the aids confuses the disk for a coaster and places his cup of tea upon it, advancing the film's depiction of the

Congress-led government as unfit ingénues in national security affairs. Nonetheless, Yadav instructs Rana to write a brief memorandum for the prime minister. Yadav suggests that Rana himself will present the plan to the prime minister. Ultimately, Yadav appropriates Rana's plan as his own; however, he fails to grasp the importance of Rana's emphasis upon denial and deception strategies and does not present these features of the plan to the Prime Minister.

The prime minister approves the test without employing any of Rana's denial and deception strategies. To further underscore that lack of competence of the government, principles in the meeting discuss the plan to test indiscreetly in the cafeteria. The outcome is foreordained: the CIA detects test preparations after which President Bill Clinton demarches the Prime Minister who relents in humiliation. Rana, made the scapegoat for this indignity, is fired whereupon he falls into a period of deep despair. He struggles to find meaning in his life until the BJP returns to power in 1998.

In the meantime, Rana transforms into a truculent figure who moves his family to Mussoorie where his wife, Sushma, is an astronomer. While his wife is the primary earner, Rana spends two desultory years tutoring aspiring Indian Administrative Service bureaucrats for the rigorous examination while failing to carry his weight as a husband and a father to their precocious son, Prahlad. Weathering the complaints of his wife and her parents, Rana believes that selflessly preparing future bureaucrats is the only way he can serve the nation. While his sulkiness grates, Rana exhibits what Murty describes as a form of masculinity 'linked with "renunciate" celibacy, duty, and service to the nation', based upon 'the image of the Hindu nationalist icon of Rama' of the *Ramayana*.⁸⁰

In 1988, the BJP returns to power and Prime Minister Vajpayee, depicted only through televised flashbacks, decides to resume testing. The prime minister's principal secretary, Himanshu Shukla (played by Boman Irani), invites Rana to brief him on what went wrong in 1995 under the guise of a job interview for a teaching position in New Delhi. This begins the weeks-long saga of lying to wife about the nature and location of his eventual posting. Shukla persuades the narcissistic Rana, who is still stung by his 1995 scapegoating, to share his experiences about the failed test. Eventually the sullen Rana draws out an elaborate schema on the chalkboard and walks Shukla through his ill-fated plan, dilating upon the previous government's disregard for his detailed plans to subvert detection of American satellites. The *mise-en-scene* flutters between the classroom, the American satellites overhead, and their visualization of the test site (Figure 1). Rana explains that there are brief times, measured in a few hours, when there are no satellites over the test site. He identifies the Indian Space Agency as an unlikely but critical partner because the agency is in a unique position to track US satellites and find these blackout windows. Having satisfied Shukla of the plan's viability, Rana is tasked with assembling the team to render India a nuclear-armed state.

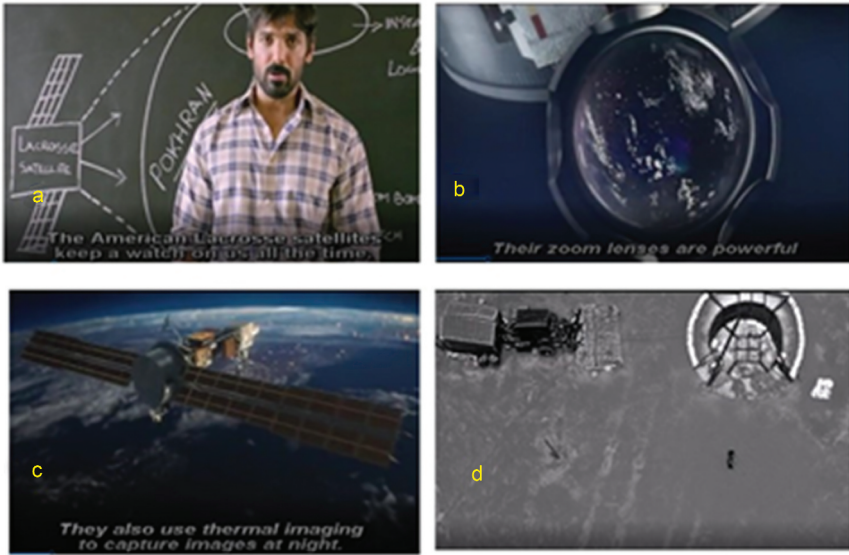


Figure 1. The Kauravas’ “Disrobing” of Draupadi. **Notes:** A. Rana explains how the American satellites work (*Parmanu* 24:42); B. Explaining how powerful the satellites are (*Parmanu* 24:50); C. Explaining they have thermo-imaging allowing them to see at night (*Parmanu* 25:15); D. The exposed test-range at Pokhran (*Parmanu* 25:25)

Back in Mussoorie, Rana peruses academic journals and dailies to assemble his crew. Visibly exhausted, Sushma suggests that he take a break and watch television with her parents and Prahlad. As he stumbles into the television room, his mother-in-law admonishes him to remove his shoes because they are watching the 1998–1990 serialized *Mahabharat*, reflecting the belief that the room in which the serial was plaid was rendered a divine space. At first, Rana ignores the program, as he is engrossed in scouring a paper for potential team members. Rana begins to pay attention only when he hears his son asking his grandmother how the five Pandavas managed to vanquish one hundred Kauravas. She patiently explains to the boy that they won because they followed Lord Krishna’s advice. Gesturing to the television screen (*Figure 2*), she explains that the oldest Pandava, Yudhisthir, was a righteous figure who always followed the correct path. Next is Arjun, who was so focused that he never missed his target. Sehdev contributed the third component of their strength, secrecy, which is commonly ignored by people. Sehdev could gaze into the sky and forecast what problems lay ahead. At this point, Rana looks up from his paper, struck by the idea that the Pandavas could provide the concept for his team. With Rana looking on attentively, his mother continues to tell her grandson that Nikul was known for his good looks and sharp eyes. An enthralled Prahlad asks his grandmother to say



Figure 2. The inspiration: watching the 1988 Mahabharat on TV. Still from *Parmanu* (30:11).



Figure 3. Introducing the Pandavas. Still from *Parmanu* (33:34).

something about Krishna. Before she answers, the scene abruptly shifts to New Delhi where Rana is dashing off to present his plan to a skeptical Shukla. While persons with deep knowledge of the *Mahabharat* may object to these characterizations of the Pandavas, Rana's team members ultimately embody these characteristics.

Rana explains his *Mahabharat-inspired* plan and its personnel requirements to Shukla (Figure 3). Before revealing team members, Rana explains that 'Pokhran is our Kurukshetra, and the American satellites are the Kauravas' (*Parmanu* 30:50–52). After offering objections and course corrections, Shukla approves the mission and anoints Rana as 'Krishna, our leader. Our guide'. Dr. Viraf Wadia (played by Aditya Hitkari) from the Bhabha Atomic Research Council (BARC) plays Yudhisthir, the gambling-addicted eldest Pandava who diced away their wife who is renowned for his magical weapons. He will be

the team member responsible for receiving the nuclear materials from BARC. Wadia, a Parsee name, is likely a nod to BARC's founder, Homi Bhabha (1909–1966) who was also a Parsee. Major Prem Singh (played by Vikas Kumar) from the Indian Army is Bheem, known for his might. Himanshu initially rejects Singh because he was on the team whose tests were detected in 1996; however, Rana reminds him that he too failed and secures Singh's membership on the team. Dr. Naresh Sinha (played by Narendra Tikku) of the Defense Research and Development Organization (DRDO) takes on the moniker of Arjun. Captain Ambalika Bandyopadhyay (played by Diana Penty), an attractive young woman from the Indian Intelligence Bureau (India's domestic intelligence agency), takes on the persona of Nakul even though she is a woman. She handles all logistical and security arrangements. Finally, Puru Ranganathan, from the Indian Space Agency, is Sahadev, the youngest of the Pandavas. His knowledge of the position of American satellites allows the team to identify the 'blind spots' that will allow the program to evade detection. Rana is Krishna, the advisor to divine kings.

As in *Kalyug*, Draupadi is not explicitly mentioned in this film which makes at best an oblique and symbolic reference to Draupadi's dishonoring. In this film, this is represented as a technological disrobing by the American satellites, which are explicitly identified as the Kauravas (See [Figure 1](#)). This BJP government will avenge this disrobing by successfully testing whereas other governments have failed to do so.

Once the team is settled in Jaisalmer near the Pokhran test site in Rajasthan, the team must overcome several unpredictable challenges, including power outages, extreme heat, sandstorms as well as a CIA spy and his ISI sidekick who begin to suspect that India will soon test. Rana, in his role as renunciate in the service of the nation, has led Sushma to believe that he is teaching in Delhi and fails to call her frequently. The CIA and ISI spies exploit her ignorance and manage to inform her that Rana is in Rajasthan with another woman, who happens to be Nakul. Upon arriving at their guest house, Sushma bursts into Rana's bedroom to find him sitting on the bed with Nakul. Even though he knows his marriage is on the line, he dispatches Sushma back to Mussoorie with the demand that she trust him. While the spies fail to expose the plan, the caper reveals to the team that the mission has been compromised, forcing the team to re-optimize and conduct the test on a shortened timeline. As local collaborators of the spies are wrapped up in sweep operations, the team persuades the government to feign a potential conflict in Kashmir, confident that the Americans would divert satellite coverage to Kashmir. Battling time and the subsequent discoveries by the CIA and ISI agents, the team successfully tests. Sushma, learning of the test, immediately understands why Rana deceived her. The film concludes with a slide show of the real test site and its scientists, including Kalam, who pose with Prime Minister Vajpayee.⁸¹

While a thorough analysis of the *Parmanu* soundtrack is beyond the remit of this paper, it should be noted that the communalizing sentiment of the film is reinforced by several songs, which are naturally patriotic. But one song in particular, *Kusambi*, is notable. This song, using elements from *Marwari*, plays during the crucial scenes during which the ISI spy is identified and the traitorous Indians who collaborated with him and his CIA associate are captured at different places surrounding the test site. Back at the test-site, the team is fighting the clock to assemble the devices, implant them in their shafts and seal the shafts for testing. The song opens with an address to the motherland whom the narrator exclaims to be the most important thing in his life for which he'd happily die. The song narrates their dedication to succeeding at the task at hand. Between stanzas is the refrain "my soul is painted in saffron". The term used for this color is *kusumbi*, as the title intimates, which is a permanent dye made from dried sunflowers. The use of this word suggests that the narrator is permanently cast with this hue in contrast to those Indian traitors working with the ISI and CIA.

What is missing from this retelling of India's quest for a credible nuclear deterrent? *Parmanu* has no character who approximates Dr. Kalam. In fact, Kalam did the job that Rana is shown to be doing in *Parmanu*. Abraham himself comes from a mix religious and ethnic heritage: his father is a Malayali Syrian Christian from Kerala and his mother is an Iranian Zoroastrian. He claims to follow no religion himself.⁸² There is no other Muslim protagonist in this film apart from the ISI operative.⁸³ In fact, the inclusion of the ISI spook implausibly working with the CIA to prevent India from achieving greatness, reinforces a more general narrative in recent Hindi films in which Muslims are devious enemies of the Indian state.⁸⁴ That the film pays homage to Homi Bhabha may seem to contradict this claim at first blush. However, the BJP and allied *Hindutva* groups are not bothered by Parsees, even though Parsee's holy land is in Iran rather than India.⁸⁵ Oddly, the *Hindutva* proponents accommodate the Parsees because that are not viewed as a threat to the *Hindutva* project because Parsees do not proselytize, forbid conversions and because of their diminutive and declining numbers (approximately 50,000) in India.⁸⁶ Moreover many Parsis are pro-BJP possibly because many Parsis are businessmen and the BJP is viewed as more business friendly and because many Parsis live in Gujarat where it would not be a prudent strategy for either Modi or the Parsis to antagonize each other.⁸⁷

By retelling the history through the narrative device of the *Mahabharat*, *Parmanu* divests Kalam's Muslimness from the acquisition of a credible nuclear deterrent, appropriates his accomplishments and re-renders them as the fruits of the most beloved Hindu heroes, the Pandavas. Empirically, *Parmanu's* communalizing and politicized account is highly misleading. The BJP, which had never been in power longer than two weeks prior to coming

to power in May of 1998, would have had no devices to test if it had not been for a succession of Congress prime ministers who shepherded India's nuclear program up to the time of the BJP's ascension to power.⁸⁸

It is also important to note that the Indian government provided considerable assistance to the filmmakers, which it would not do if the film did not align with politics and objectives. As Abraham explains:

... we met all the real players who were involved in the tests. A number of them visited the sets, some had retired, not just from the Indian Army, but also Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO), the Intelligence Bureau (IB), Bhabha Atomic Research Centre (BARC), the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO). They were satisfied that what we were showing was factual. Everything is based on the true event. We only changed names. The only fictional character in this story is mine!... We met the man who made the bomb. I wanted to give them all the respect they deserve by mentioning them in the credits at the end of the film. But they said, 'Don't use our names. The mission happened covertly. What information we are giving you is sacrosanct.'⁸⁹

Abraham also clarified that he had government permission to shoot 'at the actual Pokhran nuclear test site' and that he ran 'the script past political people involved in the test at the time' who 'loved it'. These same persons 'made some changes and suggestions which we were happy to incorporate',⁹⁰ which he does not elaborate. Abraham concluded the interview with an announcement that he would set up a special showing for Modi. Subsequent reportage does not indicate whether this occurred. This all suggests a very close degree of collusion between Abraham and the government, which further strengthens the key argument of this paper.

Implications

On its own terms, *Parmanu* is a mediocre spy thriller that distorts history for narrative affect intermingled with moments of unintentional humor. However, if one reads this film as another example of the saffronization of Bollywood's silver screen, the film succeeds. By retelling the story of India's 1998 nuclear test through the narrative device of the *Mahabharat* and necessarily excluding any Muslim character resembling Kalam, the film succeeds in re-presenting a national achievement through a distinctly communal lens.

Most importantly, *Parmanu* is not unique; rather one of numerous films which evidence explicit and growing alignment between Bollywood and the BJP. *Parmanu* should be situated in the context of other films that perform similar work for Modi and the BJP. For example, *Uri: The Surgical Strike* (dir. Aditya Dhar; 2019), depicts a fictionalized account of Modi's 2016 decision attack a Pakistani terrorist base across the Line of Control. While Modi and his supporters proudly proclaimed that this was the first assault of its kind, many similar raids were conducted by the Congress administration, although these have yet to translate

into blockbuster hits.⁹¹ As with *Parmanu*, *Uri* was also shot with government facilitation. Vicky Kaushal, who played the lead role, explained in an interview that he received several hours of military training including weapons training. He told his interviewer that he trained at the naval base in Cuffe Parade (in Mumbai) and that ‘Army men help me with training’.⁹² He told the *Mumbai Mirror* that ‘The Indian Army and navy have been extremely supportive with respect to the research for the film and training for the cast. Vicky and the supporting cast trained at Mumbai’s Navy Nagar with Captains and Majors teaching them slithering, using arms and ammunitions and other drills used by the armed forces’.⁹³ Several BJP official, including Modi himself, helped to popularize the film’s tagline ‘How’s the Josh?’⁹⁴ Abhijit Panse’s 2019 *Thackeray* and Vijay Ratnakar Gutte’s *The Accidental Prime Minister* (2019) ‘either valorise the achievements of the BJP, and its ideological allies; critique its perennial nemesis, the Congress; or construct narratives of the past that push a Hindu-nationalist agenda’.⁹⁵ Many of these pro-Modi films were released as the country prepared for general elections in 2019. It’s impossible to estimate how much Modi’s electoral fortunes were enhanced by these cinematographic boosts to his image.

Additionally there has been a spate of Hindi historical films such as the 2020 film, *Tanhaji: The Unsung Warrior*, which depicts a war between the Mughals stylized as ‘Muslim invaders’, and the Marathas, portrayed as ‘Hindu flag-bearers’.⁹⁶ Similarly, as noted above, numerous socials have been made that explicitly promote policies of the BJP generally and those of Modi in particular. *Toilet: A Love Story* (dir. Akshay Kumar; 2017) promoted Modi’s ‘Swatcch Bharat Abhiyan’ (Clean India Mission) scheme. The director, Kumar, is widely understood to be one of Modi’s preferred directors in Bollywood.⁹⁷ Kumar is joined by many other A-list stars who have explicitly come out in favor of Modi and the BJP including Kangana Ranaut, Anupam Kher, and Vivek Oberoi. Oberoi spearheaded a campaign with 900 artists requesting the voters elect a ‘mazboot Sarkar’ rather than a ‘majboor Sarkar’ (strong government instead of a helpless government).⁹⁸ In contrast, few Bollywood stars have endorsed the rival Congress Party.⁹⁹

While much of this alignment between Bollywood and the BJP has occurred apparently with the consent of the former, the BJP has ruthlessly attacked those in Bollywood who produce content that undermines Modi or his party and their Hindutva agenda.¹⁰⁰ The BJP, with adroitness Rana could admire, has rendered Bollywood an important arrow in its political quiver. Given the massive market that Hindi cinema enjoys across all platforms as well as that of India’s other film markets producing BJP-friendly content in India’s varied regional languages, this alignment between the *abhineta* (actor) and *netā* (politician) likely signals an enduring shift that will buoy BJP electoral fortunes for some time to come.

Notes

1. *Parmanu*, परमाणु, means ‘atom’.

2. Raman, 'On the Actor's Trail'.
3. Banerjee, 'Parmanu Movie Review'.
4. Cherian, 'The BJP and the Bomb'.
5. Abraham, *The Making of The Indian Atomic Bomb*.
6. There is a robust debate about this term. For a discussion of it, see the introduction to Sangita Gopal, and Sujata Moorti, eds. *Global Bollywood: Travels of Hindi song and dance*. U of Minnesota Press, 2008.
7. Khan, *No 'Me' Before The Nation*'; Mitra, '# ModiWithAkshay'; Jha, 'Unbecoming Men'.
8. Mitra, '# ModiWithAkshay'; Rao 'Soch Aur Shauch'.
9. Shrikrishna, 'Parmanu'.
10. Battle, 'India and Pakistan'.
11. Karnad, *Nuclear Weapons*.
12. Itty Abraham, 'India's "Strategic Enclave"'; Ashley J. Tellis, *India's Emerging, Fair, 'Learning'*, Mohan, *Crossing*.
13. Summarized in Fair, 'Learning'.
14. See Fair, 'Learning', Joshi, 'Nuclear Shockwave', Tellis, 'India's Emerging'.
15. Shinde, 'When Dr. APJ Kalam'.
16. Burns, 'Self-Made'.
17. Siegel, 'Profile'.
18. Stewart, 'The Mahabharata'.
19. Mankekar, 'Television Tales'; Rajan, 'Of Draupadi's Disrobing'; Black, *Draupadi*'.
20. Stewart, 'The Mahabharata'.
21. N.B. the names of epics are pronounced as Ramayana and Mahabharata in Sanskrit.
22. Lutgendorf, *Bending the Bharata*, p. 19.
23. Lutgendorf, *Bending the Bharata*.
24. Jaffrelot, *Modi's India*.
25. The Janata party was coalition of three parties including the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS), which was the original flagbearer of *Hindutvadi*, a chauvinist form of Hindu nationalism (Jafferlot 2021).
26. Jha, 'Guruji's Lie'.
27. Jha, 'Guruji's Lie'; Anderson and Damle, *The Brotherhood*.
28. Lutgendorf, *Bending the Bharata*, pp. 20–22.
29. Lutgendorf, *Bending the Bharata*, pp. 20–22
30. Lutgendorf, *Bending the Bharata*, pp. 20–22.
31. Agarwal, 'Mahābhārat, TV Version'.
32. Parwar, 'BJP'.
33. Mahabharat, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt3212600/?ref_=ttep_ep_tt.
34. 'It took 7 years to make "Mahabharat": Amaan Khan', *Business Standard*, December 14, 2013. https://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ians/it-took-7-years-to-make-mahabharat-amaan-khan-113122400381_1.html.
35. Jha, 'Guruji's Lie'; Dhar, 'Mahabharat'.
36. Jha, 'Guruji's Lie'; Dhar, 'Mahabharat'.
37. 'SS Rajamouli explains'.
38. Booth. 'Traditional Content'.
39. Mankekar, 'Television Tales and a Woman's Rage'.
40. Kumar, 'The Fascinating World'.
41. Booth. 'Traditional Content'; Blizek and Desmarais, 'Is Slumdog'.
42. Kumar, 'The Fascinating World'.
43. Singh and Chandran, 'Reading a Retelling', Booth, 'Traditional Content'.
44. Thomas, 'Melodrama and the Negotiation of Morality', p. 162.

45. Thomas, 'Melodrama and the Negotiation of Morality', p. 162.
46. Haider, 'India'.
47. 'Mahabharata Battle'.
48. Karna is an illicit son born of the Pandavas' mother, Kunti, and a god named Surya before she married their father, Pandu.
49. Rahman, 'Indian Prime Minister'.
50. 'Internet existed'.
51. Sengupta, 'The Shishupala Doctrine'.
52. Devadas, 'The shifting terrains', p. 220.
53. Devadas, 'The shifting terrains', p. 220.
54. Dwyer, *Filming the Gods*, p. 15.
55. Mitra, '# ModiWithAkshay', p. 284.
56. Mitra, '# ModiWithAkshay'.
57. Dwyer, 'The Saffron Screen?'.
58. Rajagopal, *Politics after television*, quoted in Mitra, '# ModiWithAkshay', p. 285.
59. Shoemith and Mecklai, 'Religion'. See also Jaffrelot, 'The Hindu nationalist reinterpretation'.
60. Shoemith and Mecklai, 'Religion', p. 266 drawing from Rajagopal, *Politics after television*, p. 2–3.
61. Shoemith and Mecklai, 'Religion', p. 266.
62. Savarkar quoted in Chaturvedi, *Hindutva and Violence*, p. 112.
63. Mubarki, 'Body, Masculinity, and the Male Hero', p. 239.
64. Mitra, '# ModiWithAkshay'.
65. Das Gupta, 'Modi's Bollywood'.
66. San Chirico, '*Dharma*', p.77.
67. Nandana Bose quoted in Sharma, 'Supporting Role'.
68. Nandana Bose quoted in Sharma, 'Supporting Role'.
69. Nandana Bose quoted in Sharma, 'Supporting Role'.
70. Mehta and Kaye, 'Media Censorship'.
71. Nivedita, 'Pathaan's Besharam Rang'. Also see Chowdhury, 'Bollywood's Code Orange'.
72. Rao, 'The Kerala Story'.
73. Chotiner, 'What a New a Disturbing New Film Reveals about Modi'.
74. Rao, 'The Kerala Story'.
75. 'Photos'; Rai, "'May the Force'".
76. "PM Narendra Modi's Meeting" Nooreydzan, 'Prime Minister'; 'Aamir Khan'; 'Priyanka Chopra Meets PM Modi'; 'Narendra Modi and I have Same Goals'; 'Photos'; Rai, 'May the Force Be With You'; Kidwai, 'Indian Politics'.
77. Bhatia, 'How Bollywood is Rewriting History'; Sathe, *You Only Live Once*".
78. Das Gupta, 'Modi's Bollywood'.
79. RAW is India's external intelligence organization.
80. Murty, 'Representing Hindutva', p. 270.
81. While a thorough analysis of the *Parmanu* soundtrack is beyond the remit of this paper, it should be noted that the communalizing sentiment of the film is reinforced by several songs, which are naturally patriotic. But one song in particular, Kusambi (a color for saffron derived from the sunflower seed), is notable. This song, using elements from Marwari, plays during the crucial scenes during which the ISI spy is identified and the traitorous Indians who collaborated with him and his CIA associate are captured at different places surrounding the test site. Back at the test-site, the team is fighting the clock to assemble the devices, implant them in their

shafts and seal the shafts for testing. The song opens with an address to the motherland whom the narrator exclaims to be the most important thing in his life for which he'd happily die. The song narrates their dedication to succeeding at the task at hand. Between stanzas is the refrain 'my soul is painted in saffron' (हो मेनू लगेया लगेया, लागी लगेया लगेया, लागी लगेया कसुम्बी रंग) The term used for this color is kusumbi, as the title suggests, which is a permanent dye made from dried sunflowers. The use of this word suggests that the narrator is permanently cast with this hue in contrast to those Indian traitors working with the ISI and CIA.

82. 'For those Who Want to Know'.
83. See Shrikrishna, 'Parmanu'.
84. San Chirico, 'Dharma'.
85. Chaturvedi, *Hindutva and Violence*.
86. Godbole, 'Indian Parsis'.
87. Bharucha, 'In a First'; 'BJP vs. Congress'.
88. Narang, 'Strategies'.
89. Manuel, 'PM Modi'.
90. Manuel, 'PM Modi'.
91. Joshi, 'Line Out of Control'.
92. 'Vicky Kaushal'.
93. Iyer, 'Vicky Kaushal'.
94. Dubey, 'How's the Josh'.
95. Sharma, 'Supporting Role'.
96. Husain, 'Bollywood and Politics'.
97. Das Gupta, 'Modi's Bollywood'; Mitra, Sreya. '# ModiWithAkshay'.
98. Balan, 'Whose Side'.
99. Balan, 'Whose Side'.
100. The Economist, 'What Does India's Government Have Against Bollywood'; John, 'Bollywood has Finally Spoken'.

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