

The Indian Army & Bollywood

A study of the portrayal of the armed forces in Hindi films since Independence

India is the second most populous nation in the world, with a population of over one billion. This huge population, and certain geopolitical compulsions, necessitates the maintenance of the third largest armed forces in the world, numbering well over a million. These armed forces have, in the six decades since Independence, come to be perceived by the Indian public as the cleanest part of the government, especially as the reputations of almost all other government bodies have suffered because of various forms of corruption. Today, in spite of a shortage of officers, and the coming to light of certain scams related to arms deals, the armed forces continue to command respect in the eyes of the mainstream public, & remain ‘the flag bearers of Indian patriotism’. Given their strength & immaculate public image, it is interesting to note that these armed forces have, much in contrast to other Third World nations, steadfastly managed to keep away from politics. It can also be said that it is because of their staying away from politics that the armed forces have managed to maintain a clean reputation in the eyes of the public. This clean image has also affected the portrayal of the armed forces in various forms of the media, especially films, & this portrayal has, in turn, reinforced the public image. In the following pages, I shall attempt to analyze the public image of the armed forces by looking at the role of Indian cinema in the (deliberate or otherwise) construction and reinforcement of these images.

India’s various regional-language film industries, along with Bollywood, the Hindi film industry centered in Mumbai, produce more than 700 feature films a year, a world record held by India for many years. For a long time, cinema was arguably the most influential mass media in India, as radio & television were hindered by state control, & the reach of newspapers was limited due to the widespread

illiteracy in the country. Even today, films remain (in spite of the onslaught of television, and also because television has provided a new medium for the re-screening of films) a major influence on the way Indians think about themselves, their society and their culture, & on the way in which they form their opinions about important political & social questions. Thus, the cinematic representation is a very important factor affecting the public image of the Indian armed forces.

Films based on the Indian armed forces have always attracted public attention, whether or not they have succeeded at the box-office; in fact, in either case, these films have been screened many times by Doordarshan (and now, by many of the private TV channels) on important national holidays, thus receiving repeated opportunities to make an impact on the public mindset. The songs from these movies have also been sung year after year, along with the official national anthem & national song, on important national holidays, thus attaining a unique symbolic significance in the public psyche. In many such ways, the public perception of the armed forces has been shaped by its portrayal in films. The relationship is not unidirectional, however. As mentioned earlier, the public perception has in turn shaped the cinematic portrayal of the armed forces, and both have changed with the years, in a way reflecting the changing socio-political conditions in the country. India's army & its film industry are two of its defining characteristics that have marked it out from other nations in the world, and deeply affected the way in which Indians (resident as well as expatriate) perceive their position today, vis-à-vis their neighbors and the rest of the world.

To substantiate these statements, I shall now begin with a chronological study of the portrayal of the Indian armed forces in Hindi films. The few 'landmark films' I have chosen, in order to give a certain direction to this study, are:-

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| 1.) <i>Hum Dono</i> (1961) | 2.) <i>Haqeeqat</i> (1964) | 3.) <i>Hindustan ki Kasam</i> (1973) |
| 4.) <i>Prahaar</i> (1991) | 5.) <i>Border</i> (1997) | 6.) <i>Lakshya</i> (2004) |

These ‘landmark’ films have been chosen keeping certain factors in mind, the most important being the temporal distribution. An obvious method would then be to choose one film from each decade, but the pattern of real events cannot be expected to coincide with artificially constructed divisions in our timeline. Therefore, for example, the 1962 Sino-Indian War, and the post-1991 era of liberalization and rising Hindu nationalism have been treated as turning points that put *Hum Dono* and *Prahaar* in a different era from *Haqeeqat* and *Border* respectively. Also, as has been explained in the course of the report, the frequency of making films based on the armed forces has varied with time, and has been affected by important socio-political events of the last six decades.

The 1950s – Building a new nation

This was the decade when India was beginning to adapt itself to its new-found independence. Nehruvian ideas were the guiding force of the national mindset, and in Bollywood, these ideas, especially the focus on children being the future of the nation, manifested themselves in movies such as *Jagruti*, *Do Aankhen Barah Haath*, *Boot Polish*, *Son of India*, *Dhool Ka Phool*, etc. However, all the nationalist zeal that was displayed in such films never had more than a passing reference to the armed forces, probably because the army was still considered to be, in some ways, a relic of the British Raj.

This is quite evident in a film like *Hum Dono* (released in 1961), which can be said to belong to a genre completely different from these patriotic films. The story revolves around two characters, Major Verma and Captain Anand (both played by a leading actor of the time, Dev Anand), and is set during World War II. Major Verma has the mannerisms and accent generally associated with upper-class Indians who had joined the Army during the British Raj. However, the clothes, hairstyles, and general appearance of Captain Anand, & his lover Meeta (played by Sadhna), are very typical of the 1950s romance films, and this is made evident from the very first scene (the song ‘Abhi Na Jao Chhod Kar’ – ‘Do Not Leave Right

Now'). Also, it is interesting to note that when Major Verma and Captain Anand are going to war, the only emotion expressed by their mothers is grief and despair. They do not show pride, or bless their sons as in later films, but this is 'acceptable' in *Hum Dono* because the 'heroes' are actually going to fight for the British. However, this fact, along with the anglicized portrayal of Major Verma, leads us to believe that the popular perception of the army at that time was much the same as in colonial times, and the army was not yet looked upon as the biggest guardian of our freedom. Here, we should remember that after India gained its independence, the administrative structure of the colonial times was retained. Thus, an important element of nation-building was to ensure that the Indian officers (administrative, army, police, etc.) who had taken over did not maintain the high-handedness that was characteristic of British officers, but learnt how to empathize with the people. While this was being done, the political leadership, mostly consisting of freedom fighters, retained the mantle of 'flag-bearers of Indian nationalism'.

Hum Dono is a good example of a film which drew from two prevalent genres of its time, the patriotic films and the family dramas. The prevalence of these two genres reflects the two major concerns of that time, one being the building of a modern nation and the other about changes in the joint family system and the place of women in the resulting modern society (these concerns had also been prominent when the nationalist movement began in the late nineteenth century). In *Hum Dono*, these concerns are manifest in the last scene, where Captain Anand and Nanda (Major Verma's wife) sit and talk in a temple courtyard, while Major Verma and Meeta eavesdrop on them. Captain Anand (whom Nanda still believes to be Major Verma) asks Nanda what she would have done if he were to return from battle without a leg or a hand. Nanda replies, "Will I have to go through an 'Agni-Pareeksha' (trial by fire) to prove my loyalty to my husband?" However, she has already undergone an 'Agni-Pareeksha', not literally, but metaphorically, because it seems that the biggest question to be resolved is not of Captain Anand's loyalty towards his friend Major Verma or towards Meeta, but of Nanda's loyalty to her husband. Yet, the general feel of *Hum*

Dono is quite relaxed, the dilemma is resolved in the end without much ado, and all the characters have an innate goodness, in a way reflecting the calmness of the times.

The 1960s – War with China and Pakistan, and the end of the Nehruvian era

The reason why *Hum Dono* has been discussed with the 1950s films is not just that it was more like a 1950s film, but also because it was released before a great event which deeply affected the way in which Indians looked at their armed forces, and the way in which they were portrayed in films thereafter. This event was the 1962 China War, which suddenly catapulted the armed forces to the forefront of the nation's attention, and soon enough, the Prime Minister (Lal Bahadur Shastri) eulogized them with the slogan of 'Jai Jawan, Jai Kisan'. The movie which was most instrumental in this change of image, and which first attempted to capture the tragedy & humiliation of the 1962 defeat, was Chetan Anand's *Haqeeqat* (It is interesting that all the prominent films of that time with a war theme were from the same family - the Anand brothers).

The name of the film itself ('Reality') and the acknowledgement, in the beginning of the film, of the support provided by the Indian Government, the Indian armed forces, and Pandit Nehru himself, is enough for the viewer to suspect that it is a one-sided propaganda film. However, it is unlike the 'usual' propaganda films in other countries, even in Hollywood (e.g. during WW II, the 'Why We Fight' series by Frank Capra, the British film 'In Which We Serve', or Walt Disney's 'Spirit of '43', featuring Donald Duck). Unlike these other films, here, the official opinion is not voiced through a narrator or a radio voice-over, but through one of the characters (played by Balraj Sahni), who is almost Nehru personified as he addresses his soldiers about why they are fighting the Chinese. One soldier asks, "We are here, & the Chinese are also here. Whose land is this after all?" The answer, "Has India ever invaded any country in its history? Did India ever give birth to any fierce conqueror like Alexander, Genghis Khan or Timur? ...

When our forces went to Congo & Korea, our leader told them, ‘You are a peacekeeping force. You have to maintain India’s reputation,’ while their leader says, ‘Whoever does not agree with us is our enemy.’” It is clearly an argument that appeals more to emotion than to reason. The colonial history of the McMahon Line (which was an uncomfortable point for the Government ⁽¹⁾) is not mentioned; it is simply assumed that it has been India’s natural boundary for millennia. The reality of the dispute was actually much more complex ⁽¹⁾, and while it is true that the Chinese resorted extensively to fabricated data & false claims, one must accept that the Indian Government also tried to ignore facts which were not in accordance with their position; that is, however, always the case with any international dispute.

While Balraj Sahni is thus speaking to his soldiers, the scene shifts from the army camp to show footage of Zhou Enlai’s visit to India, and he now declares, “They stabbed us in the back.” Besides this, the hypocrisy of the Chinese is also depicted in the way they begin their announcements on the border with ‘Chini Hindi Bhai Bhai!’ (‘Chinese and Indians are brothers’), but move on to proclaim that ‘This is our land. You should go away from here or be killed!’ These characterizations of Chinese soldiers addressing the Indians also reflected Nehru’s belief, and in fact, almost every Indian’s belief at that time, that the Chinese have a one-track expansionist mindset. Later in the film, the Chinese officers also attempt to rape the ‘heroine’ (a Ladakhi girl, played by Priya Rajvansh). This scene is also repeated during the song in the end, the corresponding lyrics equating the Chinese with Ravana, and the heroine with Sita. The characterization of the heroine as a Ladakhi girl and a scene of Ladakhi civilians receiving firearms training from Indian soldiers are used to show their solidarity with the Indian Union.

The Army Brigadier is still slightly anglicized, but the Major (Balraj Sahni) is a typical ‘Nehruvian man’, so much so that his romantic angle finds but a brief mention, i.e. since he was the major spokesperson of the State ideology, he could not be shown engaging in ‘trivial pursuits’ like singing songs with his lover. The other officers (played by Dharmendra and Vijay Anand) are just like the ‘heroes’ of the

contemporary romantic films. Also, the average soldier and his weeping family back home are brought into focus for the first time. Scenes of soldiers enthusiastically reading letters from their loved ones, receiving symbolic gifts in the mail, or dying in the end with a photograph of their wife or child in their hand, are used to establish their humaneness and to convey that they are ordinary people who have been forced into an extraordinary situation. Similar scenes can also be seen in the old war dramas of Hollywood, e.g. *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1939), but of course, they were ‘Indianized’ for *Haqeeqat* and subsequent films. These as well as other ideas like soldiers announcing, almost in defiance of orders from superiors, that they won’t desert their posts, or having a comic character among the soldiers (usually a cook, or a barber), have since been repeated in almost all the war films in Bollywood, most notably J.P. Dutta’s *Border* (1997). The setting of the film (the mountains of Ladakh) is also used to show the soldiers’ loneliness, besides depicting the harsh natural environment they had to survive in.

In all the battle scenes, a few Indian soldiers are shown holding up against hundreds of approaching Chinese men. The officers convince their men that retreating in such conditions is not cowardice, but pragmatism (they have to ‘live to fight another day’). In one instance, the major (Balraj Sahni) shouts in exasperation, “I need men! I need guns! I can beat these Chinese any day!” As the film reaches its climax, the rape of the ‘heroine’ and the precarious situation of the ‘hero’ (Dharmendra), who is supposed to hold back 200 advancing Chinese soldiers with the help of just one other soldier, help exaggerate the tragedy. The film ends with the famous song ‘Kar Chale Hum Fida’, and whenever the second line of its main stanza (‘Ab Tumhare Hawale Watan Saathiyon’ – ‘the nation is now in your hands’) is sung, the camera focuses on the heroine’s younger brother, who serves the dual purpose of reinforcing Ladakhi solidarity and the ‘children are the nation’s future’ theme.

On the whole, it can be said that *Haqeeqat* did show the ‘Reality’, albeit from an Indian point of view. This film, along with the famous song ‘Ae Mere Watan Ke Logon’ (not from this movie; it is said

that this song, when first sung, brought Nehru to tears) helped bring home the tragedy of the war to the general populace. Also, the prevalent opinion amongst Indians, even today, about the causes of the war, the way it was fought, the causes of India's defeat, etc. is much the same as has been shown in *Haqeeqat*. It is difficult to say how much the film affected public opinion & vice-versa; probably the best answer is that the film reflected the official opinion of that time, which had also become the public opinion through effective media management (by the government, thus suggesting that it is an old practice), and which was reinforced and sealed for posterity by this film.

The humiliation of the 1962 defeat soon faded, mostly due to the victory against Pakistan in 1965, and the resulting peasant-and-soldier iconography ('Jai Jawan Jai Kisan') coined by Lal Bahadur Shastri manifested itself in *Upkar* (1967), which added to the list of memorable patriotic film songs ('Mere Desh Ki Dharti') and also launched Manoj Kumar's series of patriotic films featuring him as 'Bharat'. However, the new-found confidence of the people in the armed forces did not lead to a spate of jingoistic films, partly because this confidence was restrained by the domestic troubles brewing then. There was also an anti-war film, *Prem Pujari* (1970), again featuring Dev Anand. It did not, however, criticize the state or the armed forces, but instead emphasized the futility of war, and yet in the end, it showed how Dev Anand had to join the war to fight for what he believed was right.

The 1970s – A resounding victory, followed by major domestic troubles

This decade began with India's resounding victory in the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War, due to which the popularity of Indira Gandhi & the public confidence in the armed forces soared. However, this again did not lead to a spate of jingoistic films, the only notable war film from this time being *Hindustan Ki Kasam* (1973) (there was also *Jai Bangladesh* by IS Johar, but it was more of a documentary, and is not very well-known). One of the reasons could again be the deteriorating domestic conditions, which also led

to the shift from family dramas and romantic films to the ‘Angry Young Man’ films. Public confidence in the various organs of the Government was shaking, and this was reflected in the ‘formula’ films of that time, but the army was still considered sacrosanct, and so it did not fit into the regular structure of these formula films. However, this image of the army did appear in *Roti Kapda Aur Makaan* (1974) through the character of Amitabh Bachchan (this was before *Deewaar*, when Amitabh Bachchan had not yet crossed the line to go over to the ‘bad’ side), who is initially a disgruntled, unemployed youth, but goes on to join the army. Juxtaposed against his elder brother (Manoj Kumar), initially an idealist engineer who later starts working for the mafia, it portrayed the conflict with the conscience which the average Indian youth was facing at that time, due to their inability to reconcile their discontent against the State with their loyalty to the Nation.

In *Hindustan Ki Kasam*, again made by Chetan Anand, the dilemma of how to fit in the heroism of the army in the regular structure of Indian society, when dissatisfaction with the State was increasing, probably resulted in the portrayal of the army, for the first time, as a separate closed society (i.e. living in separate establishments, with their own lifestyle, customs, etc). It also concentrated more on the role of officers (specifically the Indian Air Force) in the victory, featuring dogfights and many other shots of all the famous planes the IAF had in its fleet back then. Thus, the film was probably aimed more at the middle classes, who were presumably stronger supporters of Indira Gandhi & less dissatisfied with the State than the lower classes. The officers by now (even the highest ranking officers) were wholly Indianized, with no shred of Anglicization left. The focus on the IAF might also have been, at least partially, due to the fact that the 1971 War was the only time an Air Force officer (Flying Officer Nirmaljit Singh Sekhon) was awarded a Param Vir Chakra; all others have been to Army personnel. It also showed the ‘heroine’ (played by Priya Rajvansh again) going to Pakistan as a spy, thus using the ‘woman of courage’ theme again (in *Haqeeqat* too, she was shown firing at the Chinese in the last scene, helping

Dharmendra stop them) and also hinting that the war was fought on multiple fronts, including covert operations.

This was also the first war film which showed scenes of Pakistani society (only upper-class society, at that), a typical feudal setup with the males involved in the army as well as politics. This setup has since been repeated in many films, including *Gadar* and *Veer Zaara* in recent times. It may also be conjectured that the absence of the Indian civilian society (and the consequent portrayal of the army as a closed society, as mentioned above) from the milieu of this film was in order to clearly mark out the difference between Indians and Pakistanis, to create a feeling of ‘us v/s them’, as it can be said that the difference between the classes actually steering the war, the Indian army officers v/s the Pakistani army and political establishment, was more stark than the difference between the average people in India and Pakistan. In *Haqeeqat*, this problem was obviously not faced as the Chinese ‘look’ different. On the other hand, there are so many similarities between Indians and Pakistanis, that the differences need to be ‘played up’ in order to present them as a conceivable ‘enemy’. Thus, Pakistani characters in most Indian films (including *Hindustan Ki Kasam*) will be shown talking about India-related issues in proper Urdu, and with absolute malice in their tone of voice.

Hindustan Ki Kasam did not do as well at the box office as *Hum Dono* or *Haqeeqat*. There were other films like *Aakraman* (which featured a guest appearance by Rajesh Khanna as a crippled soldier in a song, where he sang praises of the soldiers as they paraded down the city streets, with people garlanding them) and *Lalkaar* which were even more forgettable. The euphoria of the 1971 victory soon faded, and the political conditions in the country went on degenerating, finally resulting in the Emergency in 1975. The films at that time decidedly stayed away from any kind of criticism of the Government, not wanting to get into trouble with the censor board (One exception being *Aandhi*, which was banned because its story & Suchitra Sen’s character resembled that of Indira Gandhi). However, the conditions of that time did

reflect in myriad ways in the kind of films, their storylines, their characterization and the portrayal of society in general. The general disillusionment with the State also led, in some measure, to the decline of war films as a genre. (There were, however, many movies which had some important character, usually a smart, chivalrous young man, in the armed forces, who dies fighting, leaving room for melodrama; such movies have been made through the decades with little variation in their portrayal of the armed forces).

The 1980s – Regaining faith, only to lose it again

The Emergency was finally repealed in March 1977, and the subsequent elections saw the end of one-party rule and the victory of the Janata Party. However, the Janata experiment failed miserably, and in less than three years, Indira Gandhi was back in power, ostensibly with a chance to redeem herself. The entry of Rajiv Gandhi by her side as a replacement for Sanjay Gandhi, and the growing changes in the television & telecommunications industry, were also going to change the way the media presented the Government to the people. News films of that time showed Indira Gandhi as an aging grandmother, with her son and his family occupying an increasingly important place. These representations were concurrent with the mood prevalent in the nation, of recovery from the turbulence of the last two decades and hope for the future.

In this backdrop, Govind Nihalani came up with a notable coming-of-age film, *Vijeta*. The film was about Angad (Kunal Kapoor) who is initially confused about his aim in life, begins to train to be a pilot in the Indian Air Force even though he is afraid of flying, but finally overcomes his fears to win the hearts of his parents and the girl he loves. It was more a personal story, where the Air Force is just an external agent that provides the standards against which the protagonist must assess himself. The film also carried the message of secularism, without mentioning it aloud, as Angad is born to Hindu parents, adopts Sikhism because of a vow taken by his parents (interesting, not least because the Sikh separatist movement was

just beginning to take root), has Muslim and Christian friends, and finally falls in love with a Christian girl. A very similar story was that of the family at the helm of affairs in India, the Nehru family being Kashmiri Pandits, Indira Gandhi having married a Parsi (Feroze Gandhi), and her son Rajiv Gandhi having married an Italian Roman Catholic (Sonia Gandhi). The generation of freedom fighters was aging out, and the Nehruvian era had ended, but his descendants were firmly entrenching themselves in the hearts and minds of the Indian people.

However, this optimism was mostly restricted to the upper-middle classes, whom *Vijeta* was aimed at in the first place, with its refined setting and characters. At the micro- level, the dissatisfaction with the State organs remained, presenting itself in new ways in films such as *Saaransh* and *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaron*. For the lower classes, the ‘Angry Young Man’ phenomenon was still alive, but AB was growing old, and the new generation that tried to take over the mantle of such films from him (Jackie Shroff, Anil Kapoor, Mithun Chakravarty, etc.) were more acceptable (in terms of appearance) to the lower classes than to the upper-middle classes, unlike AB, who had had a more universal appeal. Also, with the rise of television, the upper-middle classes moved away from cinema halls, and Bollywood started focusing increasingly on formula films made for the masses. The clean image of the armed forces was maintained, but again, it could not fit into the structure of the formula films these new ‘heroes’ starred in, and so, the armed forces again temporarily disappeared from the filmscape.

However, this was also the time of rising troubles in Punjab, Assam and neighboring Sri Lanka, and the public was waking up to the reality of proxy war. The tricky situation of not being able to form a clear image of the enemy led to the creation of extraordinary ‘villains’ like ‘Shakaal’ (*Shaan*), ‘Dr. Dang’ (*Karma*) and ‘Mogambo’ (*Mr. India*). There were attempts to stir up patriotic fervor once again with movies such as *Karma* (complete with songs like ‘Ae Watan Tere Liye’, reminiscent of the patriotic songs of the 1950s & 1960s), but it was again moderated by other factors. Also, wherever a compromise of

moral values was to be shown (as with Anil Kapoor in *Ram Lakhan*), the characters were shown in the police instead of the army, even if the setting would fit the latter better (in *Ram Lakhan*, for example, it is somewhere on the international border, and there are smugglers and terrorists as ‘villains’), thus leaving the spotless image of the armed forces untouched. The army was also sometimes used as an external organ to suggest extraordinary strength, for example, in *Saudagar* (1991), where the rival patriarchs (Dilip Kumar and Raj Kumar) were shown to be so powerful that the army had to be brought in to keep their animosity in check (as if the police would not suffice).

The optimism of the early 1980s was not to last too long, with the rising militancy in Punjab, riots in Assam, the LTTE in Sri Lanka, the Bofors scandal (which did not harm the image of the armed forces per se, but of Rajiv Gandhi and the bureaucrats involved in the deal), the Ram temple agitation, and the anti-Mandal protests taking their toll. There were attempts by the Congress Government to regain its popularity (which, along with the sympathy wave after Indira’s death, had helped it win the 1984 elections in a landslide), which led to Doordarshan becoming ‘Rajiv Darshan’, and the making of TV series like *Param Vir Chakra* (1988) (again directed by Chetan Anand). However, the public confidence went on waning, leading to the defeat of the Congress in the 1989 elections. The NF-LF coalition which came to power as a result of that turned out to be as bad an experiment as the Janata Party in 1977, and coupled with the political & economic troubles, the national confidence plummeted.

It is in this background that *Prahaar*, our next ‘landmark film’, appeared in 1991. Although the clean image of the army was still maintained, this film brought a paradigm shift in its representation; indeed, that clean image was utilized for a completely novel purpose, i.e. to suggest that the only way out of the rut the nation had got into was that every citizen was given compulsory military training (The training of the commandos in the first half was itself reminiscent of coming-of-age films like *An Officer and a Gentleman* and *Vijeta*). Also, for the first time, the main protagonist (Nana Patekar), in spite of being an

officer, was portrayed not in the urbane mold of earlier films, but in the image of the working-class hero of the 'Angry Young Man' films. The idea that conditions had reached an all-time low was conveyed both through the tagline ('The Final Attack') and through the killing of Nana Patekar's protégé, a young officer, thus suggesting that not even war heroes were respected in today's society, that the media did not even raise an eyebrow at their being killed in broad daylight. Unlike earlier films like *Mr. India* and *Shahenshah*, *Prahaar* suggested that the solution to the problems facing our society must come from within, that we can no longer wait for a superhero to arrive and solve them (this theme was also replayed in later Nana Patekar films like *Krantiveer*, where he exhorts the average person to fight back on his own, and not wait for someone to rescue him). Besides, as if to drive home the seriousness of the issue, the protagonist was shown as a completely no-nonsense person, singing no songs (he even advises one of his commandos to start playing chess as a hobby instead of playing the harmonica), seldom smiling through the film, and his romantic angle finding no mention anywhere (the obvious reason that can be given for all this is that it was an 'art film', but I am suggesting there is more to it). His straightforward attitude and the sincerity with which he presents his radical views in court are mistaken for lunacy, again showing the degeneration of the State. However, the final scene in *Prahaar* (showing smiling children bereft of any vile feelings running together) did paint an optimistic picture of the future.

Here, I would like to add to one of the arguments presented in the beginning of this report (i.e. that staying away from politics has helped maintain the clean image of the army). The armed forces are that part of the Government which is most distant from everyday society, coming into focus only in times of war, and interacting with it only in times of natural calamities, both occasions actually presenting it an opportunity to enhance its reputation. The inference that I am drawing from this is that the major corrupting influence on any Government body is the extent of its interaction with society (e.g. when an officer realizes that an average person who has come to him for some work is ready to bypass procedures by bribing him, it is then that he turns corrupt; soon it turns into a habit). This distance between the armed

forces and society made it convenient for them to be excluded from the filmscape when they could not be fit in, and bring them back when there was a major war, etc. In *Prahaar*, this distance also translates into the shock that Major Chauhan (Nana Patekar) receives when he sees the state of affairs in everyday society, having lived for some years in a utopia of sorts. Another interesting thing that I found on the Internet while searching for information about *Prahaar* was that there is a Nagpur-based NGO, called the *Prahaar Samaj Jagruti Sanstha* whose aim is to create an idealistic society with the discipline of the army imbued in every individual (as proposed in the film)⁽²⁾.

The 1990s – Proxy wars, soaring national confidence and the rise of jingoism

Like *Hum Dono*, *Prahaar* has been considered in a different decade than when it was actually released, primarily because it resembled those films of the 1980s, which showed the public discontent against the State. This genre actually spilled over well into the 1990s, ebbing only after the return of family dramas with *Hum Aapke Hain Koun* in 1994, which brought back the upper-middle classes to the theatres, and when the State-bashing moved into the ‘B-grade’ circuit. Even before these family dramas, there was another notable film, *Roja* (1992) by Mani Ratnam, that dealt with a harsh reality which grabbed the attention of the Indian public in a big way after 1989, that of militancy in Kashmir. The realization that it was not just the outcome of seething discontent, but also a proxy war orchestrated from across the border, made it even more serious, and *Roja* emphasized this aspect to portray it as another war against ‘our mischievous neighbour’. Another change that occurred around this time was in the censorship policy, that of allowing the ‘enemy country’ to be named directly as Pakistan. The only film which had been ‘allowed’ to do this earlier was *Haqeeqat*, mostly because the feeling of betrayal was so heightened, and also probably because there was no market for Hindi films in China, unlike in Pakistan. In the latter case, it would be more a self-imposed censorship, especially in the case of family dramas, where no one in

Pakistan would mind watching a story which just shows a family member dying in a war without the war or the enemy being named; on the other hand, films like *Border*, that engage in Pakistan-bashing, always face protests from Pakistani expatriates in Europe and the US, while in Pakistan itself, they are, of course, ‘officially’ banned. Another effect of the relaxation in censorship rules has been that there have been many more films on the Kashmir issue in the 1990s than on the Punjab issue in the 1980s, the only ones that I remember about the latter being the film *Maachis* (which came as late as 1996), and the TV series *Doosra Kewal* (1988). Even if we assume that the Kashmir issue has been much more serious than the Punjab issue, the lack of films on the latter is quite evident, which could also be because in the case of Punjab, there was the guilt of the 1984 anti-Sikh riots attached, which probably made the Government stricter with censorship.

In *Roja*, besides the focus on the militancy in Kashmir, there were also indications of the beginning of liberalization and the changing face of the middle-class, and the way in which it made its dissatisfaction with the State felt. The protagonist (Arvind Swamy) is now no longer a part of the Government, or the working class, but is instead a middle-class youth working in the private sector, a computer engineer who is hired to do some work for the Government. After his kidnapping, his wife (Madhu) shouts her heart out at the army officers, and later at the politician, asking him what he would do if his daughter had been kidnapped (an obvious reference to Mufti Mohammad Sayeed). Here, the army, irrespective of its clean image, has also become part of the State which is incapable of delivering.

The film also reinforces the idea of India’s ‘unity in diversity’, overtly through the song ‘Bharat Humko Jaan Se Pyaara Hai’, and subtly through the conversations where Madhu speaks in Tamil, and the guide tries to translate it to Hindi for the army officers who are struggling to understand her. Also, the scene where Arvind Swamy jumps on to the burning flag conveys the fact that the present generation can be extremely loyal to the Nation even if it is discontented with the State (the dilemma of the 1970s thus

having found a resolution). The scene is also reminiscent of the images from the 1989 anti-Mandal agitations of the student, Rajeev Goswami, setting himself on fire, both these incidents suggesting the ability of today's youth to go to any extent for what they believe is right.

Roja did not give much space to the opinions of the average Kashmiris, though; that came about much later in *Mission Kashmir* (2000), and most recently, and in more depth, in *Yahaan* (2005). These films, along with *Maachis* (the Punjab crisis), *Pukar* (which showed some of the characters in the army as spies), and *Dhoop* (released in 2003, it dealt with the struggle of a father to get due recognition for his martyred son), dared to indicate that all was not well with our armed forces, that they have been incapable of dealing with some problems, or that there were some genuine reasons why the native people of troubled areas like Kashmir and the Northeast did not trust them. All this was, however, not the most prominent feature of the 1990s. The most notable feature was, instead, the rise of jingoism in films, which paralleled the rise, in the political arena, of the BJP, and its eventual coming to power in 1998. This jingoism was both a result of the Hindu nationalism preached by the BJP as well as the rising confidence of the middle classes (due to improved economic stability, and also because the growth of the private sector gave them an opportunity to stop depending on the government, and thus helped them dissociate their loyalty to the Nation from their discontent against the State), and the film which established it as a separate genre was J. P. Dutta's *Border* (1997).

Although *Border* was set in the 1971 War, it clearly reflected certain ideologies of the time it was made in. For example, the 'secularism' of the BJP, which claimed that the Muslims need not fear the idea of a Hindu state, that if they were truly loyal to the nation, they would be 'taken care of', manifested itself through the character of Captain Bhairav Singh (Sunil Shetty), who dives into a burning house to rescue the Koran, and then explains to the amazed Muslim villager that the Hindu has always been taught to 'take care' of his fellow brethren of other religions. He also declares his love for his motherland in a very loud

manner, even fighting with a fellow soldier (who happened to ‘abuse’ the desert, which was ‘Dharti Maa’ for him) for that purpose. In the end, he dies heroically as he places a mine below a Pakistani tank, blowing it (& himself) up, but not before he rises from his half-dead state with the blessings of the Mother Shakti (which I personally found, in a way, demeaning to the soldiers, as if it is to suggest that their own heroism is not enough on the battlefield, they need the blessings of their gods to win). It could also be to suggest that the Indians have an extra edge over the Pakistanis because of divine support, which also lends righteousness to their cause. This is, in fact, explicitly stated by the main ‘hero’, Major Kuldeep Singh (Sunny Deol), as he says to his subordinate, Lieutenant Dharamveer (Akshaye Khanna), ‘What you call madness comes from faith, and I have full faith that God is with me, not with the enemy’. This notion, of being patriotic to the extent of madness, and of it overlapping with one’s faith in God, was characteristic of the BJP’s ideology. It is the rise of such an ideology in the political scene that has led to a recent spate of war-based or army-based jingoistic films never seen before in Indian cinema ⁽³⁾.

Except for these ‘new’ ideologies, *Border* borrowed heavily from *Haqeeqat*, in the way it showed the humaneness of the average soldiers, created comic scenes through the cook, or had the major declaring that they will not give up the base. The Major is an upper-middle class individual, but with a rural background, who cares for his men and even for the enemy soldier dying on the Indian side. The Air Force officers, in contrast, are distinctly urbane and more sophisticated. About the rugged desert landscape chosen for this film, J. P. Dutta has himself said, “The place is rugged and the men are very macho. I had a caption made for *Border* which said, ‘*Border*, where men are men.’ I like my heroes to be macho, rugged people who make a woman feel secure in their arms” ⁽⁴⁾. This idea is also consistent with the patriarchal mindset of the conservative Hindu upper-middle classes, especially in North India, which form the major support base of the BJP.

Besides, even though the film was based on the true story of the Battle of Longewala, and the characters were named after real-life army personnel, authenticity was not at all an issue. J. P. Dutta took his full share of artistic liberty; for example, the actual quote by Pakistani Brigadier Tariq Mir, “Insha Allah (God Willing) we will have breakfast at Longewala, lunch at Ramgarh, and dinner at Jaisalmer”⁽⁶⁾, was changed to “breakfast at Jaisalmer, lunch at Jodhpur, and dinner at Delhi”. Also, to accentuate the tragic feeling in the end, J. P. Dutta killed off characters whose real-life counterparts were still alive (e.g. the real Lieutenant Dharamveer ‘enjoyed’ watching his death in the film⁽⁵⁾). On the lighter side, J. P. Dutta chose to downplay the role of the Indian Air Force in the final victory, which I believe was a sort of answer to *Hindustan Ki Kasam*, which concentrated more on the role of the Air Force in general. On a more serious note, however, *Border* also borrowed positively from it, especially the song ‘Hindustan Hindustan’, which was quite similar to the title song from *Hindustan Ki Kasam*, with similar shots of fighter planes taking off as the song is being sung. *Border* ended with a ‘pacifist’ song, hoping for peace between the two countries, with the final shot showing the rising sun flanked by the two national flags.

This message of pacifism in a jingoistic film was also seen in the new *Hindustan Ki Kasam* (1999), which was stunt director (so you know what you can expect) Veeru Devgan’s maiden directorial venture. Some other films from this genre, which has spilled over well into the new millennium, have been *Tirangaa*, *Diljale*, *LOC-Kargil* (by J. P. Dutta, about the 1999 Kargil War, released in 2003), *Major Saab*, *Qayamat*, *Border Hindustan Ka*, *Zameen*, *The Hero – Love Story of a Spy*, *Ab Tumhare Hawale Watan Saathiyon*, *Tango Charlie*, etc. The names of these films (some of which have been borrowed from old films or patriotic songs) are enough to suggest what kind of films they are. The usual characteristics of such films are to blame Pakistan for everything that is wrong in India, and end with either the subjugation of the enemy or a ‘pacifist’ message. These escapist fantasies mostly go to ridiculous extremes. For example, in *Zameen*, the 1999 Kandahar hijack scenario is recreated, but this time, we do not have politicians going & handing over terrorists, but some super-heroic army officers going and rescuing all the

hostages, or in *Hindustan Ki Kasam*, where Amitabh Bachchan delivers the sermon of peace to none other than Vajpayee & Nawaz Sharief, who listen with rapt attention.

It is interesting to look at the way the images of ‘action heroes’ like Ajay Devgan, Sunny Deol, Sunil Shetty, and that of the original ‘Angry Young Man’ (Amitabh Bachchan) himself, have been used for the characters in such films. The first three actors had, in the beginning of their career, played ‘heroes’ who fought against the evil forces in society and in the State machinery; they had aspired to recreate the magic of the ‘Angry Young Man’. Even now, they vacillate between the various genres. In the 1990s, with the BJP’s rise to power and the tendency to blame Pakistan for anything wrong in India, these actors were called upon to play representatives of the Indian State who fought against the enemy State that was the purveyor of all evil. This point can be better appreciated if we compare these actors to those who started out with romantic films, like Shah Rukh Khan & Salman Khan. These stars were never cast in jingoistic films. Shah Rukh Khan did play an army officer in *Veer Zaara* recently, but that is a film which preached the message of love between India & Pakistan instead.

There have also been ‘new-age’ films like *16 December*, which showed some Indian spies trying to solve the mystery of hundreds of millions of dollars being sent out of the country in surreptitious ways, eventually reaching a Pakistani ex-army officer who is collecting the money to acquire a nuclear weapon to explode in the heart of Delhi. Such films, belonging to a genre long popular in Hollywood (combining elements like the thriller, conspiracy theory, America-will-save-the-world, etc.), do not indulge in loud preaching, but nevertheless paint the enemy in much the same way as the jingoistic films. Also, films like *Mission Kashmir*, *Pukar* (which I have mentioned earlier) and *Deewaar* (2003) (which dealt with the issue of Indian prisoners-of-war languishing in Pakistani jails for years) tried to give a more realistic picture, and succeeded for the most part of the film, but fell into the trap of jingoism in the climax.

Besides all these films, there have been some TV series like *Sea Hawks* and *Aarohan*, which portrayed the armed forces in a very modern way, with the characters representing the upwardly-mobile, middle-class youth of the 1990s. While *Sea Hawks* was based on the Coast Guard, *Aarohan* was about a girl, a daughter of an Army officer, who joins the Indian Navy when she hears that girls are now being allowed in the armed forces. It was a coming-of-age story, where the female protagonist resembled not the ‘heroine’ of *Haqueeqat* (who was more in the line of the Rani of Jhansi), nor the servile woman of the family dramas (who was also present in the jingoistic films, as a wife or mother yearning for the return of their husband or son), but the ‘woman of substance’ from TV serials of the 80s like *Udaan* and *Rajni*. Such representations have vanished in the mob of the soap operas today, which in the garb of being ‘women-centric’, actually serve to perpetuate the parochial mindsets in Indian society.

The 21st century – Where do we go now?

In terms of entertainment genres, there is not much to distinguish the 21st century from the last few years of the last decade, as we have had much the same mixture of ‘realistic’ films and ‘jingoistic’ films since 2001. There is one film, however, which is very distinctly a film of the new century, *Lakshya* (2004), and it is to a great extent because of its young director, Farhaan Akhtar.

Lakshya was set in the Kargil War of 1999, but it was more a personal story of one young man (Karan Shergill, played by Hrithik Roshan) than the story of the war as a whole. In that sense, it was again a coming-of-age film like *Vijeta*, in the way it showed his transformation from a nice-hearted, but confused college boy, to a determined, focused, young army officer. This transformation takes place in three stages, each increasing in seriousness, first – while watching an Arnold Schwarzenegger film, as he remembers his friend’s plan to join the army, and decides so himself, but gives it a second thought when his friend changes his mind, second – when he argues with his father and wants to prove to him that his

decision is not a joke, and third – when he runs away from the academy due to the harsh punishments, and, rebuked by his parents and his girlfriend, introspects & finally goes back to the academy. This is followed by an inspirational song in which the scenes of the IMA very closely resemble the slick advertisements the armed forces have been preparing in recent times, in order to exhort the urban middle-class youth to join the army as officers. Even before this song, such exhortations appear in different ways, as when Karan’s friend says, “I feel my country needs me yaar!” (A line which Karan himself repeats later), or the scene in the beginning where Karan, newly commissioned, is taken to the Line of Control, and he ‘realizes’ for the first time the difference between “us and them”. Also, in the latter half of the film, Karan’s father says to him on the telephone, “My peers here just talk about the ongoing war in Kargil. None of them has a son or brother or any relative serving in the forces. They just talk, while I can hold my head high.” Besides his father, Karan also speaks to his girlfriend before leaving for the do-or-die mission, & says, “You always used to say that I had no *Lakshya* (aim) in life. (Pointing to the mountain peak) Now, that is my *Lakshya*.” All these ideas, in a way, represent a model to be emulated by a generation which is otherwise seen as having no larger goals in life (this generation is represented in the film through Karan’s friends, whose reasons for choosing their respective careers are mostly superficial). Meanwhile, the female lead (Romila Dutta, played by Preity Zinta, and believed by many to be based on Barkha Dutt of NDTV) is a modern, assertive young woman, who seems to know her priorities regarding her career and personal life. In spite of her assertiveness and her outbursts against the indecisiveness of her boyfriend, Karan, and later, the chauvinism of her businessman fiancé, she is still shown to be a journalist who is ‘patriotic’, and not critical of the Government. This is subtly reflected by the fact that her stay in Kargil and her protection during surprise bombings is the responsibility of the Army, thus indirectly suggesting that her coverage will have that much of a bias (this was pretty much the case with Barkha Dutt too) ⁽⁷⁾.

Most of the matter was dealt with in a very realistic way, e.g. the junior officers do not deliver fancy patriotic lines in front of their superior, but listen to him with attention and contribute constructively to the

battle plan. The filmmaker had no qualms about keeping the roles of well-known actors (like Amitabh Bachchan & Om Puri) limited, as the storyline demanded it, even though there were laments of these veteran actors having been wasted in the film ⁽⁸⁾. The 'hero', after he joins the army, sports a crew cut throughout the film (not the stylish hair of the soldiers of earlier films, including *Border*); a lot of attention has also been given to the uniforms & all the small details, making the film near-perfect in that regard. It is also technically much slicker, e.g. the gunfire in the battle scenes looks & sounds so realistic that many people compared it with the Normandy landing scene in *Saving Private Ryan* ⁽⁸⁾.

There are quite a few scenes with high emotional tension, e.g. when Karan runs away from the Academy and sees the reaction of his parents and his girlfriend, when Romila decides to break her engagement with her businessman fiancé, when an officer shouts at her in the hospital for 'pretending' to be a pacifist, when Karan calls his father & meets Romila just before he goes off for a do-or-die mission, when there is an argument amongst the six surviving soldiers about whether they should go ahead with the mission, when the soldiers die in the various battles shown in the movie, etc. In none of these scenes, however, does the film go overboard with fancy dialogues & high drama. Also, the officers are all equally sophisticated, with their different backgrounds reflected only through their names (e.g. the Muslim officer) or slight accents (unlike other films, which reduce linguistic & religious diversity to caricatures). The message of secularism is just implied, and not overtly stated anywhere, and the Muslim officer is an equal in all respects, not someone to be 'taken care of' by the 'majority'. The anti-war statements, whether by Romila, or the old soldier (Om Puri), are also balanced and moderate. In many such ways, the characters & the story are allowed to develop naturally, so that they are realistic & believable.

Thus, *Lakshya* presents a good example of a well-handled story, made with a modern outlook and modern technical finesse. It also realistically shows why the armed forces are called 'India's firewall', & why they have managed to command the respect of the masses. It is because all the fine values required

for protecting a country of such size & diversity as India are ingrained into them. It is evident through each & every aspect of their behavior, and does not need to be declared loudly. It shows Pakistan only as a political enemy, & not as the 'evil side' of a divine good-vs.-evil struggle.

Lakshya may be a fine example of a modern film, but it is certainly not the norm. In a way, it is like the 'parallel cinema' movement in India. While directors like Shyam Benegal made many films which showcased the developmentalist agenda of the Government, *Lakshya* reflected the current agenda of the armed forces of trying to overcome their shortage of officers. It was made with a similar emphasis on realism, but was far slicker & technically polished. However, like Benegal's films, it appealed only to certain urban audiences, and did not do good business in the smaller towns. In the current scenario, such movies are being made along with the overtly patriotic, jingoistic ones, just as various ideologies co-exist among various sections of the population. Thus, the attitude of the average Indian towards Pakistan, for instance, varies from extreme hatred to annoyance to ignorance to 'nostalgic sympathy' to curiosity to a desire for reconciliation. Towards China though, the general attitude is one of awe, whether it is with respect to their economic prowess or their military might, and I suppose that the 1962 War and its portrayal in *Haqeeqat* has a lot to do with this.

The fragmentation of ideologies is also reflected in the political scene, with the growth of smaller parties, and of coalition politics. In the movie industry, the growth of multiplexes has also led to the segregation of audiences into various classes according to their likes & dislikes, and different kinds of films are being made for these different classes. *Lakshya* represents just one of these many kinds, none of which is dominant as of now. Whether this multiplicity will increase, or whether it will be replaced by the dominance of any one particular genre again, remains to be seen. One thing is for sure, though, that whatever changes take place in the socio-political scenario of the country will certainly be reflected in films.

Summary

In spite of all the changes that have taken place in the socio-political condition of the country, and in the kind of films produced in Bollywood, the armed forces have continued to command the respect of the Indian public, and their portrayal in films through the decades has reflected this. There have been minor changes through the years, and at times, some filmmakers have dared to raise questions against the armed forces, but this criticism, if it can be called so, is in no way comparable to the criticism of the US armed forces in certain films in Hollywood. For example, even an anti-war Hindi film like *Prem Pujari* had a song praising the armed forces ('Taaqat Watan Ki Hum Se Hai'), and films which have been extremely anti-war & extremely critical of the Government have, even if released, been restricted to academic circles (e.g. Anand Patwardhan's documentary *War and Peace*). On the other hand, in the US, films like Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* have acquired the status of cult films, and even a mainstream film like *Forrest Gump* painted the US armed forces in a comic (and poor) light (however, through the years, there have also been many jingoistic films in Hollywood which have supported the 'Big Brother' stance of the US Government).

The basic reason for this is, of course, the fact that India's wars have been to defend its own contiguous territories, and have been in response to enemy invasions. On these occasions, the Indian Government has received the support of most of its people (barring a few cases like the IPKF misadventure in Sri Lanka in 1987). The US, on the other hand, has been involved in wars all over the world, many of which have not found support from its own people (the most notable being the Vietnam War, which has been the background for most anti-State films in Hollywood). Also, in general, there have been many more war films in Hollywood than in India. Again, one basic reason is that India has always had an all-volunteer army, which has been involved in short-term wars, while the US has had universal conscription during the long-drawn Second World War & the Vietnam War (which meant that more

families were directly affected by these wars than in India), raising armies of millions which were sent halfway across the world for many years at a stretch. This is not the only reason, of course, but a more detailed study will be required to analyze all the reasons & their relative importance.

Finally, it can be said that the confidence of India's people in their 'firewall' remains steadfast, and the image of the people who constitute that 'firewall' is as pristine as ever, and films based on them continue to be made, whether or not they achieve critical or commercial success.

References

{1} For a detailed history & analysis of the causes of the 1962 Sino-Indian War, see '**Struggle for the Himalayas**' by Shanti Prasad Varma.

{2} The website of the 'Prahaar Samaj Jagruti Sanstha' is <http://www.prahaar.org> .

{3} To read more about the jingoist films of the 1990s see <http://www.countercurrents.org/comm-chatterjee251103.htm>

{4} This quote by J.P. Dutta is mentioned in the book '**Cinema of Interruptions**' by Lalitha Gopalan ('Masculinity at the Interval in J.P. Dutta's Films', page 98). There, it is attributed to an interview of J. P. Dutta on Rediff on the Internet.

{5} As mentioned in an interview in 'India Today' shortly after *Border* was released in 1997.

{6} http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Longewala#Battle_plan.

{7} To read more about the coverage of the Kargil War in the Indian media, and official media-management strategies, see 'Managing the Media in an era of round-the-clock news: notes from India's first tele-war' by Daya Kishan Thussu, *Journalism Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 2, May 2002, pp. 203-212.

{8} This opinion has been expressed in countless reviews of the film in newspapers, magazines, websites and web logs.