



# Contemporary Bollywood Cinema and Politics of Nationalism: A Critical Analysis of Aditya Dhar's *Uri: The Surgical Strike*

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Received: 11 Jan 2022; Received in revised form: 26 Feb 2022; Accepted: 06 Mar 2022; Available online: 14 Mar 2022  
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**Abstract**— In the present-day context of political instability and growing fear of terrorism, renewed scholarly interest in aspects like nationalism, ethnic assertion, religious fundamentalism is clearly discernible. The rising xenophobia of West, especially after the terrorist attacks of September 11, is not restricted to the white culture now, but has enormously inspired the jingoistic tendencies across the world. The belligerent nationalism that follows has seized the popular mind finding manifold expressions in forms of popular culture. Movies, music, television series, web series catering to the chauvinist taste of the audience not only has greater prospect of commercial success, but their role in the formation of the 'imagined communities' render them much more socially and politically influential than their counterparts. So far as India is concerned, the perpetual hostility between India and its neighbouring country Pakistan has provided thematic content for many genres of popular culture, particularly Bollywood movies, since Partition. Aditya Dhar's *Uri: the Surgical Strike* (2019) is such a movie, appealing to the nationalist sentiments of Indian audience of India and overseas, that has ranked fifth among the highest grossing Bollywood films of 2019 with its box office collection of over 49 million USD within seven weeks of its release. The fact that it is the dramatised version of a supposedly true event has evidently contributed to its immense popularity. This paper aims to critically analyze the movie as a cultural artefact and explore how contemporary Bollywood movies play a significant part in inculcating 'nationalism' in Indian audience by naturalizing the imagined commonalities among heterogeneous subjects through the projection of a common identifiable enemy. Reading the cinematic text as a cultural ISA, as Althusser has termed it, this paper is an attempt to decode this politics of nationalism in terms of contemporary Bollywood cinema.

**Keywords**— Nationalism, Ideology, Community, Citizen, Indian.

Oxford Advanced Learner defines nationalism as "a feeling of love for and pride in your country, a feeling that your country is better than any other." (1017) Nationalism is determined by the boundaries of the state and thus political in nature. "Nationalism" as Tom Nairn observes, "is the pathology of modern developmental history, as inescapable as "neurosis" in the individual, with much the same essential ambiguity attaching to it...and largely incurable" (29) Though Nairn has made this observation in the 1970s, his statement is very much relevant for today's world, especially India on which the

present study is focused. Nationalism has now become a growing obsession, so far as contemporary Indian social and political scenario is concerned, that inevitably leads to a tendency for xenophobia and jingoism. Use of nationalist zeal of the citizens as a political tool is not a new phenomenon. This, sometimes, serve to justify political acts which may otherwise appear inequitable and even horrifying.

The Holocaust is perhaps most appropriate example in this case where the German subjects of the

Third Reich were convinced that this ethnic cleansing was not only fair but necessary for the sake of Germany, their beloved nation. Instillation of nationalism was one of the major steps for Hitler to rise in power. Apart from its negative aspects, nationalism is the consciousness which binds the people of a country together and therefore provides it with a social and cultural stability. This is achieved through the creation of the "imagined community" where, as Benedict Anderson has observed, "the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members meet them or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion." (6) Thus it is the sense of oneness or rather "imagination" of the oneness which is the very essence of nationalism. Without this sense, it would be difficult for a country to survive and progress.

Gellner has argued that "nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness; it *invents* nations where they do not exist." (26) Thus Gellner denies the very existence of nation claiming it to be fabricated by false consciousness i.e nationalism. If nation is a country considered as a group of people, as Oxford Dictionary defines it, with the same language, culture and history living in a particular area under one government, then the question remains what if the people living in a country under a particular government do not share common language, culture or even history?

In that case, what would be the basis of this consciousness of uniformity? In India, for example, more than seven religions are practiced among the population of 133 crores who speak in twenty two different languages across the different parts of the country that do not share common historical background. Still, India is one 'nation' where citizens with different language and cultural background are encouraged to be identified by their "national" rather than regional identity. National flag, national anthem, popular sovereignty, struggle against common political enemy, common citizenship are some of "imagined realities" (Anderson 81) that serve to reinforce the consciousness of uniformity and solidarity. For a country with such cultural divergence like India, nationalism is even more important instrument to preserve stability and sovereignty. Though there exist several apparatuses that attempt to naturalise the imagined commonalities allowing the members to cherish the national pride, for present study only cinematic texts have been taken for discussion. This paper aims to critically analyse the role of Bollywood in instilling nationalism with reference to a very popular Bollywood film of recent times, Aditya Dhar's *Uri: the Surgical Strike*.

In his celebrated essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" Louis Althusser discusses different types of Ideological State Apparatuses by which ruling class exercises hegemony to hold state power. These ISAs disseminate ideologies that reinforce the control of the ruling class. Among the subcategories of ISA, Cinemas can fall under both communicational and cultural ISA. Though there are many debates among the scholars and critics regarding the question whether films should be considered as an art form, its wide influence on the psyche of the audience can never be denied. Broadly speaking, in contemporary time, cinema is able to reach wider audience than other art forms as it is easily accessible to the audience of remotest areas with less or no education. Cinema which is the clipped version of cinematography is all about communicating perceptions, feelings or ideas, in short, telling stories through motion pictures. When the story has a good moral, it can positively impact the audience. In recent years, we have witnessed release of the movies like *Padman*, *Toilet: Ek Prem Katha*, *Hindi Medium*, *Thappad*, *Article 15* etc that attempt to investigate several social issues that are affecting India in contemporary times with the aim to generate social awareness. However, cinema, being an important medium of mass communication, nevertheless plays an important role in reinforcing society's dominant ideology that sometimes serves the interest of the ruling class. It has its own subtle way to exert the hegemony thus sustaining the social cohesion and status quo. The focus of this paper is to study how the aforementioned Bollywood film serves to reinforce the ideology of nationalism, mostly with a much romanticized presentation of national achievement of defeating a common enemy.

Indian nationalism as a concept developed during the independence movement against the colonial British Raj to liberate India from the foreign rule. Today, however, nationalism in India is mostly characterised by revulsion and antipathy to Pakistan as a result of the growing tension between these two neighbouring countries. Since the independence and partition of India, the two countries had never been at peace and involved in several wars and skirmishes mainly due to Kashmir issue, border conflicts and terrorist activities that are supposedly nurtured by Pakistan. As retaliation for a terrorist attack on the Indian army near the town of Uri on 18<sup>th</sup> September 2016 that killed 19 Indian soldiers, a surgical strike was reportedly conducted by India on 29<sup>th</sup> September 2016.

The 2019 movie *Uri: the Surgical Strike* is the dramatised account of that event. As the disclaimer states, the film is based on the facts and information available in the public domain. Certain characters, institutions, events in the film are fictional and have been used purely for

cinematic reasons and for dramatizing the performances and incidents portrayed in the film. However, movies are bound to be fictional even though they are inspired by true events as no movie can claim perfectly accurate portrayal of the true events; in order to fictionalise the true event, the dramatic elements have to be added.

The surgical strike on which the movie *Uri* is based on itself a much debated topic as most claims made by India regarding the strike have been rejected by Pakistan. As published in the issue brief by Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, while Indian government claimed 35-70 terrorists to be killed in the attack, Pakistan rejected the claim stating that Indian troops did not cross the Line of Control and had only a brief skirmish with Pakistani troops at the border, resulting in the deaths of two Pakistani soldier and nine wounded. Pakistan rejected India's report of any other casualties with the report that at least 8 Indian soldiers were killed in exchange and one was captured.

In the movie, eight teams of commandos successfully kill all the terrorists in six terrorist launch pads with Idris and Jabbar the masterminds of Uri attack being killed by the protagonist Major Vihaan Singh Shergill. On their way back they face the gunfire by Pakistani Air Force. Firing back the commando teams somehow successfully cross the Line of Control on the Indian side without any casualty. Thus the movie reveals only one side where no Indian soldier is showed to be injured or killed in the film resulting in a highly glorified portrayal of the event. The movie, as a romanticised account of the Indian achievement against the enemy, is bound to fill every Indian citizen with pride for India's success. It is, as stated in the very beginning, "a tribute to those men [martyred in Uri] and all to our brave Indian armed forces and to a New India." (1:40) It is evident from the very beginning that the movie is chiefly an idealized version of India's reported retaliation but what is problematic in the movie is the lack of proper research and no attempt to produce counter perspectives.

The movie begins one year before the surgical strike with another attack on the convoy of Indian Army in Chandel, Manipur. This attack however was not by Pakistani terrorists; it was executed by NSCN militants. This ambush too is retaliated by Indian Army when Major Vihaan Singh Shergill and his team attack the Northeastern militants and kill most of them including the leaders responsible for the ambush. Here too, the commandos do not give up and all of them return safe after successfully executing the operation. Invincibility of the Indian army is made evident from the beginning and the dramatic delineation of the war scene with the commandos fighting

with extraordinary prowess serves to provide the audience with deep satisfaction. Further it is conveyed that the bravery and skill of the army has put a stop on the movements of North Eastern Terrorism and remaining terrorist groups want to compromise as they have no option left. Thus the army successfully deals with the internal terrorist activities. The only threat remains is from outside i.e. Pakistan which is presented with more intensity, making it more appealing to the Indian audience. The growing tension between India and Pakistan is conveyed by several references to minor attacks attempted by Pakistani terrorist groups culminating in the Pathankot attack of January 2016. The brief references of these attacks serve to create the context for the deadly Uri attack that "bleeds India with thousand cuts." The emotion of the audience is channelized through the little girl, the daughter of Major Karan Kashyap who is martyred in the attack. The scene where the girl along with her pregnant mother gives last tribute to her father with poignant war cry "courage and competence in war!" not only boils the blood of the onscreen soldiers who replies with their battle cry "Sacrifice is the greatest virtue" but also that of the audience who can identify with the character. The pregnancy of Neha Shergill Kashyap just before her husband is killed is significant. It not only evokes more sympathy from the audience but also the fictional account of the love and bonding in Shergill and Kashyap family that get devastated after the attack reveal the human side of the soldiers' life and make the audience relate more with the event. The battle cry uttered by the girl "Courage and competence in war, Sacrifice is the greatest *dharma*" suggests service to the nation takes priority over anything else; thus upholding the virtue of patriotism and nationalism.

One of the major themes in the movie is the emergence of "Naya Hindustan" or the New India. The discussion between the prime minister and the officials prior to the strike indicates this new dawn. So far as history of India is concerned, it has never attacked any country first. But the New India will not be tolerant of any misdeed; instead it would infiltrate the enemy country and hit them where it hurts. The proposal of direct war is dismissed as Pakistan should be answered in a language they understand. This scene is one of the most potent scenes in the movie appealing powerfully to the nationalist sentiment of the audience. In a movie based on a war between two enemy countries, there is not supposed to be any need of songs that are essential part of other popular cinema. But following the tradition of other films of this genre preceding *Uri*, this movie does have "an element of all-purpose carnival." (Nandy and Lal 18) While the song "Behe Chala" (flowing away) picturise warmth of family

love and the family bonding that are meant to appeal the audience emotionally, the song Challa (Main Lad Jaana) before the operation is noteworthy. The lyric of this highly energetic song, "Main lad jana main lad jana/ Hain laho mein ek chingaari/ Zidd se junoon tak hain jaana/ Har katra bol raha" which can be translated as I am going to fight, there is a strong sparkle in my blood, every single drop convinces me to give my best- is enough to simmer the blood of the audience as well who have already witnessed too much to endure. The picturization of the song is equally dramatic as it involves the final training of the commandos before the strike. The firing of the cannons, shooting practices, guerrilla training of the military forces are not only picturesque but also serve to create the tension. Cannons have nothing to do with such surgical strikes; they are used purely for dramatic purposes.

Another notable thing in the song is the scene where three of the commandos are praying namaz that reveals their religious identity. As Vinay Lal and Ashis Nandy has observed in their book *Fingerprinting Popular Culture: The Mythic and The Iconic in Indian Cinema*, "Border is supposed to be based on the 'history' of a specific battle during the 1971 India-Pakistan war; in such films, it is important to have one or two loveable Muslim characters among the heroes to draw a line between Pakistan and Muslims. The phenomenon of the 'good Muslim' is widely encountered in popular Hindi films." (Introduction xvi-xvii) Though the film *Border*, as Lal and Nandy have pointed out, dispensed with this tradition *Uri: the Surgical Strike* could not. The prayer of only Muslim soldiers are made visible, not that of Hindu ones. Evidently the scene is designed to convey to the audience that among the heroes of the surgical strike there were Muslims too who were ready to sacrifice their own lives to avenge the 'thousands cuts' of Mother India. This is, in the words of Lal and Nandy, one of the 'good conventions' of popular Hindi films where the Muslim subjects of India who are mostly marginalised when it comes to the issue of Indian nationalism or more precisely abhorrence of Pakistan, can also relate and appreciate.

The portrayal of the character Seerat Kaur, the adept Indian Air Force officer eager to prove her patriotism to her dead husband is also very artful as it involves women too as an active participant of the event. It was flight lieutenant Seerat who was responsible for the safe return of the team after the mission is accomplished. This instils the emotion of nationalism in female audience because of the feeling that they too can be an active part of nationalist activities that is generally associated with male.

According to the reports by Indian media, three to four teams of seventy to eighty soldiers were involved in the operation. In the movie, eighty commandos are divided into four teams each of which has to destroy two terrorist launch pads. Vihaan chooses those two launch pads that had been responsible for Uri attack to avenge the death of his colleague and brother-in-law Major Karan Kashyap. Though this personal motive may justify the protagonist's adamant attitude, it is unlikely that each team of commandos successfully kills all the terrorists while managing somehow to keep themselves unharmed. India admitted that one of its soldiers was in Pakistan custody. There is no such detail in the film. The film ends with the successful return of the army and the formal dinner that follows the victory thus eschewing counter-perspectives as well as the claims made by Pakistan regarding casualties that make the depiction only one-sided. Nevertheless, for Indian audience it provides deep satisfaction when they witness such huge success of Indian against its enemy. The film is concerned with Indian version of the attack; the glorified and romanticised account of the operation produces desired effect on the Indian audience earning the film eleventh position in the list of Hindi film with highest domestic net collection. If counter-perspectives had been included, the effect would have been lessened. The immense influence of the film on the audience is discernable. The dialogue of the movie "how is the Josh?" which is Hinglish for how is the spirit and its reply "high sir" went viral over social media and then used widely several individuals and institutions. The movie has earned the rating of 8.4 out of 10 in Internet Movie Database (IMDb) with 97% audience liking the movie as per Google survey.

The details regarding the attack are still ambiguous. According to a BBC report on the attack by M. Ilyas, "despite the claims in the Indian media, the BBC could find little evidence that militants had been hit." The then UN Secretary General Ban-Ki-Moon stated that UN Observer Group in Pakistani Kashmir did not directly observe any firing across the Line of Control. According to Hasan Aksari Rizvi, a prominent Pakistani defence analyst, as published in The New York Times, India's announcement was nothing but playing to domestic sentiments. He claimed, "There was pressure on the Indian government. Hence, they are portraying this as a surgical strike to shape public opinion." There is no way to know the 'truth' behind the claims of either party. This article does not have any intention of refuting or supporting claims made by any of the nations. The point, however, is, that watching the movie audience can find it easier to believe in the claims made by India as a result of the huge psychological impact of popular films on the audience.



The box office collection of the movie was approx three hundred and forty-two crore in Indian rupees while its budget was only twenty five crores.

The huge success of the movie proves how well the audience has accepted the portrayal of the events. Nationalism is the key plank of the film being overtly expressed in lines like, "It is time to seek revenge, an eye for an eye" or "This is a new India- this will infiltrate your home and hit you where it hurts." As suggested in an article published in *Gulf News*, "The larger-than-life portrayal of the 2016 strikes is just one of the many outlets that Indians have found to celebrate the military action against Pakistan." This victory against a common conspicuous enemy not only inspire the feeling of unity and perfect harmony among the Indians all over the country as well as overseas, but it also celebrates military predominance of India vanquishing major antagonists in a single attempt.

The single-handed victory of the Indian army against the common enemy of the whole world i.e. terrorism implies the supremacy of Indian army and emergence of the 'New India' as a distinguishable force in world politics. In the present context of growing terrorism that has become a global issue, this representation of direct action also serves to provide a certain reassurance to the citizens on behalf of the nation itself, besides instilling pride on the national success. In the discussion scene, the prime minister is worried that something has to be done; otherwise people will lose morale. After the planning of the strike, it is also implied that such surgical strike is unique in the history of India as nobody before could think of such operation that will not only answer Pakistan in a language they know but also create fear in their minds so that they will think twice before another such cowardly attack. Even it is implicated that Pakistan may deny occurrence of any such attack as they will never admit that terrorists are breeding on their land thus giving a kind of explanation of the discrepancy between Pakistani and Indian claims.

*Uri: the Surgical Strike*, whose primary aim is to ignite nationalist sentiment that would ultimately turn into revenue, resorts to tired clichés and stereotypes. As observed by Akshita Prasad in the review of the movie, "it takes the approach of 'we, the sanctimonious and they, the deprived.'" Pakistani officials are portrayed as incompetent individuals who are sloppy, callous and to a great extent lecherous. On the other hand we have Indian officials who are exceedingly competent and righteous persons. The incompetency of the Pakistani officers results in bad policy decisions, where as the highly competent Indian officers decide everything right. Such cliché portrayals

nevertheless appeal to the Indian audience who are thrilled to see the aggravators bleed in the hands of the demi-god hero. In this context, reference can be given to another such film released previous year i.e. Meghna Gulzar's *Raazi*. *Raazi*, in spite of celebrating nationalism and patriotism, carefully avoids such clichés and takes a balanced approach in showing Indian and Pakistani administration. *Uri* on the other hand contains all the dramatic elements and stereotypes that enchant the audience while appealing to their nationalistic sensibility that rest on the abhorrence of the enemy country. *Uri: the Surgical Strike* stands apart from previous films of the genre like *Border* (1997), *LOC Kargil* (2003) that deal with Indo-Pakistani War of 1971 and Kargil war of 1999 respectively because of its lack of a counter perspective.

Popular cinema is the representative of popular culture that is, in turn, is a set of practices, beliefs and objects, dominant or ubiquitous in a society at a given point in time. *Uri* with all its enticing elements disseminate and popularise the already dominant ideology of nationalism. Though there is a great variety of Indian audience as a result of class divisions, cultural and linguistic diversity of India, the movie is appealing to most sections of the audience as it plays with a sentiment where most Indians would come to agree. It glorifies war and celebrates nationalism. The movie operates to make the Indian subjects proud on national achievement as well as competency of the Indian army thus creating the feeling of fraternity for the fellow people of the imagined community "that make[s] it possible...for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings." (Anderson 7)

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