International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences
Vol-10, Issue-5; Sep-Oct, 2025

Peer-Reviewed Journal
Journal Home Page Available: https://ijels.com/
Journal DOI: 10.22161/ijels

Spectacle, Corruption, and Catharsis: The Crisis of Morality and the Neoliberal Psyche in Contemporary Indian Action Films

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Received: 18 Sep 2025; Received in revised form: 16 Oct 2025; Accepted: 19 Oct 2025; Available online: 22 Oct 2025

Abstract— *This research paper explores the crisis of morality in post-liberalization Indian action cinema, examining how law, corruption, and violence are aestheticized to reflect the psychological and ethical disintegration of neoliberal India. By close readings of Force (2011), Satyamev Jayate (2018), Udta Punjab (2016), Shaitan (2011), and Dev.D (2009), the research investigates how the spectacle of crime and justice in cinema reflects the contradictions of contemporary governance and desire. The argument here is that films substitute moral order with spectacle, subjecting law to performance and corruption to catharsis. Referencing Lalitha Gopalan's theory of cinematic interruption, Ashish Rajadhyaksha's cultural interpretation of post-liberalization India, and Ravi Vasudevan's idea of The Melodramatic Public, the research finds that Indian action cinema is now a cultural repository of anxiety. It is a reflection of a society where the distinction between enforcer and offender, legality and crime, breaks down into moral complexity—a mirror to India's neoliberal mind.*

Keywords— ***morality, spectacle, corruption, neoliberalism, violence, cinema***

Contemporary Indian action cinema has emerged as a powerful medium for the dramatization of the decline of law, morality, and institutional power in post-liberalization India. One of the most provocative tropes of this genre is the policing of the narcotics trade—a trope which conflates law enforcement with lawlessness. The conflict between the state and the narcotic underbelly uncovers not only a war of crime and order, but an extreme crisis in moral legitimacy. Movies like *Force* (2011), *Satyamev Jayate* (2018), *Udta Punjab* (2016), Shaitan (2011), and *Dev.D* (2009) turn this encounter into a metaphor for India's neoliberal breakdown, in which economic greed and moral deterioration sustain each other.

This essay argues that movies about corruption and drug policing serve as cultural critiques of India's fragmented ethics. As Ashish Rajadhyaksha puts it, "the cinema is a central institution by which the Indian public pictures its relationship with the state, power, and morality" (*Indian Cinema* 4). Such films reveal how the narcotic economy and the political machinery are reflections of each other: both are greed-based and nourished by the fantasy of control. The paper is based on an interdisciplinary approach that draws from genre theory, postcolonial studies, and cultural criticism. It places the action film in the moral economy of post-liberalization India, tracing the ways in which spectacle has substituted for substance in the representation of justice.

The theorization of law and lawlessness in Indian cinema must be grounded in a framework that is sensitive to genre aesthetics and sociopolitical ideology. The policeman figure and the narcotic trade function not only as plot devices but also as symbols of institutional anxiety. 1991 economic reforms remodeled India's shared morality, redefining virtue as productivity and ethics as efficiency. Ashish Rajadhyaksha observes that "liberalization created

a cinema of splintered publics, where law operates at once as shelter and terror" (62).

Under this cultural state of affairs, *Force* (2011) and *Satyamev Jayate* (2018) destroy the myth of the incorruptible cop. The police officer is torn between desire and duty, defending a profit-scarred legal system. David Harvey's theory of neoliberal accumulation describes this turn: "the moral ambiguity of capital permits any pursuit of profit to become crime." Likewise, the narcotic industry in *Udta Punjab* allegorizes the economy of unchecked desire. According to Vasudevan, spectatorship in contemporary *Indian Cinema* is "melodramatic in its moral structure but modern in its fragmentation" (*The Melodramatic Public* 44).

Lalitha Gopalan's *Cinema of Interruptions* also reads the Indian action film as an experience of discontinuity. The repeated song-and-violence breaks serve not as digressions but as self-revelations—cinematic interruptions that render the contradictions of governance visible. Cultural studies also remind us that law in India bears colonial traces. The police, who were first established under the 1861 Act to function for imperial order, continue to have its coercive genealogy. Nivedita Menon argues that postcolonial legitimacy "rests on the continued performance of disciplinary violence." Therefore, present-day policing in film—visible in *Force* or *Satyamev Jayate*—transcends to be both patriotic ritual and authoritarian reenactment.

Gender and masculinity complicate this schema further. As R. W. Connell theorizes, hegemonic masculinity converts violence into moral form. Muscular heroism substitutes for ethical speech in *Force* and *Satyamev Jayate*; justice is bodily action. The representation of female addicts in *Dev.D* or *Udta Punjab* reveals gendered hierarchies of penance and atonement. Through these filmic gestures, law and lawlessness are revealed as dependent moral economies, not as opposites.

The traditional Indian popular cinema symbol of the upright law administrator, earlier a representation of unbeatable nationalism, is deeply transformed in post-liberalization India. The 1970s heroic policeman, born out of political unrest and socialist ideology, is re-imaged in the twenty-first century as a morally worn, psychologically shattered force of spectacle. This transformation is not only stylistic; it betrays the remapping of moral authority in a culture where neoliberal modernity has substituted collective ethos with performance by the self. Movies like *Force* (2011), *Satyamev Jayate* (2018), *Udta Punjab* (2016), Shaitan (2011), and *Dev.D* (2009) represent this shift by translating moral dilemmas into kinetic spectacle. Their brutality and visual overkill enact the crisis of a civilization hooked on revenge, exposure, and control. Within these texts, the police, the addict, and the youth rebel are not adversaries but transmutations of a single neoliberal subject—alienated, performative, and neurotic. The law only endures as its own drama, and corruption is the form of emotional reality.

In *Force*, Nishikant Kamat builds ACP Yashvardhan (John Abraham) as a man whose dedication to duty disintegrates into pathology. He is the bureaucratic virtue the state still wants to project but can no longer maintain. His nemesis, Vishnu (Vidyut Jamwal), is neither an anarchic outlaw nor a mad slaughterer but a disciplined businessman of crime—suave, managerial, and ideologically indistinguishable from the neoliberal self-made man. The duel between them is more aesthetic than moral; it translates ethics into choreography. Lalitha Gopalan has noted how action cinema "fetishizes the body as moral currency" (*Cinema of Interruptions* 83) and *Force* exemplifies that step: every punch serves as the visual exchange for a moral proposition which words can no longer guarantee. Justice becomes vengeance when Yashvardhan's wife dies and he becomes a vigilante. Kamat stages the killings in slow motion, against a backdrop of garbage, fire, and metal blues, converting violence to elegy. The incorrupt is made corrupt not by greed but by sorrow; his tragedy is the depletion of legality itself. In neoliberal India where institutions collapse, ethical legitimacy is privatized—contracted out to actors who take revenge instead of judging.

Milap Zaveri's *Satyamev Jayate* amplifies this crisis by marrying moral outrage to populist spectacle. The protagonist Veer (again John Abraham) immolates corrupt policemen as part of a patriotic crusade that substitutes purification for justice. The film's incessant use of fire, anthem, and flag converts murder into ritual catharsis. Rachel Dwyer's comment that "Bollywood's purification rites conceal its unease at moral pollution in modernity" (*Bollywood's India* 97) precisely describes this dynamic. Zaveri re-packages ethical despair into nationalist entertainment; the spectator is exhorted not to think but to rejoice. The film's overwhelming sensory excess—flames, chanting, and slow-motion martyrdom—exhibits what Ashish Rajadhyaksha describes as "the post-liberalization aesthetics of legitimacy" (*Indian Cinema* 73). Authority, bereft of moral ground, is reconstructed through spectacle. The violence of the vigilante is the proof of his goodness, and the clapping of the audience closes the loop of validation. Michel Foucault's observation that power runs through the very actions that oppose it fits handily: each violation of law reinstates its dramatic power. In *Force* and *Satyamev Jayate*, moral law endures in choreography, its violence both punishment and evidence of mastery.

The slide into spectacle is carried on into *Udta Punjab* (2016), but the terrain moves from the individual to the state. Abhishek Chaubey's movie does not focus on an individual hero; it conducts a polyphony of victims and enablers within an tainted state. Punjab, long envisioned as India's granary and emblem of manliness, looks here like a wasteland of addiction—a body whose veins are conduits of chemical dependency. Rajadhyaksha terms this reversal the "inversion of national mythologies" (71). By projecting the narcotic crisis onto the neoliberal terrain, Chaubey builds addiction as the dominant metaphor of contemporary India: the economy itself is the drug, spurring productivity but undermining conscience.

The four lines of narrative in the film—Tommy Singh the pop star, Bauria the migrant worker, Sartaj the compromised policeman, and Dr. Preet the reforming doctor—converge as allegories of complicity. Tommy commodifies rebellion; his crass lyrics become anthems of indifference. Bauria suffers both gendered and class tyranny reflective of state violence. Sartaj starts off as a venal constable and transforms into a reluctant informant to institutional decay, and Dr. Preet's moral activism is reduced to martyrdom. Together they represent what Ravi Vasudevan describes as the "melodramatic public," in which pain is both private injury and public conversation (*The Melodramatic Public* 132). Chaubey's impatient cutting, switching back and forth between realism and stylized montage, performs Lalitha Gopalan's law that *Indian Cinema* "interrupts coherence in order to expose the incoherence of social reality" (*Cinema of Interruptions* 129). The outcome is a visual language of confusion that reflects the emotional condition of the nation.

Addiction here is not pharmacological; it is structural. The police, the politicians, and the medical machinery are all high on the drugs of corruption. The state is both pusher and addict. David Harvey's reading of neoliberalism's moral amnesia is informative: "profit becomes the sole virtue, and virtue itself the casualty" (*A Brief History of Neoliberalism* 89). *Udta Punjab* reenacts that maxim with catastrophic lucidity. The bribe and the high of the bureaucrat and the addict, however, have the same instant-gratification logic. The film's feminism does, however, bring back some sense of ethical balance. Shohini Ghosh puts forward the view that *Indian Cinema*'s portrayal of female suffering "inverts the gaze of justice, transforming victims into witnesses" (*Fire* 58). Bauria's resilience and Dr. Preet's resistance are moral because they spurn the spectacle of vengeance. The last sequence, where Bauria and Tommy race towards a light-blurred horizon, withholds closure. The withholding of redemption is itself an ethical position, defying the cinematic need to cure. Survival, and not victory, is the new moral lexicon.

While *Udta Punjab* maps out the disintegration of the collective body, *Shaitan* (2011) and *Dev.D* (2009) relocate the crisis within the mind of the urban youth. Bejoy Nambiar's Shaitan begins with pounding rhythms and strobe light, propelling the spectator into an excess city where identity has become narcotic. The well-off youth that inhabit this space are not bad boys in the old sense; they are a result of prosperous privations. Zygmunt Bauman's idea of "*Liquid Modernity*" wherein moral and social moorings disintegrate in continuous motion (Bauman 8) accounts for their unpredictability. When they stage a fake kidnapping as a result of their hit-and-run, their offence does not stem from ideology but from ennui. The intoxicated restlessness of the camera reflects their psychic instability. Inspector Mathur, the tired officer, is sucked into the same morass of hopelessness; the final shot, where he executes one of the perpetrators in cold blood, rounds off the cycle of corruption. The representative of the state is no different from those he is hunting down.

Anurag Kashyap's *Dev.D* prolongs this self-reflection into the sphere of desire. By redefining Devdas in the modern city, Kashyap transfers decadence from the feudal palace to the neon motel. Dev's odyssey from privilege to self-destruction enacts what Sigmund Freud called the "death drive"—the self-repetition of pain as obsession (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 38). Kashyap's overwrought colors—red for desire, blue for sadness, yellow for delirium—make feeling as disease. The handheld camera, the double soundtrack, and the melting frames produce an environment of sensorial overabundance blurring boundary between experience and performativity. Michel Foucault's description of disciplinary power explains Dev's interior suffering: the subject internalizes inspection, disciplining itself in the name of lost power (*Discipline and Punish* 202). Dev's addiction therefore represents a domesticated form of governance, the neoliberal conscience policing itself on pleasure.

Both *Dev.D* and Shaitan recreate gender in this moral economy. Amrita in Shaitan and Chanda in *Dev.D* both defy victimhood by claiming agency with practical survival. Chanda's history as an embarrassed student and her transformation as a sex worker redefine shame as agency. Kashyap reverses the myth of Paro and Chandramukhi by giving both self-definition independent of male validation. Their persistence accomplishes Vasudevan's assertion that melodrama finds moral renewal not in triumph but in perseverance (*The Melodramatic Public* 161). Redemption comes not through repentance but in recognition—the instant the character realizes the moral framework crumbling around him. The city itself is a symbol for the collapse: its traffic, lights, and noise

mirror the overstimulation of a mind that cannot sleep. The city maze, with billboards and screens, exteriorizes the neoliberal Indian psyche—self-promoting, disjointed, and exhausted.

Throughout these films, the cinematic space is created as a "heterotopia," in the words of Michel Foucault—a place that reflects and turns reality on its head at the same time. The police station, the club, the drug house, and the hotel room are all heterotopic spaces—places where the pretence of order is created through ritualistic transgression. The law pervades everywhere, but its significance has evaporated. The violence of the hero, the stupor of the addict, and the rebellion of the youth are all ways of complicity in a system that is fueled by spectacle. Peter Brooks's melodrama theory of "the mode of excess through which the moral occult becomes visible" (*The Melodramatic Imagination* 16) explains how these movies, despite their violence, are not amoral. Their surplus makes visible, instead of hiding, the emptiness of moral content beneath neoliberal India's shiny surface.

What finally brings together *Force, Satyamev Jayate, Udta Punjab, Shaitan*, and *Dev.D* is their rejection of firm closure. Justice, which had once been the fulfillment of the action story, now disintegrates into exhaustion. The cop survives but loses faith; the addict survives but not transformed; the youth confess but stay agitated. Émile Durkheim's notion of anomie—normlessness produced through accelerated social change—grasps the existential texture of such endings. The neoliberal subject swings between guilt and excess and can neither fully inhabit one. Violence turns into language, addiction is turned into faith, and spectacle is turned into politics. Cinema, as Rachel Dwyer says, continues to be "the national archive of feeling" (*Bollywood's India* 123); these films archive a shared mood of worry and fascination with moral breakdown. They stage not the breakdown of law but its transformation into performance—a performance the public desires because it reflects back on itself its own inconsistencies.

The coming together of ethics and aesthetics in these films indicates that Indian action cinema has reached its critical phase. In aestheticizing moral collapse, it teases and condemns its audience. The complicity of the audience—its pleasure at purification by fire or redemption by pain—closes the loop of neoliberal ethics, in which affect takes the place of justice. But the insistence of female survival and the occasional glints of self-knowledge supply a weak counter-ethic: acknowledgment without change, sympathy without fantasy. These moments suggest that even in spectacle there can still be consciousness. If the law is now theatre, at least cinema recalls that theatre once tried for truth.

CONCLUSION

From *Force* to *Dev.D*, Indian action cinema traces a path from order to entropy, where the instruments of justice themselves create disorder. The texts explored here are united in a preoccupation with the moral and psychological tolls of neoliberal modernity. Institutions deteriorate; persons disintegrate. Émile Durkheim's theory of anomie—normlessness bred of social dislocation—sums up this mood.

Force and *Satyamev Jayate* aestheticize moral conflict in muscular spectacle, reducing justice to ritual violence. *Udta Punjab* externalizes moral collapse to the body politic, but *Shaitan* and *Dev.D* internalize it as existential despair. Through these films, the authority of the law lingers only in performance. As Rajadhyaksha has noted, "post-liberalization cinema is obsessed with the state's fragility, where coercion replaces consent as legitimacy" (*Indian Cinema* 75).

These movies also reflect the changed consciousness of the viewer—conditioned to sensationalism and disillusion. *Satyamev Jayate*'s crusading vigilantism and *Dev.D*'s suicidal destruction appeal to a public that confuses catharsis with ethics. But in this collapse, there are momentary flickers of recognition—Bauria's survival, Amrita's admission, Dev's self-recognition—glimpsing ethical reawakening.

Indian action cinema thereby becomes a moral laboratory of neoliberal India, laying bare the addiction to violence, spectacle, and control. As Dwyer maintains, "Bollywood remains the national archive of feeling" (*Bollywood's India* 123). These movies document the nation's fall into moral relativism while upholding its quest for meaning. Law and lawlessness, not antonyms, are intertwined forces within the spectacle of modernity—one supporting the other in the cyclical chain of crisis and catharsis.

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