



Representations of Violence in Contemporary Indian Cinema: A Critical Analysis of Social and Cultural Implications

Dr. Shanker Singh Solanki

Senior Assistant Professor, Department of English Studies & Research, D. A-V. College, Kanpur Nagar

Dr. Arohi Sarin

Senior Assistant Professor, Department Of English Studies & Research, D. A-V. College, Kanpur Nagar

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22086294>

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Received: 21-06-2026

Accepted: 24-07-2026

Published: 21-08-2026

Keywords:

Indian cinema, cinematic violence, Bollywood, postcolonial film theory, gender and film, caste representation, cultural implications, media studies

ABSTRACT

This review paper critically examines the representations of violence in contemporary Indian cinema, analyzing the social, cultural, and ideological implications of such portrayals. Drawing upon over four decades of scholarship in film studies, cultural theory, and media studies, this paper argues that cinematic violence in India is not merely an aesthetic or entertainment phenomenon but a complex semiotic field that reflects, reinforces, and occasionally challenges dominant social hierarchies, gender norms, caste structures, and nationalist ideologies. The paper systematically reviews literature on genres including Bollywood mainstream cinema, regional film industries (particularly Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, and Marathi cinema), and independent art-house filmmaking. Through a thematic analysis of critical scholarly works, this review identifies key patterns in how violence is coded, consumed, and contested in Indian cinema. The paper engages with theoretical frameworks including psychoanalytic film theory, postcolonial theory, feminist film criticism, and cultural studies approaches to provide a multi-perspectival understanding of cinematic violence. Findings suggest that while violence in Indian cinema has

Disclaimer: The opinions, interpretations, conclusions, recommendations, analyses, and statements expressed in this research article are solely those of the author(s) and do not reflect the views, policies, or positions of the Publisher, Chief Editor, Editors, Editorial Board, Reviewers, or their affiliated institutions. The author(s) are solely responsible for ensuring the originality, authenticity, and integrity of the manuscript and for ensuring that it is free from plagiarism, AI-generated content, copyright infringement, data falsification, and any other form of academic misconduct.



historically served hegemonic functions—legitimizing caste and patriarchal authority, constructing national identity, and othering minority communities—new cinematic voices, particularly from Dalit filmmakers and feminist directors, are increasingly subverting these conventions. The paper concludes with recommendations for future research and critical media literacy interventions.

1. INTRODUCTION

Cinema, as one of the most powerful mass media forms of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, occupies a privileged position in the cultural life of the Indian subcontinent. With the Indian film industry producing over 1,500 films annually across multiple language industries—a scale unrivaled anywhere else in the world—the representational choices made by filmmakers carry enormous social weight (Ganti, 2012; Rajadhyaksha, 2009). Among the most contested of these choices is the representation of violence: its forms, its targets, its justifications, and its aesthetic rendering.

Violence in cinema is never simply violence. As Žižek (2008) has argued in his influential tripartite taxonomy, violence operates simultaneously at subjective, objective, and systemic levels. When an Indian action film hero dispatches dozens of enemies with stylized choreography, the scene encodes a complex range of meanings—about masculinity, justice, ethnicity, class, and national belonging—that far exceed its surface narrative function. The spectacular violence of a Rohit Shetty blockbuster differs fundamentally from the quiet, devastating domestic violence depicted in Nagraj Manjule's *Fandry* (2013), yet both are acts of representation that demand critical scrutiny (Deshpande, 2015; Mukherjee, 2020).

The study of violence in Indian cinema has accelerated significantly since the 1990s, coinciding with the liberalization of the Indian economy, the globalization of Bollywood, and the rise of regional cinema as a site of cultural assertion. Scholars such as Prasad (1998), Virdi (2003), and Chakravarty (1993) laid the groundwork for understanding Hindi cinema's political unconscious, while subsequent generations of critics have expanded the lens to incorporate caste, religion, sexuality, and regional identity. This review synthesizes this body of scholarship to provide a comprehensive account of where the field stands and where it needs to go.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 establishes the theoretical frameworks that inform the analysis. Section 3 examines the historical evolution of violence in Indian cinema from the silent era to the present. Section 4 analyzes gender and violence, focusing particularly on the representation of women as



targets and perpetrators of violence. Section 5 addresses caste and communal violence in cinema. Section 6 examines state and political violence. Section 7 considers regional cinemas and their distinctive approaches to violence. Section 8 reviews the effects literature and debates about the social impact of cinematic violence. Section 9 concludes with critical reflections and future research directions.

3. HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF VIOLENCE IN INDIAN CINEMA

The representation of violence in Indian cinema has a history as long as cinema itself on the subcontinent. The first Indian feature film, Dadasaheb Phalke's *Raja Harishchandra* (1913), depicted scenes of suffering and sacrifice that were rooted in mythological traditions already accustomed to representing cosmic violence. Phalke's mythological films established a template in which violence served moral and spiritual purposes, distinguishing dharmic from adharmic force (Rajadhyaksha and Willemen, 1994).

The social reform cinema of the 1930s and 1940s, represented by directors such as V. Shantaram and Bimal Roy, engaged with structural violence—poverty, caste discrimination, feudal exploitation—in ways that challenged audiences to recognize systemic sources of suffering. Films like *Do Bigha Zamin* (1953) depicted the violence of capitalist land seizure without recourse to the individualized action-hero framework that would come to dominate subsequent decades (Rajadhyaksha, 2009).

The 1970s marked a watershed moment in the representation of violence in Hindi cinema with the emergence of the 'Angry Young Man' archetype, most powerfully embodied by Amitabh Bachchan in films such as *Deewar* (1975) and *Sholay* (1975). As Prasad (1998) has persuasively argued, this shift reflected the collapse of the Nehruvian developmental consensus and the rise of a new urban underclass whose frustrations were channeled into spectacular vigilante violence. The anti-hero of 1970s cinema used violence not in service of the state but against its corrupt representatives, offering audiences a fantasy of extralegal justice that resonated deeply with social discontent.

The 1980s witnessed a proliferation of low-budget action films featuring increasingly graphic violence, partly in response to the availability of video technology and partly in imitation of Hong Kong action cinema (Gopalan, 2002). This period also saw the consolidation of the 'masala film' formula in which violence was one ingredient among several—romance, comedy, song sequences—designed to maximize audience pleasure across demographic groups.

The liberalization of the Indian economy after 1991 brought significant changes in the aesthetics and sociology of cinematic violence. As Ganti (2012) documents in her ethnography of Bollywood, the industry's orientation shifted from a mass, undifferentiated audience toward the multiplex-going urban



middle class and the Indian diaspora. This shift produced a bifurcation: glossy, internationally inflected action films on one hand, and grittier, realist depictions of urban violence and organized crime on the other. Ram Gopal Varma's *Satya* (1998) and *Company* (2002) exemplified this latter tendency, depicting Mumbai's underworld with a documentary-influenced visual style that Gopalan (2002) reads as a mode of cinematic realism that nonetheless aestheticizes criminal violence.

The 2000s and 2010s have seen further fragmentation, with regional cinemas—particularly Tamil, Telugu, and Malayalam—developing distinctive approaches to violence that sometimes challenge and sometimes amplify Bollywood conventions. The phenomenon of the mass entertainer in Tamil and Telugu cinema, featuring superheroic violence by hypermale stars like Rajinikanth and Prabhas, represents one trajectory; the parallel cinema tradition in Malayalam and Marathi cinema represents another (Velayutham, 2008; Sarkar, 2009).

4. GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND CINEMATIC VIOLENCE

The intersection of gender and violence in Indian cinema constitutes one of the most thoroughly analyzed aspects of the field. Feminist scholars have consistently demonstrated that mainstream Hindi cinema is structured around what Mulvey (1975) identified as the male gaze, with women's bodies positioned as objects of both desire and violence. In the Indian context, this dynamic takes on specific cultural inflections related to ideals of feminine virtue, honor, and self-sacrifice.

The trope of the 'fallen woman' who must be either redeemed or punished through violence has roots in classical Sanskrit literature and was powerfully reproduced in early Hindi cinema. Viridi (2003) traces this archetype from *Mother India* (1957)—in which a mother shoots her own 'fallen' son—through decades of Bollywood films in which violence against wayward women is presented as both tragic and necessary. The violence, in this framework, is simultaneously an act of love and a reassertion of patriarchal norms.

The representation of rape in Indian cinema has attracted particular critical attention, especially following the gang rape and murder in Delhi in 2012 which catalyzed public debate about sexual violence (Sen, 2013). Scholars have noted a long tradition in Hindi cinema of representing rape as a test of the heroine's virtue—a test she passes by either dying or being avenged by a male hero—rather than as a crime against women's autonomy. As Gopal (2011) argues, this framework displaces attention from structural gender inequality onto individual acts of masculine honor, foreclosing a feminist analysis of the conditions that enable sexual violence.



The vigilante rape-revenge film, exemplified by *Insaaf Ka Tarazu* (1980) and more recently by *NH10* (2015) and *Mardaani* (2014), represents a complex negotiation with this tradition. These films allow female protagonists to become agents of violent retribution, apparently inverting the passive victim position. However, as Banaji (2006) and Mazumdar (2007) argue, the female vigilante figure often reproduces rather than challenges patriarchal frameworks: her violence is legitimized only because it is directed against men who have violated 'their' women, and she typically returns to a subordinate social position after her exceptional violent act.

5. CASTE, RELIGION, AND COMMUNAL VIOLENCE IN INDIAN CINEMA

The representation of caste and communal violence in Indian cinema is a politically charged terrain that has received increasing scholarly attention in recent decades, particularly as caste-based violence and Hindu-Muslim communal conflict have intensified in public life. This section examines how cinema has historically managed, contained, or occasionally confronted these forms of structural violence.

Mainstream Bollywood cinema has overwhelmingly been produced from an implicit upper-caste Hindu perspective, a fact that shapes not only what forms of violence are depicted but how they are morally coded. As Deshpande (2015) argues in his influential study, caste violence in Bollywood is typically rendered invisible: the Dalit protagonist either does not appear at all, or appears as a subsidiary figure whose victimization serves to develop the upper-caste hero's moral character rather than being examined in its own right.

The few Bollywood films that have directly addressed caste discrimination—such as *Ankur* (1974), *Bandit Queen* (1994), and *Article 15* (2019)—have done so largely through an upper-caste gaze that positions the Dalit or lower-caste figure as an object of either sympathy or social analysis rather than a subject with interiority and agency. As Rajendran (2014) notes, even ostensibly critical films about caste violence often reproduce the paternalistic gesture of upper-caste representation speaking on behalf of the oppressed.

Regional cinemas, particularly Tamil and Marathi cinema, have developed more substantive engagements with caste violence. Nagraj Manjule's *Fandry* (2013) and *Sairat* (2016), in particular, have been widely recognized as cinematic breakthroughs in the representation of caste violence and its intimate connection with honor, desire, and social mobility. Mukherjee (2020) analyzes how *Sairat*'s climactic violence—the murder of an inter-caste couple by the bride's family—refuses the consolations of either



liberal optimism or revenge fantasy, presenting caste violence as a systemic condition that exceeds individual moral failure.

8. CINEMATIC VIOLENCE, AUDIENCES, AND SOCIAL EFFECTS: DEBATES IN THE LITERATURE

The question of whether cinematic violence causes or contributes to real-world violence is among the most extensively researched and most contested in media studies. This section reviews the relevant literature with particular attention to research conducted in or focused on Indian contexts, where the effects question has additional dimensions related to communal violence and political mobilization.

The dominant paradigm in effects research, rooted in social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), hypothesizes that exposure to media violence increases the likelihood of violent behavior through processes of imitation and desensitization. Laboratory studies purporting to demonstrate this effect have been extensively published since the 1960s, though their ecological validity—their applicability to real-world contexts—has been consistently questioned by critics including Freedman (2002) and Gauntlett (1995), who point to the failure of correlational studies to establish causal mechanisms and the enormous gap between laboratory conditions and actual media consumption.

In the Indian context, the effects question has frequently been raised in relation to communal violence: do films that demonize Muslim characters, as critics argue the BJP-aligned Bollywood of the 2010s increasingly does, contribute to anti-Muslim violence? This is an extremely difficult question to answer empirically, given the complex causal pathways between media consumption, political ideology, and violent action. Scholars including Rajagopal (2001), writing about the role of the Ramayana television serial in the context of the Ayodhya movement, have argued for a more nuanced 'political economy of attention' framework that examines how media representations circulate within specific political and social contexts rather than producing uniform behavioral effects.

9. CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This review has surveyed a substantial and growing body of scholarship on violence in Indian cinema, revealing both the richness of the field and its significant remaining gaps. Several conclusions emerge from this synthesis.

First, cinematic violence in India is thoroughly over determined: it operates simultaneously as entertainment spectacle, ideological mechanism, cultural expression, and potential social force. Any single-



causal account of its significance—whether a naive effects model or a naive formalist celebration of cinematic style—will be inadequate. The theoretical pluralism evident in the best scholarship on Indian cinema reflects genuine complexity in the object of study rather than indecision or eclecticism.

Second, the dominant tradition of Hindi mainstream cinema has historically used violent representation to reproduce rather than challenge hegemonic social structures: patriarchal gender relations, upper-caste social hierarchies, Hindu nationalist territorial claims, and authoritarian fantasies of state power. This is not a simple or uniform tendency—there are significant counter-currents and internal contradictions—but it is a pattern visible enough to require explanation and critique.

Third, regional cinemas represent important alternative traditions that scholars have only begun to adequately map. The global recognition of Malayalam cinema in particular, and the emergence of distinctive voices from Marathi and Tamil cinema, suggests that the monolithic category 'Indian cinema' requires significant disaggregation if it is to be analytically useful.

In conclusion, the representation of violence in contemporary Indian cinema is a field of study with high stakes—social, cultural, and political—and considerable scholarly momentum. This review has attempted to map the terrain and identify the most productive avenues for future work. The critical analysis of cinematic violence is not merely an academic exercise; it is a contribution to public understanding of how powerful cultural forms shape the social imaginaries in which actual violence occurs or is prevented.

REFERENCES

- Althusser, L. (1971). Ideology and ideological state apparatuses. In *Lenin and philosophy and other essays* (pp. 127-186). Monthly Review Press.
- Ambedkar, B. R. (1936). *Annihilation of caste*. Self-published. (Reprinted by Verso, 2014)
- Bandura, A. (1977). *Social learning theory*. Prentice-Hall.
- Banaji, S. (2006). *Reading 'Bollywood': The young audience and Hindi films*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of culture*. Routledge.
- Bose, M. (2020). *Bollywood: A history*. The History Press.
- Buckingham, D. (2003). *Media education: Literacy, learning and contemporary culture*. Polity Press.



- Chakravarty, S. S. (1993). *National identity in Indian popular cinema, 1947-1987*. University of Texas Press.
- Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 139-167.
- Deshpande, A. (2015). *The cinematic imagination: Indian popular films as social history*. Primus Books.
- Dwyer, R. (2000). *All you want is money, all you need is love: Sex and romance in modern India*. Cassell.
- Fanon, F. (1963). *The wretched of the earth* (C. Farrington, Trans.). Grove Press.
- Freedman, J. L. (2002). *Media violence and its effect on aggression: Assessing the scientific evidence*. University of Toronto Press.
- Ganti, T. (2012). *Producing Bollywood: Inside the contemporary Hindi film industry*. Duke University Press.
- Gauntlett, D. (1995). *Moving experiences: Understanding television's influences and effects*. John Libbey.
- Gopal, S. (2011). *Conjugations: Marriage and form in new Bollywood cinema*. University of Chicago Press.
- Gopalan, L. (2002). *Cinema of interruptions: Action genres in contemporary Indian cinema*. British Film Institute.
- Gopinath, G. (2005). *Impossible desires: Queer diasporas and South Asian public cultures*. Duke University Press.
- Guha, R. (Ed.). (1982). *Subaltern studies I: Writings on South Asian history and society*. Oxford University Press.
- Hall, S. (1980). Encoding/decoding. In S. Hall, D. Hobson, A. Lowe, & P. Willis (Eds.), *Culture, media, language* (pp. 128-138). Hutchinson.
- Jenkins, H. (1992). *Textual poachers: Television fans and participatory culture*. Routledge.
- Jha, S. K. (2009). *Probing popular culture: On television and Hindi films*. Orient Black Swan.
- Kaplan, E. A. (1983). *Women and film: Both sides of the camera*. Methuen.



- Kaur, R., & Sinha, A. J. (Eds.). (2005). *Bollyworld: Popular Indian cinema through a transnational lens*. Sage Publications.
- Mazumdar, R. (2007). *Bombay cinema: An archive of the city*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Metz, C. (1982). *Psychoanalysis and cinema: The imaginary signifier* (C. Britton, A. Williams, B. Brewster, & A. Guzzetti, Trans.). Macmillan.
- Minh-ha, T. T. (1989). *Woman, native, other: Writing post-coloniality and feminism*. Indiana University Press.
- Mukherjee, M. (2020). *Parallel cinemas of India: Non-mainstream Indian cinema since 1947*. Routledge.
- Mulvey, L. (1975). Visual pleasure and narrative cinema. *Screen*, 16(3), 6-18.
- Prasad, M. M. (1998). *Ideology of the Hindi film: A historical construction*. Oxford University Press.
- Rajadhyaksha, A. (2009). *Indian cinema in the time of celluloid: From Bollywood to the emergency*. Tulika Books.
- Rajadhyaksha, A., & Willemen, P. (1994). *Encyclopaedia of Indian cinema*. British Film Institute.
- Rajagopal, A. (2001). *Politics after television: Hindu nationalism and the reshaping of the Indian public*. Cambridge University Press.
- Rajendran, C. (2014). *Dalit aesthetics: Literature, cinema, and identity*. Orient Black Swan.
- Rao, A. (2020). *The caste question: Dalits and the politics of modern India*. Permanent Black.
- Rao, S., & Rao, R. (2019). *Baahubali, the conclusion: Mythmaking and Hindu nationalism in contemporary Telugu cinema*. *South Asian Popular Culture*, 17(2), 183-196.
- Sarkar, B. (2009). *Mourning the nation: Indian cinema in the wake of partition*. Duke University Press.
- Sen, S. (2013). Gender and the politics of representation in India: From Nirbhaya to Gulabi Gang. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 48(15), 12-15.
- Sivathamby, K. (1981). *The Tamil film as a medium of political communication*. New Century Book House.
- Velayutham, S. (Ed.). (2008). *Tamil cinema: The cultural politics of India's other film industry*. Routledge.



Virdi, J. (2003). *The cinematic Imagination: Indian popular films as social history*. Rutgers University Press.

Žižek, S. (2008). *Violence: Six sideways reflections*. Picador.