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INDIAN CINEMA AND THE PRESENTIST USE OF HISTORY

Conceptions of “Nationhood” in Earth and Lagaan

————— Giacomo Lichtner and
===== Sekhar Bandyopadhyay

Abstract

This article critically assesses Deepa Mehta’s *Earth* (1998) and Ashutosh Gowariker’s *Lagaan* (2001) as cultural outputs of recent political and historical debates over the nature of India’s nationhood. The article argues that the films politicize history, constructing an innocent past with the aim of advocating a more inclusive Indian society.

Keywords: India, history, cinema, nationhood, modernity

Introduction: National Integration, History, and Cinema

The 1990s posed several challenges to India’s national unity, leading to animated debates over the nature of its nationhood and renewed searches for contending histories to legitimize conflicting visions of nationalism. The 1990 Hindu nationalist Rama Janmabhoomi (The Birthplace of Rama) campaign was spearheaded by the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh (National Volunteers’ Association, RSS); Viswa Hindu Parishat (World Hindu Organization); and the Bharatiya Janata Party (Indian

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People's Party, BJP). The campaign advocated the demolition of the 16th-century Babri Masjid and its replacement with a temple for the mythical king Rama—worshipped today by many in India as a Hindu deity—at the site of whose birthplace the mosque was believed to have been constructed. With the intention of building a pan-Indian political support base, BJP leader Lal Krishna Advani in 1990 started his *ratha yatra* (chariot march) to the “holy” city of Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh, in a Toyota truck redecorated as Rama’s chariot. He was stopped in the state of Bihar before reaching his destination but, as his *ratha* traversed the north Indian plains, he managed to whip up a new brand of militant Hindu nationalism that vitiated inter-communal relations, putting members of the Muslim minority in a difficult situation.¹ The movement reached its climax with the violent destruction of the Babri Masjid on December 6, 1992, which sparked widespread communal riots throughout India in its aftermath.²

What further complicated the political scenario was the attempt by then-Janata Party (People’s Party) Prime Minister Viswanath Pratap Singh to split this emergent Hindu, and essentially high-caste, political constituency by announcing his intention to implement the decade-old Mandal Commission report on affirmative action for *dalits* (the former “untouchables”) and Other Backward Classes (OBCs).³ This report had recommended extending the reservation of jobs and seats in educational institutions to members of OBCs, along with the Scheduled Castes (*dalits*) and Scheduled Tribes. Even though these classes remained grossly underrepresented in higher education and employment, the Mandal Commission’s recommendations evoked a fierce high-caste backlash, especially among students, including self-immolations by young men as spectacular acts of protest.⁴ The nation looked divided along caste lines. On the one hand, the situation precipitated a growing sense of self-assertion and political emergence of

1. For details, see Richard H. Davis, “The Iconography of Rama’s Chariot,” in David Ludden, ed., *Making India Hindu: Religion, Community, and the Politics of Democracy in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 27–54.

2. The number of casualties caused by these riots has been both disputed and difficult to ascertain. One estimate reports approximately 3,000 people, for the most part Muslims, to have been killed. See Luke Harding, “Terror Comes to Bombay’s Tourist Hub as Blasts Widen India’s Communal Divide,” *Guardian*, August 16, 2003.

3. The Janata Dal (People’s Party) is vastly different from the present-day BJP. The Janata Dal arose as a secular democratic protest movement against the autocratic “Emergency” regime of Indira Gandhi in the mid-1970s. In contrast, the BJP, which was periodically a constituent member of the wider Janata coalition, has emerged as a right-wing Hindu nationalist party.

4. For evidence, see Rana Hasan and Aashish Mehta, “Under-representation of Disadvantaged Classes in Colleges: What Does the Data Tell Us?” *Economic and Political Weekly* 41:35, September 2–8, 2006, pp. 3791–96.

dalits and the OBCs while, on the other hand, atrocities against members of these groups increased markedly during the middle of the 1990s.⁵

These twin movements, not to mention ethnic insurgencies in non-Hindu-majority regions of India such as Punjab and Kashmir, triggered a deep crisis for the Indian nation, both internationally and domestically. Internationally, India's self-professed image of itself as a secular nation was seriously undermined as a growing stereotype of a "predominantly Hindu India" began to dominate media reporting in the West.⁶ An even deeper crisis of identity was felt domestically when the BJP, swept into power in 1998 by the winds of the Hindutva (Hindu-ness) movement, sought to further homogenize this image of a Hindu-state.⁷ Victims of the Hindutva movement (Muslims and *dalits*) and the campaign's opponents (left-liberal politicians and intellectuals) began a renewed search for the meanings of Indian "nationhood," turning to history for this critical reexamination.

History as a political tool for constructing imperial loyalties or building national identities has always been in demand in India.⁸ In 1975, the *Handbook for History Teachers* issued by the National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT) advised history teachers in India that "[t]he study of Indian history provides special opportunities for overplaying the unity and underplaying the disunity, thus fostering a cause of national integration."⁹ This political use of history assumed a whole different meaning after 1998 when the BJP government tried to revise the history textbooks issued by the NCERT, introducing its more right-wing Hindu view of nationhood. This effort included projecting Muslims as foreign invaders, underplaying the contributions of other religious communities, understating the impact of caste discrimination in Hindu society, and even omitting the important fact that Mahatma Gandhi—the universally revered "father of the nation"—had been assassinated in 1948 by a right-wing

5. For an analysis of this growing self-assertion, see Narendra Kumar, "Dalit and Shudra Politics and Anti-Brahman Movement," in *ibid.*, 35:45, November 4–10, 2000, pp. 3977–79. For statistical evidence, see Sukhadeo Thorat, "Oppression and Denial: Dalit Discrimination in the 1990s," in *ibid.*, 37:6, February 9–15, 2002, pp. 572–78.

6. David Ludden, "Introduction: Ayodhya, a Window on the World," in Ludden, ed., *Making India Hindu*, pp. 7–8.

7. The notion of Hindutva entailed the idea of proclaiming with pride the Hindu identity of the majority community and ensuring the dominance of the Hindus in the running of the Indian state.

8. For more details, see Daud Ali, ed., *Invoking the Past: The Uses of History in South Asia* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999).

9. Quoted in Jessica Levknecht and Hema Ramanathan, "Speaking Volumes: Religion and Teaching History in India," *Economic and Political Weekly* 41:36, September 9–15, 2006, pp. 3853–58.

Hindu fanatic.¹⁰ This new “official” history provoked an outcry from many professional historians, who complained about a return to “obscurantist, unscientific, communal historiography.”¹¹ In response to these changes implemented in some BJP-ruled states in India, many professional historians began directing their own research to the fundamental problems of a pluralist nation, namely, the roles of religion and caste. As a result, the 1990s witnessed the publication of an enormous amount of historical literature on communalism, the caste question, and nationalism, particularly, religious nationalism. This increased production of historical literature was also fuelled by the 50th anniversary of the nation-state, which focused new critical attention on discourses of secular nationalism—a discursive common ground shared by both the Nehruvian Congress Party and the leftist parties.

While this paper is not necessarily about the recent “history war”¹² in India, it is worth engaging this topic, if even only briefly, to provide a wider context for the main subject matter discussed below. On the one hand, some outstanding studies have been published on *dalit* and non-brahman history that told tales of discrimination, talked about alternative visions of nationhood, and expressed aspirations for increased empowerment for marginalized sections of society such as *dalits*, within the polity.¹³ This was clearly a history informed by the ideological underpinnings legitimized by the Mandal Commission report.¹⁴ On the other hand, studies on communalism

10. For a detailed discussion, see Kumkum Roy, “National Textbooks for the Future?” *ibid.*, 37:51, December 21–27, 2002, pp. 5083–85; Janaki Nair, “‘Dead Certainties’ and the Politics of Textbook Writing,” *ibid.*, 40:16, April 16–22, 2005, pp. 1587–91.

11. “Communalizing Education” resolution passed by the Delhi Historian Group workshop on the NCERT’s new syllabus for the social sciences, history, and languages, held on March 3, 2002, at Jawaharlal Nehru University. A copy of the resolution is found in *ibid.*, 37:10, March 9–15, 2002, p. 1053.

12. “History war” is an expression being currently used to describe the fierce debates over contested aspects of national histories. One other obvious example is the recent heated debate on Australian national history and the place of the aboriginals in that history. These debates are much more than just academic debates, as they take place in a wider public arena, involving the media and the political fora as well as a lot of personal vilification and propaganda.

13. Brahmins have traditionally stood at the top of the Hindu caste hierarchy and dominated Hindu society. They are commonly held responsible for prescribing and legitimizing the social disabilities suffered by the *dalits* and other lower castes.

14. Some good examples of this literature are Kancha Ilaiah, *Why I Am Not a Hindu: A Sudra Critique of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture, and Political Economy* (Calcutta: Samya, 1996); and Kancha Ilaiah, “Toward the Dalitization of the Nation,” in Partha Chatterjee, ed., *Wages of Freedom: Fifty Years of the Indian Nation State* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 267–91; M. S. S. Pandian, “‘Nation’ from Its Margins: Notes on E. V. Ramaswamy’s ‘Impossible’ Nation,” in Rajeev Bhargava, Amiya Kumar Bagchi, and R. Sudarshan, eds, *Multiculturalism, Liberalism, and Democracy* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 286–307.

took a new turn as the Partition of India gained center stage in public discourse during the year of its 50th anniversary. As a result, a new genre, “Partition history,” emerged that focused more on “victimhood” rather than on searching for the causes of what is still regarded in India as a major national catastrophe. Encouraged by writings on the Holocaust and other “trauma literature,” new historical studies on the Partition tried to retrieve the memories of people who suffered in the bloody riots associated with it.¹⁵ By powerfully interrogating the right-wing stereotype that Muslims alone were the perpetrators of communal violence, this historiographical shift was meant mostly to provide “therapeutic history” to help facilitate reconciliation and healing.¹⁶ Yet, as Ian Talbot’s study of violence in Punjab during the Partition reminds us, “[A]ll communities had blood on their hands” in this particular conflict.¹⁷ So it was time to get past the old narratives of Hindu victimhood and start building a more inclusive nation, incorporating minorities as equal citizens not overburdened with any socially imposed sense of guilt.

Within this context, the purpose of this paper is to consider an aspect usually left out of the discussion of this new historiography—namely, the role of films as another site of this “history war.” In particular, we examine the “presentist” use of history in the task of national integration in India.¹⁸ It is well known that “historical films” have a habit of deconstructing, reconstructing, or, more often than not, simply misrepresenting the past.¹⁹ Scholars such as Robert Rosenstone have devoted a great deal of attention to the challenges that issues of aesthetic representation, and film production

15. Some notable examples of such writings are Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* (Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1998); Suvir Kaul, ed., *The Partitions of Memory: The Afterlife of the Division of India* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001); Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India’s Partition* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998); and Gyanendra Pandey, *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism, and History in India* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

16. This type of literature appeared most prominently within the South African context. For example, see Christopher J. Colvin, “‘Brothers and Sisters, Do Not Be Afraid of Me’: Trauma, History, and the Therapeutic Imagination in the New South Africa,” in Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone, eds., *Contested Pasts: The Politics of Memory* (New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 153–68. For a critique, see Susannah Radstone, “Reconceiving Binaries: The Limits of Memory,” *History Workshop Journal* 59:1 (Spring 2005), pp. 134–50.

17. Ian Talbot, *Freedom’s Cry: Popular Dimension in the Pakistan Movement and Partition Experience in North-West India* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 45.

18. By “presentist use of history,” we refer to a twofold cultural and historical approach that, on the one hand, entails the introduction of contemporary interpretations into past narratives and, on the other hand, the application of those narratives to present-day political and cultural debates.

19. The term “historical films” refers to feature films that either set their narratives during a specific historical era or fictionalize historical events.

and distribution, pose to the successful use of film as a source in historical research.²⁰ Narrative and marketing necessities often require a glossy and smooth appearance that, in Rosenstone's words, "serves to suppress rather than raise questions."²¹ The sublime linearity and Manichean characterizations of most film narratives conflict with the tortuous, and sometimes contradictory, unfolding of history. In other instances, sociopolitical and financial considerations explain deliberate misrepresentations, omissions, or selective emphases in films that are designed to convey an openly political interpretation of the past—or to fit what producers believe their audiences would wish to see. However, the attention historians give to films too often concentrates on protecting their discipline from distortion, rather than explaining these very distortions as historical phenomena in their own right that are closely connected to the context of the film's production.

This article examines the presentist use of history in contemporary Indian cinema—or cinema as a part of the "history war" in India—with a particular focus on two recent films: Deepa Mehta's *Earth* (1998) and Ashutosh Gowariker's 2001 *Lagaan* (Land Tax), known internationally as *Lagaan: Once Upon a Time in India*. This article seeks to consider these films' relationship not only with the historical periods they represent but also, and more importantly, with the contemporary period during which they were produced. While cinema's presentist use of history is widely acknowledged, historians are only just beginning to explore its complexities in the Indian cultural context. Thus, the aim of this article is in part methodological—to encourage scholars to consider the multifaceted relationship between film and history by moving away from the existing obsession with the accuracy of historical representation to—instead—analyzing film *as* history.

For this reason, our article deliberately does not focus on films relating to a particular period of history. After all, we wish to avoid the temptation of joining the now mostly bankrupt debate over accuracy. For example, *Earth* could undoubtedly be compared to other recent films that deal with Partition, such as Anil Sharma's *Gadar: Ek Prem Katha* (Mutiny: A love story, 2001) and Chandraprakash Dwivedi's *Pinjar* (The cage, 2003). Yet, such straightforward comparisons would inevitably draw attention to these films' relationship with the historical periods they claim to represent, not with modern-day India, of whose historical and political discourses they partake. A similar point can be made for *Lagaan*, whose representation of

20. Robert Rosenstone, ed., *Revisioning History: Film and the Construction of a New Past* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); and Robert Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001).

21. Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past*, p. 11.

the British raj could perhaps be compared to Ketan Mehta's extravaganza of the Mutiny of 1857 titled *Mangal Pandey* (The rising: Ballad of Mangal Pandey, 2005). Both represent resistance to colonial rule—one non-violent and the other violent. Instead, by focusing on two films that discuss different historical events, we can discuss what both films do with the past, rather than simply how they represent it.

Comparing *Earth* and *Lagaan* is all the more engaging because the two films are, in many ways, opposites. One film (*Earth*) shuns the conventions of Bollywood cinema while the other (*Lagaan*) embraces them; one promotes an openly left-wing political agenda and interpretation of history while the other oscillates between Marxist overtones and a very conservative image of society; one targets an elite high-brow Indian and international audience while the other tries to court India's masses. Although the social messages of both films contain some parallels, considerable differences exist in the political, ideological, and moral implications of the two works. Both films are concerned with modernity, yet this phenomenon assumes polar opposite characteristics in each film. In spite of these differences, it is our contention that *Earth* and *Lagaan* share the common intent to advocate a more inclusive Indian society through a presentist use of history.

A casual observer may be inclined to assume that the significance of the two films lies in their alleged ability to manipulate their audiences' understanding of India's past. This is especially the case if one approaches understanding *Lagaan* as being a reinterpretation of the origins and motivations of Indian nationalism and independence, and *Earth* as a revision of the history of the Partition into India and Pakistan.²² Instead, by offering detailed analyses of the texts, the remainder of this article attempts to demonstrate that the significance of these films lies not just in the specific representation of the historical periods to which they refer but rather how each filmmaker chooses to represent an innocent past with a view of constructing a "presentist" discourse on the challenges contemporary India faces.

Earth: The Construction of Modernity as Lost Innocence

Based on Bapsi Sidhwa's novel, *Earth* is a fictional story situated against the backdrop of real historical events. Set in Lahore in the time just preceding

22. Among such contributions are Sharmistha Gooptu, "Cricket or Cricket Spectacle? Looking Beyond Cricket to Understand *Lagaan*," *International Journal of the History of Sport* 21:3/4 (June-September 2004), pp. 533–48; Chandrima Chakraborty, "Bollywood Motifs: Cricket Fiction and Fictional Cricket," *ibid.*, pp. 549–72; and Nissim Mannathukarren, "Subalterns, Cricket, and the 'Nation': The Silences of *Lagaan*," *Economic and Political Weekly* 36:49, December 8–14, 2001, pp. 4580–88.

British disengagement and the Partition of India, the film follows the lives of a wealthy Parsi family (the Sethnas), their young daughter Lenny, and her Hindu nanny Shanta. Shanta has many suitors—Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh working-class boys who compete for her attention in Lahore’s public parks. Eventually, the expectation pervading the city deteriorates into foreboding, and Lahore’s traditional kite duels are replaced by more gruesome confrontations between Hindus and Muslims.²³ Lenny and her family maintain the illusion of possible, and perhaps necessary, neutrality as the promise and threat of Partition all too suddenly transform former friendships into hatred.

In the increasingly violent atmosphere, Shanta chooses one Muslim, Hasan the masseur, over another, an ice-candy man named Dil Nawaz. Jealousy adds to the vicious cycle of attack and retaliation that grips Lahore, as Muslim and Sikh citizens react to what seems to be happening elsewhere, in the corridors of power or in the Sikh strongholds of eastern Punjab. The arrival of a train laden with the bodies of Muslims murdered by Sikhs finally turns Muslim anger into an outright riot against Sikhs and Hindus. During this confusion, Dil Nawaz abuses Lenny’s trust to betray Shanta to the mob. *Earth* ends with the division of the territory that was once British India and a now adult Lenny sitting alone among wind-swept cenotaphs, rundown reminders of the British raj, asking herself whether the violence associated with Partition was worth it.

By employing Lenny as the narrative’s voice, Mehta is able to assume a perspective that is concerned but also neutral in the film’s main dispute. While a first-person adult narrative would admit a (legitimate) bias and a third-person omniscient narrative would imply a more direct responsibility (in the filmmakers’ judgment), the child narrative offers the filmmaker a way of commenting on the issues from an “innocent” standpoint. However, the ending of the film reveals the narrator to be the adult Lenny, not her eight-year-old self. Thus, if the events described in the film are still the memories of an eight-year-old, the adult’s perspective makes *Earth* a contemporary as much as a historical narrative. Unlike the straightforward allegories of *Lagaan*, it is through this mechanism that Mehta achieves the link between history and the present.

The eight-year-old’s point of view is also essential to the film for another reason: Lenny is four times an outsider because she is not only a child and a Parsi but also upper middle-class and affected by a physical

23. Kite duels were a tradition of the spring festival of Basant in Lahore. Thousands of people, irrespective of religious orientation, would fly their kites, using wire or special strings to attack and cut opponents’ kites in mid-air. In *Earth*, Mehta uses the festival in a musical sequence to represent Lahore’s cultural harmony before Partition.

disability. Her family is wealthy and educated, with friends of all religions and ethnicities. This means that Lenny is allowed a privileged childhood. For example, she is doted on, allowed and encouraged to study, and spared the trauma of an early arranged marriage. By adopting Lenny's perspective, Mehta can acknowledge contemporary expectations, casting a contemporary eye on the past without being anachronistic. It also allows the director to make a point about social and gender relations in modern India. Lenny's disgust at the marriage of her young friend to a much older man is Mehta's disgust at this practice, already amply voiced in her other works *Fire* (1996) and *Water* (2005). Lenny's lack of prejudice lets her see a common humanity before she sees different religions. Mehta advocates a return to this approach in contemporary times.

Earth is a story about human harmony expressed through the desire for fairer gender, social, and religious relations. Although caste is surprisingly bypassed, by focusing on the relationships of characters from different religious and social backgrounds, Mehta seems to suggest that people are victims of artificially fabricated political tensions rather than the cause or catalyst of such tensions. In that sense, the film is based on the premise that religious and ethnic relations in Lahore deteriorated only after and as a result of Partition. Mehta firmly lays responsibility for the violence that accompanied Partition and, by extension, for the subsequent history of tense Indo-Pakistani relations, at the feet of the British.

The film begins with Lenny's adult voice recalling, "Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs, who had lived together as one entity for centuries, started to clamor for pieces of India for themselves. The arbitrary line of division the British would draw to carve up India in August 1947 would scar the subcontinent forever." Furthermore, this carries the arguable implication that reasoned negotiations among all sides, as opposed to the "arbitrary" decisions of the British, would have gotten different results. Immediately afterward, a polite conversation around the Sethnas' dinner table hinges on the same point. A joke about British introduction of syphilis in India leads to an argument between a Sikh guest and a British bureaucrat, who taunts the native with the promise of bloody confrontation between Muslims and Sikhs. Therefore, Mehta's is not a simple generalization of a complex historical event; rather, she presents it as a politically charged revisionist discourse.

Mehta's reading of the history of Hindu-Muslim relations in India stems from a particular left-of-center, nationalist vision that has tended to put the blame squarely on the colonial regime.²⁴ This is, as more-recent historical research has demonstrated, a gross oversimplification because

24. As an example, see Bipan Chandra, *Communalism in Modern India* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1987).

religious tensions predated colonial rule and were certainly not British inventions, although they may have been transformed and exploited by the British through their policies. Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs may have lived side by side for centuries, but hardly as one entity.²⁵ Similarly, the left-liberal reading of the history of Partition blames elite political manipulation and the retreating colonial regime for the decision to divide India.²⁶ This ignores the evidence of grassroots-level support and mass participation in the partition campaigns in 1946–47 in both Punjab and Bengal.²⁷

Lahore, in particular, with its dynamism but also with the difficulties of a frontier city, was the venue of religious struggles well before 1947. It was, after all, the city where the Pakistan resolution and the “two nation theory” were endorsed by the Muslim League in 1940. The Muslim League’s mass mobilization campaign had begun in July 1944 after Muhammad Ali Jinnah’s visit to Lahore to attend the Muslim League Council meeting, where the founder of Pakistan had been greeted by huge crowds. After this meeting, Muslim feudal chiefs, *sajjad nishins* (custodians of Sufi shrines), and religious *pirs* (spiritual guides) had been pressed into the political service of the Muslim League to garner mass support for the Pakistan demand. This was more or less accomplished by the election of 1946 in which the Muslim League received a majority of the Muslim vote in Punjab but was excluded from the coalition government cobbled together by Unionist Party leader Khizr Hyat Khan. The resultant Muslim frustration erupted into mass protests against the Unionist government of Punjab from January 1947 onward, more than six months before the Partition. For two months, thousands of Muslims protested in the streets of Lahore, observed strikes, picketed in front of shops and government offices, and clashed with the police. The riots started in Lahore from around March, when Muslims attacked Hindu properties and Hindus retaliated with bombs and stabbings.²⁸ In other

25. For evidence of Hindu-Muslim conflicts in pre-colonial India, see Cristopher A. Bayly, *Origins of Nationality in South Asia: Patriotism and Ethical Government in the Making of Modern India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 210–37.

26. For such views, see Sumit Sarkar, “Popular Movements and National Leadership, 1945–1947,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 17:14–16, April 1982, pp. 677–89; and Partha Chatterjee, “The Second Partition of Bengal,” in Partha Chatterjee, ed., *The Present History of West Bengal* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997).

27. For Punjab, see Talbot, *Freedom’s Cry*. For Bengal, see Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, “Mobilizing for a Hindu Homeland: Dalits, Hindu Nationalism, and the Partition of Bengal (1947),” in Mushirul Hasan and Nariaki Nakazato, eds., *The Unfinished Agenda: Nation Building in South Asia* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers and Distributors, 2001), pp. 151–95; and Taj ul-Islam Hashmi, *Pakistan as a Peasant Utopia: The Communalization of Class Politics in East Bengal, 1920–1947* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1992).

28. Talbot, *Freedom’s Cry*, pp. 30–47; David Gilmartin, *Empire and Islam: Punjab and the Making of Pakistan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 186–22.

words, communal relations in Lahore did not change overnight with the announcement of Partition, as conceptualized in *Earth*.

The question is not simply one of accuracy, much less realism. Instead, it is why does Mehta prefer this particular reading of Partition history? Mehta is a Toronto-based *engagé* Indian filmmaker, admired abroad as well as in her home country. She is a gritty and insightful director who can reject the more escapist, spectacular aspects of Bollywood without renouncing a truly personal Indian style. Her previous film, *Fire*—the first in an “elements series,” which has just been completed with the release of *Water* (2006)—was an outspoken condemnation of a contradictory democracy in which a world of difference exists between social classes, urban and rural environments, and men and women. In other words, Mehta is accustomed to criticizing aspects of Indian society, and thus does not necessarily need to blame the British for its ills.

Indeed, even in *Earth*, Indian politicians are strongly chastised for “playing God under the fanned ceilings of Lahore Hotel” in the debacle following Independence. Nehru’s voice on the radio seems a world away from Lahore, his famous “tryst with destiny” speech placed alongside the worst barbaric atrocity of the film, further stigmatizing politicians who “speak with such forked tongues.” The passive neutrality of the Sethnas completes a picture of the Indian elite as a guiltily detached and self-centered oligarchy. Not incidentally, Nehru’s speech is in English and the Parsi family insists on speaking English. The appeasement of the foreigner and adoption of their model are seen as responsible for many of India’s ills. There is undoubtedly a specific ideological underpinning behind Mehta’s judgment of British occupation and disengagement; yet, there is more than politics involved. The film needs a constructed idyllic representation of pre-Partition Lahore in order to argue that contemporary India should, and can, resolve its many divisions that supposedly originated from the experience of Partition.

Mehta’s premise, critical of the British but also of the Indian elite, is tantamount to advocating better relations between Hindus and Muslims, and therefore between India and Pakistan. This is in keeping with the recent trend in left-liberal interpretations of Partition history, where the “causes” of Partition have become less important because there already seems to be a consensus as to who is to blame. Thus, more emphasis is placed on the “experience” of Partition in which “violence” is the dominant theme. As historian Gyanendra Pandey argues, “The ‘truth’ of the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 lay, at least for its victims, in the violence done to them.” The significance of this violence for the post-colonial nation is that it has become “the marker of the boundaries of the reconstituted community, even as the (new) community is reified into one of ancient origin.”

What this generates is a discourse of revenge in which memories of rape, murder, and forced conversions—depicted in abundance in *Earth*—acquire salience.²⁹ But this historiography is not grounded in a temporality of retribution. After all, it shows that both Hindus and Muslims perpetrated the same kind of violence on each other, thus necessitating the reconstruction of a new history of violence as a tool for reconciliation.

Where the historian ends, the filmmaker takes over. What Mehta invents as a way out of this cycle of violence and communal hatred is an imagined pre-Partition affable society. Thus, the harmonious atmosphere of pre-Partition Lahore becomes not just a narrative ploy for Mehta but also proof that Indian people, uncorrupted by the opportunism and greed of politicians and religious leaders, can live together. Even though the city never existed in that form, the audience can identify Mehta's Lahore as both memory and aspiration, past and future. There is little doubt, then, that *Earth* tackles the issues of gender relations, social structure, religious tolerance, and national identity from a historical perspective but with a presentist purpose. Mehta's representations of the events of 1947 do convey a political interpretation of those events, but their key aim is to advocate a socially more progressive and cohesive modern India.

However, a number of problems remain with Mehta's presentist use of history. First, there is the problem of accuracy and misinformation. As we have argued so far, the accuracy of so-called "historical films" is something of a false concern because historians are misguided in expecting from films, and applying to them, the academy's standards of empirical rigor. As we have suggested, simply posing this question creates an unnecessarily limited approach to film as being only a historical source, and neglects the relationship between the historical film and its context of production. Nonetheless, the extent to which a film conveys misleading histories is still an issue, and *Earth* certainly has the potential to mislead audiences.

Second, the role of the British in *Earth* is not free from potential contradictions. In an interesting parallel with *Lagaan*, the film *Earth* portrays the British as being guilty in their occupation of India, as much as for their hasty disengagement from it. However, British departure in *Lagaan* signifies harmony, whereas in *Earth* it signifies chaos. Was the English guest of the Sethnas indeed right when he foresaw the internecine struggles of the post-colonial era? No matter how much Mehta blames the British for the "arbitrary line of division," one cannot avoid feeling that her argument is, at best,

29. Gyanendra Pandey, "Community and Violence: Recalling Partition," *Economic and Political Weekly* 32:32, August 9–15, 1997, pp. 2037–52.

ambiguous. Furthermore, Mehta fails to reconcile her very construction of the past as a place of innocence with her own critical, progressive views on gender, social relations, tradition, and religion. The result is the unresolved paradox of a past that appears to be at once innocent and unjust.

Third, there is a problem in the extent to which Mehta's narrative emphasizes jealousy and the desire for personal revenge. It is clear to the audience that Dil Nawaz betrays Shanta not because she's a Hindu but rather to seek revenge for his murdered sister and against Hasan, whom Dil Nawaz also eventually kills. Thus, as is so often the case, films favor the temptation of indulging the audience with two-dimensional human emotions over the fear of disturbing viewers with a powerful but uncompromising political message. Not incidentally, the film's Western trailer states "JEALOUSY KNOWS NO LIMITS" in white characters on a full-size black screen. Yet, this conventional explanation for the breakdown in the lives of individuals narrated in the film does not translate into a suitable explanation for the widespread turmoil in Lahore in which those lives are framed. A film that begins with the promise of a subtle investigation into the corrupting influence of politics, ends with a melodramatic explanation that favors the individual over the collective and ignores the environment of communal distrust and violence that preceded Partition. Much more than Mehta's partially inaccurate representation of history, her emphasis on jealousy obfuscates the film's overall interpretation of the period and greatly weakens its potential to explain the political mistakes committed on the eve of the Partition of India that cost hundreds of thousands of human lives.

Lagaan: The Construction of Modernity as Regained Innocence

Lagaan has been a much talked about film. Its immense commercial success, its nationalist undertones, and its role as a B/Hollywood cross-over have fascinated both critics and scholars alike, who have sought to understand the roots of its popularity. The centrality of cricket in its plot, as well as in Indian popular culture, has been correctly identified as a realistic, yet not exhaustive, explanation for its commercial success. Scholars have also questioned the concept of nationalism and the idea of "nationhood" inspired by *Lagaan*, both as points of political debate and also potential reasons for its popularity. *Lagaan* has even entered the historiographical debate with historians and critics finding in the film either the tropes of traditional nationalist culture or, as Chandrima Chakraborty has argued, a Bollywood example of the "subaltern studies" school.³⁰

30. Chakraborty, "Bollywood Motifs," pp. 549–72.

Yet, neither of these explanations can fully explain *Lagaan*'s triumph at home. Furthermore, neither concept can elucidate why Gowariker's film also found popular acclaim and prizes abroad, culminating in its nomination for an Academy Award. Perhaps scholars have underestimated the aesthetic beauty and endless charm of an underdog story. There is also little doubt of an increase in Western audiences' interest in South Asian cinema, as evidenced by the success of films such as *Monsoon Wedding* (Mira Nair, India, 2001), *Fire*, and *Earth*. This interest can also be seen through Western films that either borrow the Bollywood style, such as *The Guru* (Daisy von Scherler Mayer, USA, 2002) or those that discuss narratives of encounter between Europeans and Asians, such as *East Is East* (Damien O'Donnell, U.K., 1999); *Bend It Like Beckham* (Gurinder Chadha, U.K., 2002); and *Anita and Me* (Metin Hüseyin, U.K., 2002). Nonetheless, it is clear that both the relationship between cricket and popular culture and the concept of nation are central to understanding *Lagaan* itself, as much as its success.

Lagaan is a fictional story set during the era of the British raj—1893 to be precise—in a princely state.³¹ If the period map shown at the beginning of the film is any indicator, the film's storyline is located somewhere in central India above the Ceded Districts and Berar, in what was then known as the Central Indian Agency, that is, present day Madhya Pradesh state. The villagers of Champaner live a simple life with hard but honest toil in the fields, pious devotion to the gods, and patient tolerance of both drought and the invasive presence of the nearby British cantonment.³² The cantonment is led by the arrogant and cruel Captain Russell, who tries to humiliate the raja, Puran Singh, by forcing him to eat meat, and eventually doubles the villagers' tax. As the villagers plead for leniency, the officer taunts them with a bet—the whole province will be exempt from tax for three years if they can beat the British in a game of cricket but, if they lose, they will pay triple *lagan*. The headstrong hero Bhuvan accepts, and sets off to conquer the white man's game, the symbol of the latter's cultural superiority. Helped by his devoted girlfriend Gauri, Bhuvan slowly overcomes the mistrust of his peers to build a team. Irresistibly drawn by Bhuvan's raw

31. The British ruled India in two ways. Part of it was ruled directly by a governor general and these territories were known as "British India." The rest of India was constituted into "princely states" where Indian princes were nominally in charge, but they too had to acknowledge British paramountcy, pay annual tributes, and govern with the advice of a British resident in their courts.

32. A cantonment usually refers to a temporary military installation, although in British India these often became associated with permanent garrisons. By the early-20th century, every major city in British India featured a permanent cantonment.

rage and exoticism, Captain Russell's own sister, Elizabeth, lends a helping hand and a cricket ball to teach the peasants the game. The second half of the film is devoted entirely to the cricket match, during which the villagers triumph over their colonizers, just as the monsoon delivers its rewards to the village. Surpassed at their own game and humiliated, the British disband their cantonment while Gauri gets her man, Bhuvan. Elizabeth, the compassionate colonizer, is left to her own grief.

Lagaan is quite different from *Earth* in terms of both style and subject matter. In the best Bollywood tradition, Gowariker's film has something for everyone—an inspirational hero, a deliciously vile enemy, no less than two love triangles, an underdog's triumph, singing, dancing, tears, laughter, and beautifully crafted suspense. It has the narrative structure of a traditional fairy tale, with an omniscient narrator—Indian acting legend Amitabh Bachchan—opening and closing the film. The ending, in which the Champaner heroes fade out of focus and out of history, reinforces the impression that what we have just seen is not a historical film, as clearly is the case with *Earth*, but rather a mythological epic.

The use of history in both *Lagaan* and *Earth* is similar. Both Gowariker and Mehta, in fact, use the past to construct the image of a cohesive Indian society to be applied not only to the historical period each film represents but also to contemporary India, in which both films were released. As with *Earth*, *Lagaan* offers the audience an innocent and idealized past. However, in *Earth*, modernity is constructed as being a threat to this innocent and idealized past, whereas in *Lagaan*, modernity needs to be embraced to retain innocence and safeguard tradition. In *Lagaan*, the cricket match—a phenomenon of mass spectatorship—confirms that the colonized have to play and beat the colonizers at their own game.

Gowariker employs a straightforward allegory to link past and present. Whether we interpret *Lagaan* as a nationalist or subaltern example of what we could term Indian “cinematic historiography,” it is not hard to see Champaner as being an allegory of India as a whole. Champaner is deliberately kept nondescript in order to perform this role. Within this broader allegory stands the even more obvious allegory of the cricket team—a unifying symbol par excellence in India. The present-day Indian national cricket team is called “Team India” and usually includes players from throughout India's diverse society. This metonymy is pushed further by the composition of the cricket team in *Lagaan*, which, even though it comes from one small village in central India, includes Hindus, a Muslim, a Sikh, and, in a final momentous twist, even a *dalit*.

First, Ismail, a Muslim villager, joins the team late amid the hostility of other players, who warn him that Bhuvan will never accept a Muslim. However, the ecumenical Bhuvan embraces Ismail, whose contribution will be

crucial to the team's success. It is interesting that while Ismail may be a "token" Muslim, he is also a very pious man, rejecting the mainly Western identification between religion and fanaticism. Secondly, Sikh fast bowler Ram Singh wanders in, seeking revenge against the British in whose army he had served and, implicitly, simultaneous rehabilitation for this very act of collaboration. Third, successfully defying the mutiny of his team-mates and the condemnation of the village elders, Bhuvan recruits an unknowingly talented spin bowler, the *dalit* Kachra. As these examples show, *Lagaan* argues strongly for an inclusive Indian society that embraces its minorities and breaks the limiting shackles of class and caste for its own collective good and well-being.

The choice of villain in the film also points to an inclusive political discourse. The anti-hero is not an evil raja, a greedy businessman, or a natural cataclysm, but rather the *firanghees* (foreigners) who are depicted as being pompous and unnecessarily violent. Thus, the enemy is wisely chosen to unify the Indian characters in the film and their audiences in India's cinema halls. The difference between Indians and foreigners is made explicit immediately by contrasting Captain Russell's hunting party with the vegetarian ethos of Raja Puran Singh. Choosing the British as enemies also allows the film to be inherently uplifting. The audience, privileged by its own historical hindsight, can rejoice at the fact that the British have indeed been expelled from India. The foresight of many a character in the film winks at the audience and at the memory of the struggle for independence. For example, Bhura, the seer, prophesizes the colonizers' eventual hasty and undignified exit. When Captain Russell beats and stamps on the local blacksmith, the victim foretells the non-violent action of the Gandhian movement by replying—"No matter how thick, the sole will wear out and the nail will prick." The film locates the Gandhian technique of non-violent resistance in a historical period several decades before Gandhi actually made it popular as an instrument of popular protest in India. This is demonstrated in the film by the crowds of people descending from the hills to watch the cricket match wearing white cotton garments clearly reminiscent of *khadi*—the white hand-spun cotton cloth that became the unofficial uniform for volunteers in Gandhi's non-violent movements several decades later.

However, while the social inclusiveness of *Lagaan* is indeed progressive, the moral and political structure of this new and enlightened order is distinctly conservative. This is the most significant difference with *Earth*, which seems to be more left-wing, more critical of Indian politics, and more ambitious and urgent in its chosen topic. This is evident in all aspects of social and political life—from religion to social relations, and from gender relations to the practice of politics. *Earth* had altogether banned religion from the social life of its characters, relegating it to the powerful but negative

role of a divisive and destructive force. In contrast, *Lagaan* makes religion and religiosity absolutely central to its narrative. Mehta had avoided all scenes of religious practice, except the comic sequence of Dil Nawaz caricaturing a *pir* having a telephone conversation with God. On the contrary, piety is essential to a complete and fulfilling life in *Lagaan*, and Gowariker builds several central moments around religion and the quest for divine intervention. Raja Puran Singh, a potentially ambiguous character because of his closeness to the British, is definitively identified as being an enlightened ruler thanks to his devoutness. Even Elizabeth is positively characterized by her eagerness to do a *puja* (Hindu religious offering). As mentioned earlier, Ismail's devoutness is represented as central to his character's moral and, hence, physical strength. In contrast, Captain Russell is ultimately punished for his hubris. Thus, it is not a specific religion, but rather religiosity, which is central in *Lagaan*.

If the emphasis on religion is not in itself a conservative element, it definitely justifies conservative social, political, and gender relations. Unlike *Earth*, *Lagaan* is certainly not a feminist film. Rather, it affirms the importance of women within their traditional, male-defined roles of mother, wife, and temptress. In essence, conventional gender roles within society are upheld in the film. The men fight, and the women support the men and are in charge of domesticity. There are three prominent women in the film, each covering conservative female roles associated with predictable and stereotypical female virtues. Bhuvan's mother plays perhaps the strongest of the female roles. She constantly gives him strength; she is a wise and highly spiritual matriarch who looks out to the skies and leads the village in praying for rain. As in the proper traditionalist family the film advocates, Bhuvan returns her support with unquestioning loyalty, especially regarding her choice of bride for him. This is represented not as interference but rather as justified deference to the elders' wisdom. The second female character is Gauri, the female lead, who gives Bhuvan unconditional love and inordinate amounts of food. In return for her devotion, she only expects his loyalty—a virtue that is questioned, though never seriously, by Bhuvan's relationship with Miss Elizabeth. Elizabeth represents temptation, albeit without the back-stabbing qualities conventional cinema has taught us to expect of such characters. Despite being a positive character, Elizabeth is the only woman in the film not associated with food or fertility, condemning her to a lifetime of solitude. Although women are agents in *Lagaan* and instrumental in the villagers' triumph, they act in gender-specific ways. This is perhaps best epitomized by the scene in which the men are lost in futile despair while the women show feminine resourcefulness by praying at the temple. Thus, unlike in *Earth*, strict gender roles, and the institutions that govern them, are upheld.

The representation of government is similarly traditionalist. While British rule is rightly seen as being oppressive, the raja is a paternalistic figure who upholds traditional Indian and Hindu values. There is no criticism of his lack of resistance against the British, and no chastising of his rivalry with neighboring Indian princes that actually made British rule possible. Perhaps the most surprising political ambiguity in the film is the lack of any criticism of the raja's own tax collection. Although Bhuvan at one point questions whether the village should be grateful for the raja's protection, he quickly accepts that his ruler is a blameless victim of the foreign occupiers. This greatly weakens the film's argument in favor of workers reaping the benefits of their sweat and toil. After all, Bhuvan's quasi-socialist tirades target only taxation by the colonial overlords, not the principle of social inequality. As the historical literature on the princely states suggests, Indian princes were no benevolent patriarchs, although there were some exceptions.³³ While some tried to resist the political pressures of the British residents and political agents, most of them succumbed to this pressure and actually collaborated in order to maintain their own rather conservative and oppressive rule in return for the formal acknowledgment of British paramountcy.

There is also no questioning whatsoever of the leadership of the benign village chief. Although his decisions are occasionally challenged by Bhuvan, no criticism of the social hierarchy of the village is present in the film. Unlike in *Earth*, where politicians are clearly seen in a negative light, *Lagaan* supports the concept of a traditional hierarchical society. And, if the film clearly wishes for this society to be fair, its recipe for achieving this fairness is based on vague conceptions of unity, justice, and morality, not on radical reforms. The film does not even offer a veiled critical analysis of the social inequality and unfair distribution of wealth on which the raja's rule is based. While it can be argued that such a political discourse in an epic set in colonial India would be anachronistic, we have established that *Lagaan* has a presentist agenda and that Gowariker's film is, indeed, deeply anachronistic in most other aspects of its representation of history.

Caste is perhaps the only issue on which *Lagaan* appears to be more progressive than *Earth*, although it is also legitimate to question whether this truly is the case. For example, the recruitment of the disabled *dalit* Kachra to the village cricket team is rather problematic. First, Kachra possesses an extraordinary ability to play cricket, and there is no suggestion that negative attitudes toward him would change if he did not have such skill. The village's inclusiveness is therefore an interested humanitarianism, motivated by sporting talent rather than a moral belief in human equality. Second,

33. For details, see Ian Copland, *The British Raj and the Indian Princes* (Bombay: Orient Longman, 1982).

Kachra's skill with the ball exists not in spite of his disability but rather because of it, with the obvious complexities this entails. Third, as Sirivayan Anand has pointed out, Kachra—whose very name means “garbage”—is entirely passive.³⁴ For example, he does not speak and, in fact, is not even asked whether he wants to join the team or not. He is simply roped in to joining it. To Anand, this is but one symptom of a film that perpetuates an elitist, caste-conscious, and male-centered society, an enlightened dictatorship perhaps, but a dictatorship nonetheless.³⁵ Others have critiqued *Lagaan* for similar reasons, pointing to the clear subaltern relations between those the film is supposed to unite.³⁶

Although these criticisms are legitimate if not persuasive, we should not underestimate the significance of the inclusiveness of *Lagaan*'s narrative. First, we must consider that the subordination of character relations may owe more to respecting the conventional superiority of the hero than to a socially hegemonic political agenda. Second, it is arguable that a *dalit* spin bowler who has the skill to eliminate three opponents from the game with consecutive balls commands a great deal of admiration by a notoriously cricket-literate audience such as the Indian one, regardless of whether he is talkative or shy. This conveys an important message that all castes contributed, or are capable of contributing, to the nation. Third, it is not unreasonable to suggest that Kachra's passiveness—a state of almost constant fear hardly assuaged by triumph—is a testament to the very condition of subordination and discrimination in which he has lived his entire life. Thus, his submissiveness may be an indictment not of him, but rather of society itself. In fact, critics of *Lagaan* have struggled to accept that Gowariker's film is contradictory in many respects, including being both progressive and conservative, and subscribing to both subaltern and nationalist schools of history. *Lagaan* sacrifices progressive politics to the idea of a symbiotic inclusiveness of an innocent past. Perhaps it is in this ambiguity, which provides something for everyone both politically as well as cinematically, that the key reasons lie for *Lagaan*'s spectacular cinematic success.

The Presentist Use of History in Other Indian Films

Other recent Indian films have also addressed the divisions and contradictions of Indian society. Some, such as Aparna Sen's *Mr. and Mrs. Iyer*, are

34. Sirivayan Anand, “Eating with Our Fingers, Consuming Hindi Cinema and Watching Cricket,” *Himal South Asian* (Kathmandu, Nepal), February 2002. The article is available online at <<http://www.himalmag.com/2002/march/essay.htm>>.

35. *Ibid.*

36. Mannathukarren, “The Silences of *Lagaan*.”

not necessarily “historical films” but rather attribute a privileged role to the allegories of historical narratives. Indeed, there is a trend in this direction in recent Indian cinema. For example, *Mangal Pandey* tells the story of the first Indian mutiny of 1857, like *Lagaan*, choosing the British as the foreign enemy around which all the different souls of India can and must unite. The British bullet cartridge that enrages Mangal contains not only cow’s fat but also pig fat, simultaneously offending Hindus and Muslims alike. Thus, actor Aamir Khan’s latest heroic role links the unity of Hindus and Muslims to the very roots of Indian independence—an event usually associated instead with division.

Mangal Pandey also brings in *dalits* and courtesans, the two archetypal marginal groups of Indian society. It is a *dalit*, Nainsukh, who makes Mangal aware of the contaminated bullet cartridge and makes him realize that all Indians are “untouchables” within the power relations imposed by British colonial rule. When the civilian revolt starts, it is Nainsukh who takes the lead, thus including *dalits* in the cinematic narrative of Indian nationalism. A courtesan is also seen in male attire participating in the violent attacks on the *firanghees*. Toward the end of the film, Mangal, a conservative brahman, realizes the triviality of caste and status and actually marries a courtesan the night before his execution. The disruptive tropes of caste, gender, and class are thus appropriated into a narrative that seeks to bridge the hiatus between the elites’ perception of history and the masses’ consumption of it. An inclusive past is invented to rectify some of the imperfections of the present and to create, as Rochana Majumdar and Dipesh Chakrabarty have argued, a new democratic people’s culture in India.³⁷

However, Ravi Vasudevan has examined the other side of this filmic version of the “history war” by showing how Kamalahasan’s controversial film *Hey Ram* ingenuously projects a bold narrative of “Muslim bloodlust and Hindu trauma,” juxtaposed with the notion of “Mahatma [Gandhi’s] politics of [Muslim] appeasement.”³⁸ Despite an ambiguous conclusion, these are the themes that “return as irreducible features of the historical memory relayed by the film.”³⁹ Similarly, two other recent films situated during Partition, *Gadar* and *Pinjar*, offer more-predictable visions of the India-Pakistan conflict. While the opening of *Gadar* acknowledges the reciprocal atrocities of 1947 Punjab, the rest of this explicitly nationalist film stresses the contrast between unyielding Muslim hostility and Hindu

37. Rochana Majumdar and Dipesh Chakrabarty, “*Mangal Pandey*: Film and History,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 42:19, May 12–18, 2007, pp. 1771–78.

38. Ravi Vasudevan, “Another History Rises to the Surface: ‘*Hey Ram*’—Melodrama in the Age of Digital Simulation,” *ibid.*, 37:38, July 13–19, 2002, pp. 2917–25.

39. *Ibid.*

tolerance and forgiveness. Thus, while the film's ending advocates reconciliation, it is a peace effectively built on Pakistani surrender.

Pinjar is similarly ambivalent in its representation of the cycle of violence, although it is not as obviously political as *Gadar* despite an opening dedication to a whole list of historic Congress Party leaders. *Pinjar* does not discuss the politics of Partition but rather uses this traumatic period as a background for a melodrama about love and sacrifice, which never quite delivers on the promise to tackle issues of gender and tradition. As in the case of *Gadar*, the ending of *Pinjar* also embraces an ecumenical message, but this is fatally jeopardized by the film's characterization of Muslims as vindictive and even barbaric. Hence, these films show sympathy for victims on both sides but lack the political courage to draw from this sympathy a necessary re-evaluation of mutual responsibilities in the violence. Instead, they adopt a melodramatic tone that substitutes personal narratives for politics, and fall back on familiar and reassuring representational tropes, such as the jealous Muslim or the quick-to-anger Sikh.

Conclusion

This article has examined the presentist use of history in contemporary Indian cinema by focusing primarily on two recent films, *Earth* and *Lagaan*. We have argued that there appear to be opposing trends in Indian cinema, reflecting contemporary debates on national identity and the reconstruction of India's history. On the one hand, there are attempts to instil a newly reconstructed divisive past in India's collective memory propounded by Hindutva history, which explicitly marginalizes Muslims and *dalits* from this invented nation-space. On the other hand, the narratives in *Earth* and *Lagaan* appear to be "correctives" to this *Hindutva* history and belong to a conscious effort to combat and resolve divisive and potentially destructive issues in Indian society. Yet interestingly, the two films employ opposite approaches to convey their inclusive message. To explain, *Lagaan* smoothes over these issues in a narrative-appropriate fairy tale fashion, whereas *Earth* places them under a merciless spotlight. *Earth* offers no easy solutions, whereas the solution in *Lagaan* is inherent in human kindness and equivalent to a "well-struck six."⁴⁰ Indeed, if *Earth* offers a solution at all, it is through the need to learn from past mistakes and resulting tragedies, while *Lagaan* attempts to inspire audiences into action, diluting its progressive message with an overall conservative and traditionalist moral

40. In cricket, six runs constitute the maximum a batsman can score off a single ball. This occurs when the batsman hits the ball directly over the boundary rope and out of the field. *Lagaan*'s hero, Bhuvan, hits a crucial six off the last ball of the match to win the game for Champaner.

and political outlook. While *Earth* is more modern, Western, and secular in its approach, *Lagaan* takes a more ambiguous position upholding a tradition of spiritualism, morality, and ethical government.

Similarly, as we have shown, the two films share an idealistic representation of an innocent past, but their actual representations of this past differ. While both opt to depict an innocent inclusive society—an ideal to be replicated in the present—Gowariker’s representation takes on a more idealistic tinge than Mehta’s. Moreover, the two films also suggest opposite ways to safeguard innocence from the encroachment of a corrupting modernity. In *Earth*, modernity takes the form of colonization and its corollary, Partition: its remedy is a simple rejection of the colonial legacies. In contrast, modernity in *Lagaan* is shaped by its cultural artifacts (cricket); the Indian population needs to embrace and adapt this if it is to retain innocence, thus indicating the hybrid nature of Indian modernity. The inevitable acts of commission and omission in both films—that is to say, their selective focus on and interpretation of issues of religion, caste, gender, and sexuality—serve to construct India’s past and, by implication, its future in slightly contrasting ways. Both films are anchored in a post-colonial present, inventing a collective memory in the service of a particular vision of the post-colonial nation.

However, these dissimilarities aside, *Earth* and *Lagaan* share the same methodology of invoking a reconstructed memory of an idyllic and non-discordant past that can help refashion a harmonious future for India. This cinematic history consciously positions itself against the more divisive Hindutva version of history that tends to homogenize an aggressive Hindu majoritarian nationalism, at the expense of minorities such as Muslims and *dalits*. Yet, as this analysis has shown, the prescriptions found in these “correctives” to the Hindutva-style cinematic films do indeed differ, thus demonstrating Indian intellectuals’ attempts to come to grips with the dynamics of their country’s past and the implications of this complex past on its future. In this way, both *Earth* and *Lagaan* contribute to the evolving public career of history and “history wars” in contemporary India. More importantly, these films take history to the wider public involved in India’s democratic politics, and their reach is much longer than that of academic historians. Considering the growing popularity of Indian films internationally and the multi-million-person domestic audience for these films, the implications of cinema’s presentist use of history on India’s evolving construction of “nationhood” cannot be understated.