

Historicizing Presentism: Hindutva and Indian Version of Feminism in the Film, “Panipat: The Great Betrayal.”

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Abstract

There is a plethora of literature available on presentism in film adaptations of historical events in world cinema in general and Bollywood cinema in particular. The film "Panipat: The Great Betrayal (PGB) is no exception to this trend. This article delves into the political aspect of the film and postulates that this period epic is reflective of the contemporary political situation in India. Identity binaries of 'us' and 'them' are created by introducing oversimplified themes, including religion, gender, ethnicity, and nationalism. A shift of emphasis from secular nationalism to religious nationalism Hindutva as Indian political ideology can be observed through many Bollywood period movies in general and PGB in particular. The film PGB reflects the Indian version of feminism where the women are educated and professional, yet their purpose is to aid their male family members.

Keywords: Panipat, Nationalism, Islamophobia, Presentism, Bollywood, and Feminism.

Introduction:

The Bollywood film PGB, directed by Ashutosh Gowariker is a clear manifestation of presentism in contemporary Indian cinema. The film PGB revolves around the Battle of Panipat, fought between Ahmad Shah Abdali's forces and the forces of

Marathas in 1761. This paper explores how the evolving Nationalism in India and the Indian version of feminism are used as the essential tools to tell the Indian version of the story of the Panipat battle. Furthermore, the article explores how personality portrayals in PGB reflect xenophobia in general and Islamophobia in particular.

Review of Literature:

Anugyan Nag, in his article, "Panipat by Ashutosh Gowariker,"¹ has explained how the film moved away from the Muslim historical genre towards hyper-nationalism as the glorification of Hindus is shown through Marathas, and Muslims achievements are overshadowed. Maratha men represent masculinity and chauvinism, and on the other hand, the leading role of the female (Parvati Bai) portrays a modern approach and represents hyper-nationalism. The article explains how PGB reflects contemporary politics in India as it portrays Muslims as outsiders like the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA).

In the book *Panipat: 1761*, Tryambak Shankar Shejwalkar believes that the Marathas fought against an invader and not against the proponents of Islam.² Many Muslims were a part of the Maratha army, and no Hindu from the north sided with the Marathas during this battle, which shows it was not merely a fight for religious purposes. He also disagrees with the qualities of Bhau as narrated by Kashiraj and the Maratha chronicles. He termed Bhau as a shy and straightforward man and not proud or offensive. He also termed Panipat a 'national disaster' and not an individual failure. The character of Sadashivrao Bhau is inspired by Shejwalkar's book, *Panipat: 1761*, and explains how Sadashivrao Bhau in PGB is in contrast to the Maratha chronicles.

The article, "Misfitting: An Islamophobic (Film) Industry in a Secular State," written by Malini Mukherjee,³ deals with Islamophobia promoted through Bollywood films such as *Padmaavat* and PGB. According to her, Islamophobia in films like *Padmaavat* and PGB is advanced through the portrayal of Hindus and Muslims. Islamophobia has increased in Indian society due to the increasing communal differences. Such films

propagate the idea that Muslims are outsiders and must be ousted out of the country and promote Islamophobia.

In their article, "Cinema as an Element of a State's Soft Power System," Oliver Keune and Valeriya France (Keune and Frants, 2017)⁴ described cinema's importance as a soft power tool. Cinema can portray a positive image of a country. It also shapes people's political thought and boosts the economy of a nation. The authors have given examples of the USA, China, and Russia to describe how these states create a soft image through cinema. The article has enabled us to understand how India, just like other countries, uses cinema as a soft power tool to portray an image of Hindus and Muslims in a particular way.

In his book, *Ahmad Shah Abdali*, Ganda Singh⁵ has given the reasons behind the campaign of Abdali against the Marathas. The invitation of Shah Alam to Abdali also became a reason for his campaign against the Marathas. Similarly, he has also given the consequences of this battle in this book. The author has also given the details of Abdali's life and his campaigns to India. This book has aided in understanding the personality and life of Abdali as represented in the film and historical sources.

In the article, "Ahmad Shah Abdali's Designs over Punjab," Indu Banga (Banga, 1967)⁶ has narrated the reasons behind Abdali's campaign to Punjab. He divided his campaigns into three phases. In the first phase, his purpose was to explore Punjab; in the second phase, he wanted to bring Punjab under his administration, and in the final stage, he tried to keep his suzerainty over Punjab. Punjab was the bone of contention between Marathas and Abdali that created political tension. This article depicts the importance of Punjab for Marathas and Abdali. It has demonstrated the importance of Punjab for Abdali in history and the film.

In his article, "Main causes and the outcomes of the third battle of Panipat," Karmvir⁷ blames Maratha's expansion to Punjab as the immediate cause of the war. The primary reason behind the victory of Abdali, as stated by Karmvir, was the support from Shuja-ud-Daula. Moreover, the slow movement of Marathas and supply cutting by Afghans also contributed to their loss in the

battle. Anarchy, the rising power of the Marathas, internal conflict, Hindu domination, aggressive nature of Abdali, and the invitation of Abdali by Shah Waliullah were the significant causes of the battle. The fate of this battle weakened the power of Marathas. This article has aided my work by comparing the reasons for Abdali's invasion shown in the film and given in this article.

Stewart Gordon, in his book, *The New Cambridge History of India, vol. 2, The Marathas 1600-1800*,⁸ has explained the factors that resulted in their defeat at the hands of Ahmad Shah Abdali such as slow movement, poorly coordinated infantry and cavalry compared to the Afghans. This article helped analyze the factors that contributed to the defeat of Marathas and the way they are depicted in the film.

The Plot:

As the movie's title suggests, the movie is about the third battle of Panipat fought between the Afghan forces and the Marathas in 1761. The nephew of the eighth ruler of the Maratha Empire Balaji Baji Rao Peshwa (r 1720-1761) named Sadashivrao Bhau (1730-1761), led the Maratha forces, and the Afghans fought under the leadership of Ahmad Shah Abdali (c. 1722-1772). This chronicle of Sadashivrao Bhau is narrated by his wife, Parvatibai (1734-1763), and the story is told from her vantage point. Her character also provides a romantic relief amidst the tensions surrounding changing battlegrounds and war preparations. The film starts with her voice-over narrating the victory of Marathas against the Nizam of Hyderabad. The cold politics between the Marathas and the Afghans in the film landed them into the third battle of Panipat. The Maratha army marched towards north India under Sadashivrao Bhau to protect their motherland from the Afghan invasion,

Marathas had devised a great strategy in the initial phase but lost due to the delay in their plans and the betrayal faced at the hands of two rulers, Shuja-ud-Daula, the Nawab and Subedar of Oudh and *Wazir* of Delhi from 1754-1775, and King Aradhak Singh. Marathas lost the battle, but their dignity is still maintained as Ahmad Shah Abdali praised the valor of the Maratha in the battle through a letter.

The movie offers an oversimplified and unidimensional version of nationalism and feminism. The portrayal of the Marathas projects the eulogizing Hindutva, and the portrayal of Ahmad Shah Abdali demonizes the foreign invaders. The lens of presentism connects with the contemporary political situation in India aimed towards spreading Islamophobia and hatred between both communities.

Hindutva as the Central Theme of the Film

Though the film's title, "Panipat: The Great Betrayal," gives the impression that betrayal was the film's central theme, nonetheless, the screen timings of Sadashivrao Bhau reflect that patriotism in the form of religious nationalism was the central theme. Sadashivrao Bhau remained on the screen for more than 1 hour, whereas the traitors in PGB like Shuja-ud-Daula and King Aradhak Singh only remained for almost 8 and 6 minutes, respectively. Thus under the veil of betrayal, the film revives religious nationalism through patriotic Sadashivrao Bhau.

In their groundbreaking work on Bombay cinema, *Islamicate Cultures of Bombay Cinema*, Ira Bhaskar and Richard Allen postulate that the Bollywood industry advocated a secular image of the country through presenting the Muslim Historical genre in the films.⁹ Muslim Historical genre presented Muslim's culture during their glorification time. However, gradually the Bollywood industry moved away from secularism to staunch nationalism. Genres of movies are emerging where Muslims are demonized, and the debate is about nationalism and secularism. Anugyan Nag has also discussed in his article, "Panipat by Ashutosh Gowariker," that in the film PGB, the Bollywood industry has depicted a hyper-nationalistic perspective.¹⁰ This film is a clear reflection of moving away from the Bollywood industry from the Muslim Historical genre. This film was an attempt to revive the "Hindu-nationalistic past."¹¹ Considering the current political situation, the film PGB reflects the Hindutva ideology taken by political parties such as Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Hindutva refers to Hindu Nationalism but also has been termed fascism and conservatism. Revival and glorification of the Hindu past are a part of this ideology and promoted through the films.

Presentism and Character Portrayal in the Film

The Bollywood film industry has incorporated presentism to look into the past.¹² PGB reflects the ongoing legal battle over the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) passed five days after the film's release.¹³ The CAA excluded the Muslims and gave citizenship to Jains, Buddhists, Sikhs, Christians, Hindus, and Parsis who arrived in India before 2014. The film also terms the Muslim ruler of Afghanistan, Ahmad Shah Abdali as an outsider and the Marathas as landowners. The Marathas wanted to oust him out of India in the film, which justifies that presentism has a stronghold in the Bollywood film industry.

Binaries of good and evil, patriot and traitor, have been developed to construct stereotypical characters. A one-dimensional image of the characters has been presented in the film mainly through folk psychology (predicting and explaining other people's behavior) that reflects Character Theory. According to the Character Theory, a villain is stigmatized with a negative approach compared to the protagonist¹⁴ to build a particular narrative, and in PGB, a narrative against the Muslims has been built.¹⁵

Furthermore, this cultural identity perception affects the audience's behavior, emotions, and actions in a particular way.¹⁶ The Affect Control theory postulates that people's reaction depends on their expectations and depends upon three things: evaluation, potency, and activity.¹⁷ Either a character is bad or good, weak or strong, or active or lazy. The characters in the film are presented in this way because people expect them to be in the same way.¹⁸ In PGB, these theories have made their place as particular portrayals of characters reflect the filmmakers and the audience psyche. The political scenario in India has shaped the identities of the people. They have begun to look towards the Muslims as the 'other.' The film exaggerates the personality images and simplifies the boundaries of heroes and villains. It portrays a soft image of the Marathas through their facial features, makeup, and clothing that symbolizes peace, innocence, and spirituality.

In contrast, the Afghans wore *kohl* in their eyes and black dresses, which signifies darkness, evilness, death, and fear. The film also projects Abdali as an Arab rather than an Afghan.¹⁹ This portrayal makes the hero of one nation a villain of the

other.²⁰

1-Character Portrayal of Ahmad Shah Abdali:

Known as Ahmad Shah Baba, the leading figure in Pashtun nationalism who united the Afghans into one nation,²¹ Ahmad Shah Abdali was born in 1722.²² During the third battle of Panipat, Ahmad Shah Abdali was 39 years old, but the film depicts Abdali as an older man who quietly justifies why he won against a young patriot. He was an experienced man,²³ but the film portrays him as a naive, greedy plunderer and evil man. Ahmed Shah Abdali became the ruler of Afghanistan and Kandahar after the death of Nadir Shah.²⁴ He led six expeditions to India²⁵ and did significant damage to the power of the Marathas. His weaknesses have overshadowed the strengths of his character in the film. The portrayal of such a callous image of Ahmed Shah Abdali has roots in the Hindutva Ideology (strengthening the Hindu community) when the communal differences have increased.

PGB portrays Afghans as cowardly, inhumane, ruthless, and outsiders. This otherness in the film entirely justifies the contemporary political scenario, which treats Muslims as 'others,' outsiders, invaders, and Hindus as the people of the land. The Marathas use the word motherland repeatedly in the film, making them the native people. The debate of 'us and them' has begun to dominate the Bollywood industry²⁶ as Muslims have been termed invaders and inhumane in several films.²⁷

2-Character Portrayal of Surajmal Jat:

The film describes the ruler of Bharatpur, Surajmal Jat (r. 1755-1763), as a resisting person against the Marathas, and his portrayal faced a backlash from the *Jat* community. After the battle ended, he gave refuge to the Marathas.²⁸ The film depicts him as a traitor. He did not side with Marathas firstly because he got offended by Bhau as he did not agree to give him control over Delhi. Secondly, the policies the younger brother of Balaji Peshwa, Raghunathrao, displeased him²⁹ and became a reason for his siding with the Afghans. Surajmal Jat unwillingly paid revenue or *chaudh* to the Marathas and aided the Afghans by letting them pass through his territory.³⁰ The film does not highlight these factors for his betrayal as these depict the failure

of Maratha's policies and are a detachment from the revival of the glorious Hindu past.

3-Character Portrayal of Shuja-ud-Daula:

The ruler of Oudh Shuja-ud-Daula³¹ paid *chaudh* to the Marathas.³² He had a strongly disciplined and well-equipped army.³³ The Marathas offered him the seat of Wazir of Delhi,³⁴ and the Afghans put forward the cause of Islam and proposed him the seat of Delhi as Wazir.³⁵ He had to side with the Afghans as his territory was threatened by Afghans.³⁶ In his eyewitness account, The Bakhar, Kashiraj believes that Shuja-ud-Daula brought a small army and left behind most of his men to guard his territories.³⁷ The film highlights the support of Shuja-ud-Daula with Afghans as the primary cause of the defeat of Marathas. Betrayal is the primary reason in the movie that overshadows all the other factors leading to the loss of Marathas. It accomplishes the audience's expectations as they want to see Hindus powerful compared to the Muslims.

4-Character Portrayal of Sadashivrao Bhau:

In the light of the Maratha chronicles, Sadhashivrao Bhau was a bold man³⁸ who dictated terms such as during the battle, Surajmal Jat and the Wazir (Minister) advised Sadhashivrao Bhau to make a base at Delhi³⁹ and during his siege at Delhi before the battle of Panipat, they also suggested not to move everything from Delhi.⁴⁰ Bhau overlooked their suggestions and had to pay the price during the battle as it led to the detachment of Surajmal Jat in the battle.⁴¹ Sadashivro Bhau's character in the film has been inspired by the book *Panipat: 1761* written by T.S. Shejwalkar in which he describes Bhau as a straightforward and genuine person who treated everyone equally.⁴² The film depicts Sadashivrao Bhau as a well-experienced military general whereas Sadashivrao Bhau's mind state was 3/4th of a civil man and 1/3rd of a military man⁴³ as he had expertise in financial matters.⁴⁴ The character of Sadashivrao Bhau glorifies Hindu pride through his masculine and militant traits.⁴⁵ His character is relatable to the ideology of the right-wing parties in India that demonstrate the inclusion of Muslims under the Hindu rulers as their subjects.⁴⁶

Similarly, the Afghans enslaved almost 40000 Marathas

and killed them later on, but the film shows no such captivity as it maintains the dignity of the Marathas.⁴⁷ Many among them were traded as sex slaves by the Afghans.⁴⁸

Issues of Historicity in the PGB

History is a process of selection of facts by historians. However, the historical movies are not history but an artistic version of imagination about how the filmmakers would like to imagine the past. The success of a period film depends upon how the movie conforms to the viewer's expectations of how the past should have looked like. PGB overshadows the Muslim ruler's achievements and exaggerates Hindu achievements, reflecting the supremacy of Hindus over Muslims.

1-Historicity of Reasons behind Abdali's Invasion of India:

The film only shows a few reasons behind the invasion of Abdali. In the movie, Abdali invaded India due to the invitation received from Najib ud-Dawlah to save him from Marathas and lured him with the wealth of India. In the film, he kept an eye on the throne of Delhi, but the way he treated Delhi did not reflect any intentions of him to occupy the throne.⁴⁹ However, he invaded India because Shah Waliullah invited Ahmad Shah Abdali to save Islam from the Marathas owing to the declining conditions of the Mughal rule in India.⁵⁰ The Rajpoot Princes of Jaipur and Marwar also invited him to protect them from the Marathas.⁵¹ In his previous four invasions, Ahmed Shah Abdali secured Punjab for himself as it was a vital source of revenue for his kingdom.⁵² In 1758 he left his son Timur Shah Durrani (1748-1793) as the Governor of Punjab,⁵³ and Marathas made his son flee from Lahore.⁵⁴ Punjab supported his Empire financially.⁵⁵ G. S. Sardesai and Sir Jadunath Sarkar termed the taking over of Lahore as a Blunder on the part of Marathas as it caught them the wrath of Abdali.⁵⁶ Marathas also controlled the Peshawar region for some time.⁵⁷ Abdali had to take revenge from the Marathas as a significant source of revenue was cut off by them. Jihad against the infidels, wealth and territorial gains also motivated his invasion.⁵⁸ The former adviser to the Parwan governor in Afghanistan, Arwin Rahi believes that Abdali did what most of the rulers of his time were doing, and he invaded

India for the interests of his Empire.⁵⁹

2- Historicity of Reasons Behind the Maratha's Campaign against Abdali:

Conversely, it is ironic that the reasons behind the campaign of Marathas against Ahmad Shah Abdali given in the film are similar to the reasons in the literature⁶⁰ Peshwa had sent the Maratha military general, Dattaji Rao Shinde, to take revenue from Najib ad-Dawlah and expand Maratha's rule. Najib was unwilling to pay so the Marathas decided to take revenue forcibly from him.⁶¹ Dattaji Shinde, along with the forces of Holkar, confronted Najib ud-Dawlah and had to face defeat at the hands of the combined forces of Najib-ud-Daulah and Ahmed Shah Abdali. Dattaji lost his life in this skirmish.⁶² His death angered Marathas, and they wanted to stop Abdali from proceeding and plundering India.⁶³ Marathas also plundered India and killed people, but the films staged no such scene.⁶⁴ Moreover, Marathas and the Mughal Emperor had signed a truce in 1752.⁶⁵ The Marathas had to protect the Mughal Empire from external and internal foes in exchange for revenue.⁶⁶ The Mughals paid the revenue, so Marathas had to save Delhi from the forces of Ahmad Shah Abdali.⁶⁷

3-Historicity of Factors behind the Triumph of the Afghans:

The Afghans had a stronghold in the north,⁶⁸ which became the ultimate reason for their victory whereas, Peshwa paid less attention to the north and had offended the rulers of those areas.⁶⁹ They wanted to get rid of the rule of Marathas and joined hands with Ahmed Shah Abdali. Secondly, Marathas expanded their area of control up to Peshawar⁷⁰ and recruited more men to guard the extended area, burdening Maratha's resources.⁷¹ Thirdly, the Maratha army progressed slowly under Bhau as they adopted Mughal warfare techniques (moved with loaded tents, heavy cannons, guns, bullocks, women, children, pilgrims, and older people),⁷² which failed Bhau's many plans.⁷³

In contrast, Ahmad Shah Abdali had mobile artillery,⁷⁴ and all the officers were covered in armor.⁷⁵ During this campaign, Marathas laid a siege upon Delhi, and Sadashivrao Bhau sent several troops to take control of Delhi but they failed

⁷⁶ Bhau himself approached, and Marathas took control of Delhi, but it only increased their burden on resources.⁷⁷ When Sikhs rose against Afghans in Punjab, Abdali sent his men along with Ruhellas to fight, but the men of Dattaji Shinde made Afghans eat grass and beg for forgiveness.⁷⁸ Lastly, the location of Panipat did not prove beneficial to Marathas. The Ruhellas lived around these areas, and they were the allies of Ahmad Shah Abdali, so the Afghan army had no shortage of food or anything.⁷⁹ The director did not include these details in the film.

4- Historicity of Reasons Why Marathas Lost the Battle:

The Maratha army was exhausted,⁸⁰ and the harsh weather was also unsuitable for Marathas compared to the Afghans who grew up in such areas.⁸¹ There were inevitable miscalculations on the part of Marathas. They had calculated to cross the Yamuna before the onset of Monsoon rains but could not do so.⁸² Delhi as a base did not yield anything as it lacked food and fodder. The most important cause was that the Maratha army was divided compared to the Afghans, whom Abdali united. As a result, they disobeyed Sadashivrao Bhau.⁸³ Ibrahim Gardi followed the square formation, whereas the Marathas had no understanding of it, and they also did not follow Ibrahim Gardi's orders.⁸⁴ They did not follow the orders due to which the efforts of Ibrahim got wasted.⁸⁵ Ahmad Shah had an efficient espionage system, and the Afghans confiscated nearly all the letters of Bhau before they reached Nana Saheb.⁸⁶ The battle of Panipat was a collective failure but PGB did not show failures of Maratha's strategies.

Furthermore, at the end of the film, a letter from Ahmad Shah Abdali is read to the Peshwa, in which Ahmad Shah Abdali paid tribute to the brave Sadashivrao Bhau and the fearless Maratha forces. According to Ganda Singh, Ahmad Shah Abdali neither praised Bhau nor the Marathas.⁸⁷ Abdali wrote that Sadashivrao Bhau left no option other than war and demanded Punjab until River Sutlej. He also put forward certain conditions that Peshwa accepted and sent gifts and a robe of honor for Abdali.⁸⁸ The film ends on the note that this was the last invasion of Ahmad Shah Abdali, and he never returned to India. Whereas he invaded Punjab in 1767, due to the increased power of Sikhs in Punjab, he had to return to Afghanistan.⁸⁹ The selection of

specific facts and the omission of others was visible in the film, which demonstrates the subjective attitude of Bollywood filmmakers.

Feminism in the Bollywood Films

There are multiple gender-related messages in PGB. The song *Jai Mard Maratha* (the brave Maratha men) represents masculinity and male superiority.⁹⁰ It also reflected the psyche of the general public.⁹¹ The leading political role of Parvatibai in PGB reflects femininity. She negotiated with Sakina Begum, the daughter of the Mughal Emperor Humayun and a Mughal princess of a region in North of India. The film casts her a pivotal role to promote an image of Hindus that fits the modern-day world as, in actuality, women had no role to play in the political scenario during the times of Marathas.⁹² Parvatibai stood side by side with her husband, highlighting the importance of female leadership in today's world. According to Anugyan Nag, the voice-over was given to Parvatibai for two reasons. Firstly, Gowariker wants to move away from the representation of masculinity in historical films and, secondly, to attract a female audience.⁹³ According to the present literature, Parvatibai and the general's wives sat on an elephant throughout the battle, and she left the battlefield before the battle ended, guarded by 500 shepherds.⁹⁴ In PGB, all women fled safely, whereas, in the light of the sources, the Afghans enslaved many women.⁹⁵ Her political participation in the film depicts the changing response of society towards politics. It also gives an impression that Hindus treated women equally and portrays a positive image of Hindu culture to the world. However, the Afghan side has no female in the PGB that depicts the conservative society of Afghans. According to Malini Mukherjee, no female character on the Afghan side shows that familial life was unknown among the Afghans.⁹⁶ Apart from all this, the female voice-over also presents the changing attitude of people towards females in society. The awareness about gender equality has become the voice of the world. Hence, the Bollywood industry is also adapting to this change.

Conclusion

Historical films are always close to fiction, and it is more of a Cinematic imagination. However, the distortion of facts builds a narrative through films that most people believe is reality. People spend more time watching films than going through the books and gaining knowledge. The movie PGB sets an image in the minds of audiences that shapes the way they look at certain aspects of history. By portraying a sinister picture of Ahmad Shah Abdali, the movie sends its viewers an agenda forwarded by the Hindutva that Muslim rulers were cruel, harsh, and greedy. Presentism has been taken up by most of the writers as well as the filmmakers. They view the past through the present lens, where communal differences have enhanced the gulf between Hindus and Muslims. The film shows a unilateral image of Sadashivrao Bhau and Ahmad Shah Abdali. Such films circulate a message of Islamophobia and Nationalism. Hence, the filmmakers should make movies that treat different communities on the same grounds.

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