

Can The Terrorists Speak: Revisiting the 90's Bollywood and its Nuanced Understanding of the 'Terrorist' Question

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Citation: Bikiran Dhar et al. (2024). Can The Terrorists Speak: Revisiting the 90's Bollywood and its Nuanced Understanding of the 'Terrorist' Question, *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 30(1) 7834-7839

Doi: 10.53555/kuey.v30i1.10949

In January 1990, the Indian government appointed Jagmohan Malhotra as the Governor of Kashmir for the second time in response to the escalating violence of the separatist groups and the subsequent uprising in the valley. The chief minister of Kashmir, Farooq Abdullah, resigned at the same time, saying "he could not cooperate with a man who hates the guts of the Muslims" (qtd. In Ali 118). Jagmohan's objective was to restore order in the valley by any means:

Our first and foremost objective was to assert the authority of the state ... no matter what the costs, no matter what the sacrifices. Our resolve, our will, had to be made clear ... It had ... to be conveyed to all concerned, in no uncertain terms, that ... no soft underbelly of the state would be offered to punch or fool with. (Ali 118)

Ironically, the Indian cinematic lens (post-2014) prefers to project the typical terrorist with a simple one-note-destruction agenda where his hatred is primarily guided by religion. However, *Roja* (1992) was probably the first Indian film to address the conflict zone within the nation where the antagonist, more than a person, was an -ism. Meenakshi Bharat in *Shooting Terror* classifies the early Indian cinematic narrative on the subject of terrorism as 1) The pseudo-documentary style 2) Glorification of the Indian Army style (focusing on the Nationalist angle). It is interesting to observe that the latter garnered favourable response from the youth of 'New India' (post-2014), where breaking into the enemy home is applauded for a just cause. Early Indian postterrorist films (released in 1990s), however, approached the subject from a psychological perspective. Amaan, Altaaf, Meghna, Kripal these names are easily identifiable as common middle-class characters stuck in traffic on their way home after a long day. With flashbacks and flashforwards, the audience gets to know them layer by layer as imagined by the director and the camera. To hate, to understand, to sympathise or to seek answers were the choices left for the audience to discover at the end of the films. The directorial presentation of choices was soon replaced by an emotionally charged hall full of homogenous appeals for vengeance. The shift in the presentation of the terrorist-protagonists, was primarily motivated by the socio-political changes during and between the two timelines. The 90s Bollywood, primarily distinguished by the romantic chartbusters and heartbreak melodies, was deeply motivated by the turbulent bilateral relationship of the neighbours (India and Pakistan) in the larger political context and the nation's desperate attempt to restore order in the valley.

The Turbulent Nineties and the Faltering Peace Process

Both nations had high hopes for peace when Rajiv Gandhi and Benazir Bhutto resumed dialogues to transform and improve international relations. Rajiv Gandhi's China visit in 1989 was politically successful, and as a direct result, Indo-China border tension toned down during this period. The Kashmir situation, however, had slight improvement despite many meetings and agreements. Both nations kept blaming each other for militancy and terrorism. Pakistan admitted to provide moral support for the *Azadi*(independence) of Kashmiris, while the Indian Government accused it of terrorism. The difference, however, was more than semantic for the common people of the valley.

The apparent punishment-spectacle treatment of the Indian army to intimidate the militants started backfiring from the 1990s when dozens of unarmed protesters were shot down in the 'Gaw Kadal massacre'. The official report estimated 35 dead, whereas other reports found around 100 dead people in the event. An influential Kashmiri leader was killed by an unknown attacker in May 1990. Around 200,000 Kashmiris gathered for his funeral, which was surprisingly raided by Indian forces, resulting in the death of 60 people. Continuous violence, protests and disobedience ensued with the parallel repression programme of the state led by Jagmohan Malhotra until the complete breakdown of administration in the valley. The continuous violence came under international scanner, and the actions of the Indian Armed forces were heavily criticized:

Widespread human rights violations in the state since January 1990 have been attributed to the Indian army, and the paramilitary Border Security Force and Central Reserve Police Force ... Cordon-and-search operations are frequently conducted in areas of armed opposition activity ... Torture is reported to be routinely used during

these combing operations as well as in army camps, interrogation centers, police stations and prisons. Indiscriminate beatings are common and rape in particular appears to be routine ... In Jammu and Kashmir, rape is practiced as part of a systematic attempt to humiliate and intimidate the local population during counter-insurgency operations. (Ali 121)

Many international Islamist separatist groups, including the Afghan Resistance Movement groups, were invited by the ISI to join the fight for Kashmir in this context. The spiralling atrocity took the two nations to the brink of a nuclear war in 1993. The U.S. intervened at a climactic moment, and a three-year deadlock followed the apparent peace process of the two nations. The first significant move after the deadlock was made by the Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee when he visited Minar-i-Pakistan accompanied by Senator Mushahid Hussain. The Senator, in an interview revealed:

I told to Vajpayee that sir you are going to do a great job. Vajpayee replied that I want to give a message to the people of Pakistan that we accept the national sovereignty and territorial integrity of Pakistan. Nonetheless, I know that there will be a massive criticism on me back home in India. (Ali 133)

Consequently, the two nations signed the "Lahore Declaration" and agreed to explore "back-channel diplomacy" to solve the Kashmir problem. R.K Misra and Niaz Naik were recruited by the two Prime Ministers and they made significant progress only to be stopped indefinitely by the increasing tension in the Kargil area along the Line of Control in May 1999.

None of the nations succeeded at what they initiated. The proxy war led by the Pakistani military elite failed to get international support, and the nation incurred heavy financial loss. Indian Government spent more than what they spent in three major wars with Pakistan, mobilized a significantly high number of human resources and received severe criticism left and right for the atrocities committed by the armed forces. This was followed by a series of violent events in Bombay. Thus, the late nineties saw a nation turning inwards to seek and understand the opinion and individuality of its people. In such a context of dissent in public opinions and headlines, popular media began questioning the culpability of the antagonist from a sociological perspective, and the silver screen captured a light-eyed terrorist-protagonist helplessly searching for his mother in twilight before making a move on the target.

Mission Kashmir: Haunted Paradise

Mission Kashmir (2000) opens with the background of snow-clad mountains looking at the crystalline waves of Dal Lake. The background score, however, highlights smoke everywhere and hints at some ominous conspiracy at work, that will soon ravage this 'land of Gods'. This antithetical juxtaposition of image and lyrics prepares the audience for the blast at the end of the song, and the cinematic narrative begins with the local police force searching for an active bomb hidden somewhere around the lake. The stunning visuals and the excellent camerawork mark the departure from the canonical lair of evil presented by Bollywood and bring up the central idea of a paradisaical land desecrated by the diabolical designs of man. More interesting, however, is the psychological development of the terrorist-protagonist Altaaf, played by Hrithik Roshan. The light-eyed, fair-skinned, athletic-built, freshly titled superstar was mistaken for a militant and refused entry to the shooting spot. Interestingly, JKLF (Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front) was initially the pioneer organization in the movement for a secular, sovereign and united Kashmir. With the support of ISI, they sent young Kashmiris to Pakistan's side to train and successfully established around three hundred sleeper cells in Kashmir. This organization had representatives from the Students' Liberation Front, People's League and other local political groups. JKLF had a major fallout with ISI over the use of violence in the valley, as locals were caught in the crossfire. Soon, *Lashkar-e-Taiba* replaced them as they shared interests with the ISI. Altaaf's character as a Kashmiri Muslim, thus comes closer to a member of JKLF dreaming of a liberated Kashmir, rather than the hardcore professional mercenaries of *Lashkar-e-Taiba*.

Haunted by the recurrent nightmare of the red eyes of the masked assailant that murdered his entire family, a young Altaaf discovers a similar mask from the locker of his adoptive father, Inayat Khan (role played by Sanjay Dutt) and attempts to connect the dots. After an unsuccessful attempt at revenge, Altaaf flees home to seek refuge from Hilal Kohistani (role played by Jackie Shroff), a veteran Afghan mercenary, driven purely by his desire for money and power. Hilal addresses Altaaf as *Bachcha* and, in typical terrorspeak, fans the flames of his personal vendetta to exploit the rage of the acolyte in an operation against his country. Altaaf trains to become a ticking bomb, only questions his actions when the lost childhood love returns and invites him for a romantic ride on *Shikara*. Unfortunately, Altaaf is unable to feel the moment:

You know Sufi, today, after a gap of ten years you are sitting in front of me, near me, yet I cannot feel it; today, after ten years, I am sitting in a shikara, but I feel nothing; all around, it is so beautiful, yet I do not see it ... I just see smoke, Sufi, all around, and in the clouds of the smoke, I hear volleys of gunshots, and the shrieks of dying people ... their corpses. (Bharat 42)

Sufi attempts to convince Altaaf to renounce violence and embrace the image of family that he was so fond of as a child. It is interesting to note that Sufiya Parvez works as a journalist and upholds the Nehruvian ideal of a "Good Muslim" who questions and criticizes religious paradigms to protect the sovereignty of a secular nation. Altaaf is emotionally distraught, but his training compels him to sacrifice his childhood romance and move on in mission. A new nightmare sequence kicks in. In it, Altaaf kills Sufi at a dance performance, who, at a close inspection, transforms into his mother (Neelima).

A growing psychosis continues to haunt Altaaf In his sleep, and his battle preparations are interrupted by the subconscious surfacing of the image of his mother. However, Altaaf makes a successful strike at the TV tower on top of the Shankaracharya Hill and makes another unsuccessful attempt at the life of Inayat Khan, his adoptive father. In this context, Neelima (Altaaf's mother) makes an undercover visit to the lair of Altaaf and, unlike Sufi and Fiza (Amaan's sister from the Film *Fiza*), doesn't plead Altaaf to renounce violence and weapons. She places a choice more difficult than surrendering:

On one side is love, on the other, hate; on one side is humanity, on the other, terror. It is for you to decide, Altaaf, whether it is to be good or evil; whether, bestiality or humanity. You have to choose whether chaos or Kashmir lives. (Bharat 43)

Vijay Devadas, in *The Shifting Terrains of Nationalism and Patriotism in Indian Cinemas*, takes the readers back to *Mother India* (1957), where Radha (role played by Nargis) kills her son for making sexual transgressions on a girl. The author points out this action is in tune with the postcolonial Nehruvian nationalism where the mother sacrifices the most intimate relationship for the continuity of the *dharmic* order (Socio-cultural hierarchy) and upholds the law. Later, many films successfully follow this formula where the mother appears as a covert agent of the state to discipline the misguided children. Thus, Neelima's visit to recalibrate the moral compass of Altaaf is in sync with the nationalism of the Indian National Congress, where her sacrifice fixes the final piece of the puzzle and enables Altaaf to make the 'right' choice. In the climactic battle, the background score of the beginning returns with fog. Hilal, in his typical terrorspeak, attempts to cloud Altaaf's judgement while the BGM (Background Music) questions the conception of false Gods and the true meaning of jihad. The ensuing antithesis ends with Altaaf opening fire at Hilal and his minions to protect Hazratbal mosque and Shankaracharya temple. The Sun comes in the background and the fog clears as Altaaf makes the 'right' choice: the co-existence of Hazratbal and Shankaracharya, *Kashmiriyait* (pluralism in Kashmiri culture) in favour of the people of Kashmir, as taught by his mother.

The director Vidhu Vinod Chopra, a Kashmiri Pandit himself, received mixed reviews for the film. Actor Sanjay Suri accused him of romanticizing terrorism. The director, however, at the end of the film, writes that the film was for his children hoping they may rediscover the haven of harmony someday where he grew up. Saisuresh Sivaswamy of *Redif.com* gave four stars out of five, saying, that it was a story from the director's heart, not his head, and the sincerity comes across in frame after frame.

The film opened with an ominous presence of an active bomb lurking around the corners of Dal Lake. A major fallout event and a long list of casualties were narrowly avoided due to the superior skill and sharp composure of Inayat Khan. The timely intervention of motherly love and guidance prevented the major explosions in the end, which would have inevitably resulted in an act of war. However, certain splintered implosions could not be avoided during the Mumbai riots of 1993. The terror on the streets resulted in around 900 deaths, with 575 Muslims and 275 Hindus among the casualties. The Srikrishna Commission reported that the violence occurred in two phases. The first phase was immediately triggered by the demolition of the Babri Mosque on December 6, 1992, by Hindu kar sevaks, resulting in an unprecedented Muslim backlash and communal rioting in major Indian cities. The second phase was primarily a Hindu response to the killing of Hindu Mathadi workers in Dongri, assaults on Hindus in Muslim-majority areas, and the burning of six Hindus, including a disabled girl, in Radhabai Chawl. Through a close analysis of the film "Dil Se," this paper rediscovers such an implosion through the projected anxieties of voices from a motherless northeast region of India, where the victims discover the adversary cloaked in the authority of the Centre.

Dil Se: When the Center cannot Hear the Margin

Mani Ratnam's *Dil Se* (1998) unfolds in an unmentioned trouble-torn land, which we presume to be a part of the northeastern region of India. This decision to blur the exact identity of the setting of the film is very interesting considering the fact that the previous two films of Mani Ratnam- *Roja* (1992) and *Bombay* (1995)- do not hesitate to locate their stories in the tumultuous backdrop of terror-stricken Kashmir and riot-hit Bombay without any attempt to camouflage the identity of the place. Talking about the Northeast, the tendency of clubbing eight states into one singular, homogeneous identity is highly problematic as it successfully denigrates the individual identity, ethnicity, and language of each of the eight states and their vast populations. *Dil Se* acknowledges this arrogance shown against a peripheral region by mainland India and attempts to estimate the explosive outcome this hubristic behaviour may lead to. Unlike other mainstream Bollywood films, which only fetishize and itemize the scenic backdrop of the Northeast to amp up the appeal of their romantic songs and dances, *Dil Se* makes a partial departure from this normative practice. It attempts to explore the fraught relationship between a peripheral state and the Centre within the federal framework by pitting its lead pair against one another.

The story of the film revolves around the ill-fated love between Amar (played by Shah Rukh Khan), a national radio channel broadcaster and Meghna (played by Manisha Koirala), a secessionist militant activist. In her essay *Allegories of Alienation and Politics of Bargaining: Minority Subjectivity in Dil Se*, Ananya Jahanara Kabir finds the relationship between Amar and Meghna as an allegory of a centre-state hierarchical relationship:

Since India's independence, Bombay cinema has provided both a crucible for the forging of a sense of 'common thicker we-ness' (Kaviraj, 1991, pp.90-91) and a mirror in which its audience has seen its hopes, aspirations

and fantasies reflected (Chakravarty,1993). In that cinematic imaginary, however, some kinds of India never found representation. Other kinds were represented, but at insidious cost.

The hint of the impossibility of this relationship is encoded at the beginning of the film when, on a stormy night, in a deserted station, Amar misrecognizes Meghna as a male and asks for a matchbox to light up his cigarette (ironically, at the climax of the film, both of them get consumed by the fire). Amar's relentless pursuit of Meghna, his inability to understand her rejection, and his act of constant stalking and fixing a voyeuristic gaze at Meghna are reflective of the stubbornness and arrogance that the center often displays in its treatment of the peripheral state. In one sequence, of the film, Amar, in his desperate bid to initiate a conversation with Meghna, stops her midway:

Amar: This is wrong. You have met me twice. And yet you failed to recognize me.

Meghna: Stop following me. Amar: No.

Meghna: you have to. Amar: Why?

Meghna: Because I don't like it.

Amar: I don't believe it. See, what's the problem? Is it your parents, caste, community, religion? Or two rascals who took you in the train? I don't know who they are but I can talk to them. Even if I have to use my fists...

Meghna: It's not that. I don't like it. Please leave me alone. Okay? Amar: You don't like me?

Meghna: No. Hope you don't follow me now.

At the end of this conversation, Amar promises not to follow Meghna any further, and at the very next moment, he's seen chasing the bus she has boarded. Amar's callous response to Meghna's disapproval and his inability to understand her rejection is indicative of the center's lack of decency in recognizing any counter-narrative that may question the grand narrative of the centre. This complete collapse of conversation between the centre and the periphery becomes more evident when Amar, as a representative of All India Radio, decides to interview a local separatist leader, on the eve of India's 50th Independence Day:

Militant leader: 'Fifty years ago promises were made to us but they've not been kept. Instead, we have been oppressed ...'

Amar: 'But India is your country, isn't it?'

Militant leader: 'No. It only seems like that to you. Delhi is India. Do you know why? Because small states like us, languishing in a corner, have no meaning for you; because we are not important vote banks. Delhi only notices those places that are vote banks.'

In his obsessive desire to demystify, map, and possess Meghna, Amar follows Meghna to Ladakh (another politically contentious space), and being frustrated by repeated rejection of Meghna, he forcefully plants a kiss on her. This act of intrusion (often glorified in Bollywood films as a marker of intense love) sends Meghna into a state of elliptical trance as she revisits her traumatic past of sexual violation perpetrated by the Indian army. Unaware of Meghna's past, Amar reenacts the same and proves himself to be the extension of the Indian military, displaying the same phallic desire to bend the ungoverned into submission.

Ironically, Amar, who works in the communication industry (throughout the film, he often proudly flicks his Identity Card and announces himself as an employee of All India Radio), is unable to decode the muttering of Meghna because it falls outside his regular handling of structured and decorative language. We can borrow Kristeva's ideation of 'symbolic' and 'semiotic' to develop a theoretical understanding of this linguistic impasse between Amar and Meghna. In her essay, 'The System and the Spea'Ing Subject,' from the book *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984), Kristeva recognizes two different aspects of language: symbolic and semiotic. Whereas the former is associated with stability, order, control, and authority, the latter is characterized by language's more randomized, chaotic and disruptive nature. In the film, Amar displays his exceptional communication skills within the symbolic aspect of language, which promotes a certain sense of order and hierarchy the center approves. But Meghna's experience of being sexually brutalized demands a different linguistic register, embracing the semiotic aspect of language. Her refusal to speak in a language understood by Amar underlines the impossibility of bridging two worlds.

In the climax, when Meghna and Amar finally confront each other, the movie tries to give both sides equal representation. After knowing the true identity of

Meghna as a terrorist, Amar forces her to reveal her motivation behind joining the movement:

Amar: You make bombs, you kill people.

Meghna: You are not aware of the life I have lived. You haven't seen what I have. You sit back in Delhi and play songs on the radio. What do you know of our difficulties since the last 50 years? We have been deceived in the last 50 years. When we ask questions, we are silenced. You know nothing. What do you know? You feel terrorism has grown. You are not to be blamed for it?

Lives are being taken and you have no hand in it? For the way we live, we have no other alternative. There is no other way. Death in every house, at every footstep. Day and night. Every moment, for years. They kept killing us. We kept shedding our blood. There was blood everywhere. Those screams still echo in my ear. Stop it, stop it, stop it. Do you know what fear is? Fear always followed me, it never left me.

This long monologue is interspersed with shocking visuals of a rampage on a snow-laden village: the stuttering of machine guns, the screams of helpless villagers, the dead body of Meghna's father, a girl watching her sister being raped. Interestingly, Mani Ratnam never shows the ones wielding the guns and perpetrating the rape.

Probably fearing the backlash, he may get from the Indian audience so interpellated to worship the men in

uniform onscreen, he decides to absent the assailants, leaving everything to the imagination of the audience. Amar, not privy to the disturbing visuals shown on the screen, still somehow manages to construct a heart-wrenching backstory of Meghna and offers his assistance to take her away from this turbulence (Amar's saviour complex is already portrayed in the picturization of 'Dil Se' song where he imagines to escort Meghna to safety amidst military activities and serial bomb blasts). But Meghna's stern refusal to take any help turns him into the mouthpiece of the state. Himself being a son of an army officer, he clears out his statist stance and engages Meghna in the final piece of verbal duel:

Amar: What do you want? How many do you want to slay? Come, I will accompany you. We'll kill people together. Come on.

Meghna: You still don't understand.

Amar: I can understand what must have happened. But I can't understand what's going to happen. How many will you kill? 20, 30, 50? Will this ease the suffering of your state? Will happiness return? I know you went through wrong. But because of the mistakes of few people, you can't let the whole country suffer.

Meghna: A few people's mistakes? What are these mistakes? Killing innocent people? Or setting entire village aflame? Raping a 12-year-old child! If you don't have an answer to our struggle, if you can't give us justice, is it a crime to demand justice? Little kids wield guns and their parents don't stop them. Why? Because it makes no difference even if they die. There's no other way of survival. From the dictatorship of your army.

Amar: Quiet. I know the army well. You would have fought each other to death. Every little village against the other. Had it not been the army, the nation would have been torn to shreds.

Meghna: You think the army can save us?

Amar: Who else will save you? Your terrorist? Will you save your nation with terrorism?

Meghna: your nation, not mine.

This constant juxtaposition of 'my state' and 'your nation' throughout the conversation only highlights the impossibility of reconciling two worlds. Unable to conclude satisfactorily, the film ends with an explosion triggered by Meghna's plastique-laden vest, annihilating the star-crossed couple. Ananya Jahanara Kabir views the ending as a subversive warning about India's national fragility: 'If some groups are not allowed self-expression on their own terms, other groups who have ostensibly succeeded in their negotiations with the centre, and indeed the centre itself, will suffer' (154–55). In contrast, Sujala Singh views *Dil Se's* ending ultimately as a 'reaffirmation' of those ideologies that glorify the center: 'What is reinstated is the unsullied, incorruptible image of the urban Hindu male (the son of an Army officer) who saves his country and dies for his lady love in one stroke' (352).

Meghna's decision to implode and explode reflects her desire to find a suitable language to vent her pent-up emotions of anguish and anger. Ratnam's portrayal of Meghna, Jason Howard Mazy speculates in the article "The Pyrotechnics of Gender and Terrorism in Mani Ratnam's *Dil Se*," runs a close parallel with the real-life character of Dhanu, the suicide-bomber orchestrating the explosion on 21st May 1991 in Sriperumbudur taking the life of former Prime Minister of India, Rajiv Gandhi. The Meghna-Dhanu parallel appears more relevant if we consider the film's depiction of the training camp scenes, the oath-taking sequences, and, most importantly, the terrorists carrying a vial of potassium cyanide, which are so typical of LTTE (Liberation Tiger of Tamil Elam) Black Tiger operatives. Now, we attempt to delve deep to understand if the explosion intended by Meghna could give rise to a new language of resistance or if it gets confined within the usual territory of phallogocentrism. The climax of the film may provide a cathartic pleasure to the audience if they find Meghna's decision to weaponize her body against the state that once violated her body is an act of feminist resistance. However, such an idea of feminist empowerment demands scrutiny because the film cannot differentiate a female from the patriarchal notion of bodily purity. The film's failure to imagine any redemptive arc of a raped woman beyond her body being splintered into thousand pieces conforms to patriarchal expectations. It almost reinstates the *Sati* ritual of presenting fire as an ultimate purifier of contaminated flesh. Also, imagining Meghna's only drive to join revolutionary politics rooted in her bodily violation nullifies her critical understanding and support for the cause of the movement. In this context, it will be apt to quote V.G. Julie Rajan commenting on Dhanu's appropriation within the patriarchal stereotype:

It is unfortunate that Dhanu did not leave any testimonial – however mediated – for it has allowed broad Western stereotypes about women bombers to speak for her. Western views that women bombers *must* have experienced rape resonate with common Western assumptions about Third World women as generally passive, and that they must be provoked in some horrific

manner, like rape, on a personal level for them to respond with such violence. Consequently, Dhanu's suicide attack is gauged as a performance of female violence specifically against the patriarchal performance of rape. Her entire voice, her agency, then, is limited to being read within the context of rape alone. Unfortunately, this logic limits an understanding of women

bombers' missions by reading their agencies in terms of some general, visceral response to the violation of their bodies, rather than a response that also involves their thinking, their conscious gauging of the political environment in which they implode themselves. (105)

Although Meghna is given a few lines in the film where she delineates the marginality of her state and the sufferings of her people, her prime motivation to join the movement and prepare herself as a suicide bomber

is body-bound. In fact, the decision to weaponize her body does not belong to her; it comes from the male leader of the movement, who often feels the need to fix the ideological goal of a conflicted Meghna:

Leader: What's in you? Meghna: Anger.

Leader: And? Meghna: Ideals. Leader: And?

Meghna: My future. Leader: And?

Meghna: Courage

The decision to use her body to further the cause of the movement may not be taken against Meghna's consent. Still, it also needs to be considered that Meghna went through a series of ideological conditioning to sacrifice her body's autonomy for the movement's purpose during her time in the training camp. From this perspective, Meghna becomes doubly victimized: first at the hands of authoritative forces and second by being reduced to a mere tool in the planning of the insurgents.

Conclusion

However, despite all the ideological uncertainties and political opaqueness, *Dil Se* stands out by showing raw courage to let its audience confront the uncomfortable questions asked by the country's margins. Revisiting these two films in the current climate of hyper-nationalism only makes us aware of the paradigm shift that has radically altered Indian society and its cultural industry in the last two decades. Both *Dil Se* and *Mission Kashmir*, made with the leading Bollywood stars, managed to speak about sparks of dissent flickering in the different pockets of the country without getting any backlash from the contemporary audience. Although unable to win many box-office successes, both films garnered positive responses from the critics and familiar audiences. The visuals of army personnel massacring a village in *Mission Kashmir* or the men in uniform causing the sexual violation of a woman in *Dil Se* were not interpreted as an attempt to defame the Indian army. Also, the decision to cast prominent stars such as Hrithik Roshan and Manisha Koirala in the roles of terrorists and to give them a solid backstory to contextualize their anger was not seen as part of the anti-India campaign. In the current political-cultural milieu of India, when the hyper-nationalist Bollywood films represent every dissident voice as the enemy of the state and glorify every act of military brutality as a redemptive measure, such nuanced portrayal of terrorist characters and the desire to uncover their traumatic past seem to be an outrageous proposition. To conclude, as discussed at the beginning of the paper, the socio-political reality of the 90's India was radically different from today's time, which was evident in some of the films that came out in that period. The agency they granted even to the flawed characters is unimaginable in today's era of easy binaries and extremities.

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