Rethinking Indian Cinema: Toward a Cinema of Multiplicity

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Abstract

This thesis explores the ways in which cinema’s in India have articulated the idea of the Indian Nation, and presents the argument that a national cinema must be necessarily multi-faceted in nature. Nationalism and Nations are invented traditions and there is an inherent relationship between Indian Cinema and nationalism.

The thesis discusses the concept of national identity and invented traditions, and how cinemas in India use the construct of a national identity as a tool to reinforce or challenge the status-quo. It raises questions of difference and sameness and how citizens of that nation understand their place within the conditions produced by each.

The key argument of this thesis challenges the articulation of the Indian nation that is presented by Bollywood Cinema as the dominant form and holistic representation of India’s national identity. It asserts that there are multiple elements that are a part of the national imagining, rather than the lone representation of the North Indian (male) Hindi speaking subject. The alternative cinemas discussed in this thesis problematize the singular conception of national cinema in India.

Chapter one outlines the formulaic construction of the Indian nation as presented by Bollywood and the hegemonic ideology that it reinforces. This chapter outlines the formula that Bollywood repeatedly uses in order to uphold the status quo.

Chapter two examines Tamil cinema from 1930-1970’s in relation to its articulation of an ethno-nationalist ideology centred on Tamil heritage, challenging Bollywood as India’s national cinema.

Chapter Three uses the work of Mani Ratnam, and his Terror Trilogy, in particular Roja (1992), to articulate another alternative cinema, but one that ultimately endorses the secular pan-Indian identity portrayed in Bollywood cinema. This is a significant intervention into the usually ethno-communal cinema that dominates Tamil cinema.

Chapter four uses the work of Canadian Indian director Deepa Mehta to discuss her representation of the Indian nation through her depiction of a lesbian relationship in a traditional joint family situation. The representation of women in Fire (1996) caused huge controversy in India at the time of its release because it went against the normative depiction of women and their roles in society. Because the image of ‘woman’ is intrinsically linked to the building of the nation (Mother India), Mehta’s film explores another, darker alternative to the mythical India portrayed by Bollywood.

Chapter Five discusses the work of documentary film-maker Anand Patwardhan, whose films are highly critical of the nationalism constructed and endorsed by Bollywood. His work uncovers the national tensions and issues that are not addressed in Bollywood cinema, again giving a very different view of the nation.
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Introduction

Cinema and the Indian Nation

In this thesis I explore the ways that cinemas in India have articulated the idea of the Indian nation. This thesis is historically driven, engaging with a specific period of time in India’s cinematic history, between Independence and the beginning of the millennium. It is concerned with capturing and analyzing the various key trajectories of Indian Cinema that are situated in that temporal span.

I focus on Bollywood cinema in Chapter One to showcase the dominant hegemonic modality of imagining the nation through a North-Indian, patriarchal Hindi speaking subject. In Chapters Two I examine Tamil cinema between the late 1930s and early 1970s in relation to its articulation of an ethno-nationalist ideology centered on Tamil heritage that challenges a unitary conception of the Indian nation as seen through Bollywood cinema. In Chapter Three I discuss the work of the globally renowned Tamil (Indian) director Mani Ratnam, focusing on his terror-trilogy to suggest that Ratnam goes against the tide of ethno-nationalism in Tamil cinema and emphasizes a return to a pan Indian secular national identity. Chapter Four explores the films of Deepa Mehta, the diasporic Indian filmmaker whose work has received critical (and hostile) reception to argue that Mehta’s construction of India in her films radically challenges the idea of the Indian nation: her representation of women goes against the normative grain of representing women in Indian cinema. Chapter Five explores the political documentaries of Anand Patwardhan, a non-mainstream marginalized documentary filmmaker from India, whose work is highly critical of Indian nationalism, and which offers an alternative conception of the Indian nation and nationalism.
My aim in exploring these various facets of Indian cinema is to underscore two inter-related points: first, that there is no unitary representation of the nation and nationalism in Indian cinema even though Bollywood cinema as a dominant form seeks to articulate this through the figure of the North Indian (male) Hindi speaking subject (Mishra, 2002; Devadas, 2006).

In that sense the nation and nationalism in Indian cinema is necessarily, always-already, hybrid. This argument thus seeks to challenge the dominant equating of Bollywood cinema as Indian cinema, and hence by extension, a national cinema. This is the second point: the thesis demonstrates that Indian cinema, as a national cinema, is more than Bollywood cinema: it is always-already heterogeneous.

The notion of an Indian national cinema, which has been forever linked to Bombay cinema (and the culture industry of Bollywood), is taken up not only in the popular imagination but also in academic scholarship on Indian cinema. In other words, following Schlesinger (2000: 25), this formulation constructs the nation and national cinema in the singular, as singular. This is the foundational assumption that occupies film studies and its conception of a national cinema Schlesinger argues, and which also occupies a large body of work on Indian cinema. The point here is that the singularisation of national cinema masks the heterogeneity of Indian cinema, and discursively constructs Bombay cinema as paradigmatic of Indian cinema. Against this, I suggest the urgency of pluralising the idea of a national cinema in India. In his study on Australian national cinema, Tom O’Regan argues, through an examination of the cinematic industry’s economies of production and distribution, transnational finance arrangements, and its relationship to other national cinemas, suggest that any attempt at theorising Australian national cinema must begin from the view that an Australian national cinema is always-already “a hybrid assemblage of diverse elements, statuses and films” (1996: 4). It is a similar assumption that is the starting point for this
thesis on Indian cinema. The central argument calls for a shift from a closed vision of Indian cinema as Bombay cinema and open the possibility of conceptualising the various ways in which other cinemas that are part of Indian cinema have been simultaneously collaborative, complicit, and antagonistic to the project of constructing a national identity. In other words, as Devadas (2013: 219) points out:

Indian cinema is not a singular machine of representation: it is multiple and multifarious film industry that includes a variety of cinemas (Urdu, Marathi, Gujarati, Malayalam, Kannada, Telugu, Tamil and Assamese) marked by cultural, linguistic and regional differences; parallel or art cinema; documentary films, and most recently digital cinema. While Indian cinema is a complex assemblage of various parts, within the popular imagination Bollywood, the popular name given to the Mumbai-based Hindi film industry, is Indian cinema *par excellence*.

This is because of the commercial success of Hindi cinema within India and globally; this is also because of historical occurrence (cinema entered India through Bombay); and this is because of the political history of the nation: the Congress Party of which Gandhi was a central part and which was a key broker in Indian independence supported the introduction of compulsory Hindustani in 1938, 9 years before Independence in 1947. I discuss this further in Chapters One and Two.

In her book *The Cinematic Imagination* Jyotika Virdi argues that in India ‘popular films touch a major nerve in the nation’s body politic, address common anxieties and social tensions, and articulate vexed problems’ (2003: 9). Likewise, Purnima Mankekar notes that ‘discourses of class, gender, and nation ... have been vital structuring principles in popular culture in India’ (1999: 18) while Rajadhyaksha and Willemen write that ‘for millions of Indians, wherever they live, a major part of ‘India’ derives from its movies (1994: 10). Indian cinema, according to these scholars, has played the key role in the construction of the nation and is a key domain where the question of the nation, national identity and Indian
nationalism is played out. In this thesis I focus on cinema’s power to articulate a sense of nation and nationalism. More precisely I explore the multiple representations of nationalism in Indian cinemas to demonstrate that “they mutate and shift according to political interests, regional take-ups, religious hegemony, historical conditions, struggles for and against power, gender ascriptions, and discourses of communalism” (Devadas, 2013: 217). It is impossible to provide an exhaustive list of the various expressions of nationalism across the various cinemas in India. In this thesis I wish to chart the various ways in which the tropes of nationalism have been expressed, emphasising difference, multiplicity as key to conceptualising this. Before this, I wish to explore the concepts of nation, nationalism and national identity to shore up the various, competing and complimentary, debates around these terms, and, more importantly, to illustrate cinema’s role in the formation of an imagined Indian national community.

Invented Traditions
Anthony Smith, in Nations and Nationalism in a Global Era, provides a useful definition of nationalism, when he writes:

Nationalism derives its force from its historical embeddedness. As an ideology, nationalism can take root only if it strikes a popular chord, and is taken up by, and inspires, particular social groups and strata. But nationalism is much more than ideology. Unlike other modern belief-systems, it depends for its power not just on the general idea of the nation, but on the presence and character of this or that specific nation which it turns into an absolute. Its success ... depends on specific cultural and historical contexts, and this means the nations it helps to create are in turn derived from pre-existing and highly particularized cultural heritages and ethnic formation (1995: viii).

1 Such a project has already been done in the Encyclopedia of Indian Cinema for example, which provides a comprehensive overview of Indian films.
A number of key points emerge from this: first, that nationalism is an ideology, that is to say it interpellates individuals as subjects of the nation in relation to the ideas of the dominant class and/or culture; second, that nationalism is more than ideology because it has the capacity to turn a contingent idea, the nation, into an absolute, with fixed parameters. In other words, it has the capacity to produce a non-negotiable, fixed, and universal idea of a nation. Smith’s argument draws from the work of Ernest Gellner, who suggests that ‘nationalism ... invents nations where they do not exist’ (1983: 168). For Gellner, it is not the nation that engenders nationalism but the reverse; this is because ‘nationalism is primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent’ (Gellner, 1983: 1). The transition to an age of nationalism for Gellner occurred with (and as response to) the shift to industrial capitalism, which redrew previous cultural, economic, social and political boundaries. As Gellner writes:

Early industrialism means population explosion, rapid urbanisation, labour migration, and also the economic and political penetration of previously more or less inward-turned communities, by a global economy and a centralising polity ... a new kind of Babel, with new cultural boundaries that are not stable but in constant and dramatic movement, and which are seldom hallowed by any kind of custom (1983: 42).

The mobilities ushered by industrialization were responded to by a focus on homogeneity as a strategy of controlling and managing political legitimacy. That is by “the imposition of a ... culture on society” (Gellner 1983: 57), a culture which various members of the community can identify with. This practice of manufacturing a singular culture does not mean that:

that nationalism imposes homogeneity out of a wilful cultural Machtbedürfniss; it is the objective need for homogeneity which is reflected in nationalism. If it is the case that a modern industrial state can only function with a mobile, literate, culturally standardised, interchangeable population, as we have argued, then the illiterate, half-starved populations sucked from their erstwhile rural cultural ghettos into the melting pots of shanty-towns yearn for incorporation into some one of those cultural pools which already has, or looks as if it might acquire, a state of its own, with the
subsequent promise of full cultural citizenship, access to primary schools, employment, and all (Gellner 1983: 46).

Gellner is not making a functionalist argument: rather he is arguing that nationalism is couched through the discourses of incentive, compatibility and constraints, which function to foster a sense of membership, mediated through a singular national culture. This is why for Gellner nationalism invents the nation. Similarly, Eric Hobsbawm writes, that ‘an invented tradition [refers to] … a set of practices … which seek to inculcate certain values and norms by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past’ (1983: 1). In conceptualising the nation as an invented tradition these scholars are suggesting that the nation (and nationalism) are not natural but are discursively produced through the selection, retention, affirmation, denial and perpetuation of specific histories, memories, culture, and practices. Nations and nationalism determine, frame, articulate, and fix our relation to what Benedict Anderson (1983) calls an imagined community. In Anderson’s book, one of the key points that he makes with regard to the construction of an imagined national community is that print media was central to this. Print media, specifically newspapers were central to how the imagined national community was ‘conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship’ (1983: 7).

Similarly, Virdi argues that in India it was cinema, rather than print or ‘state-controlled radio and television’ that played a key role in fostering a sense of nationalism (2003: 6). While there are contesting and competing representations of nationalism in popular Indian cinema,

constructed ... through a complex apparatus of metaphors, discourses, and modes of address ... a stock set of tropes, symbols, characters and narratives ... the films iron out tensions among various constituents in the nation and play out utopian ideals’ (Virdi 2003: 9).
In short Indian cinema invented a singular idea of the nation and sense of nationalism that are not rooted in objective surveys of history, but rather in invention and myth. It is, in Eric Hobsbawm’s (1992) terms, an invented tradition; invented by a sense of shared communal moral conscience.

Ernest Gellner and Terence Ranger (1983), and Anthony Smith (1993) also support such an argument, that the nation and nationalism are invented traditions. As Smith writes, the nation is an organisation that is often, and most easily, identified by the way it defines itself through everyday objects and customs. All nations have their own versions of these signifiers of nationhood, which include: Flag, anthem, administration, educational system, army, judicial system, legislature, citizenship rights, founding myth and constitution, coinage and capital (Smith 1993: 2). In other words, as Ernest Gellner in Nations and Nationalism puts it, nationalism can be conceived as:

primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent. Nationalism as a sentiment … is the feeling of anger aroused by the violation of the principle, or the feeling of satisfaction aroused by its fulfilment. A nationalist movement is one actuated by a sentiment of this kind (1983: 1).

Sharing Gellner’s conception is Eric Hobsbawm who writes that “the basis of ‘nationalism’ of all kinds was the same: the readiness of people to identify themselves emotionally with their ‘nation’ and to be politically mobilized as Czechs, Germans, Italians or whatever, a readiness which could be politically exploited” (1992: 143). And finally, to draw the relation between the state and the nation and vice-versa, I find recourse in Hobsbawm's position in The Age of Empire:

the state not only made the nation, but needed to make the nation. … ‘The nation’ was the new civic religion of states. It provided the cement which bonded all citizens to their state, a way to bring the nation-state directly to each citizen, and
counterweight to those who appealed to other loyalties over state loyalty” (1992: 148).

It should be emphasised however, that nationhood as a form of identity revolves around questions of difference and sameness; and also how the citizens of that nation understand their place within the conditions produced by each.

Benedict Anderson argues that the “‘anomalies’ of nation-ness as well as nationalism, are cultural artefacts of a particular kind ... which command such profound emotional legitimacy” (1993: 4). Anderson argues that nation-ness or nationalism can be thought of as an imagined community, or a consciousness of connection between people across time and space. He locates the awakening of this consciousness with the dissemination of print media in the sixteenth century. The spread of print media saw a change in collective identity come about which was no longer governed by the church. The state began to legitimise its position by producing texts which articulate the nation and “came to represent political sovereignty, displacing the religious one communicated via Christian Latin’s previous monopoly on the book” (Miller 1999: 95). Anderson proposes that the spread of print media, such as novels and newspapers, saw a change in a subject’s sense of time and space, or an awareness of the phenomenon of a ‘meanwhile’. What Anderson suggests is that these two new forms of mass-produced media made it possible to imagine the same action taking place outside of the boundaries of ones own existence, but still connected through that action; “part of our world as connected individuals looking at a text but not available to us at a single site” (Miller 1999: 95).
Having argued that nationalism and nations are invented traditions, I will now briefly chart, in board terms, the relationship between Indian cinema and the nationalism. I conduct this critical review for the following reasons: to affirm the centrality of cinema to the construction of Indian nationalism; to articulate the various ways in which nationalism is fostered and, finally to show that despite the multiple modalities of representing the Indian nation, a hegemonic view of Indianness prevails. In that sense Indian popular cinema is a central architect of a normative version of nationalism.

Indian Cinema and the National Project: A Critical Overview

Cinema’s relationship with the project of nationalism began very early on, in 1913 to be precise with the screening of the first full length Indian film by Dadasaheb Phalke, Raja Harischandra (King Harishchandra), a mythological film based on the Hindu religious texts — Ramayana and Mahabharata. This film, as Devadas points out, “was foundational to the construction of an Indian nationalism that was simultaneously anti-colonial and Hindu in character rooted in the discourse of swadeshi (self-sufficiency), central to the anti-British movement” (2013: 220). As Phalke himself declared — “‘My films are Swadeshi in the sense that capital, ownership and stories are all Swadeshi’” (cited in Mishra 2002: 13). What Phalke does, in situating his film as a swadeshi film is connect his creative work to the Indian independence movement adopted by Gandhi who described swadeshi as the soul of swaraj (self rule).

This tradition of producing swadeshi films, according to Devadas, dominated Indian cinema for some time: across the subcontinent, filmmakers from various regions embraced and emphasized the distinctiveness of homegrown films. Patriotic films such as Dwarkadas Sampat’s Bhakta Vidur (The Saint Vidur, 1921), Vande Mataram Ashram (The Vande Mataram Hermitage, 1926), which was censored and briefly banned by the colonial authorities, and Gopal Krishna (1929), are
exemplary of the *swadeshi* film tradition that sought to represent Gandhian anti-colonial nationalism (2013: 220).

The production of pan-Indian, Gandhian inspired anti-colonial films was not confined to Bombay. According to Devadas, this genre can be found in a number of films from the Southern state of Tamil Nadu including (*Dharmapathini,* The Devoted Wife, 1929 and *Anadhaipenn,* Orphan Girl, 1931), Assam (*Joymoti,* 1935), Kerala (*Martanda Varma,* 1931), Andhra Pradesh (*Vande Mataram,* 1939), and Bengal (*Bilet Pherat,* The England Returned, 1921) foregrounded and perpetuated Gandhi’s anti-colonial nationalist program (2013: 221).

As Thoraval points out, *Vande Mataram,* a ‘melodrama ... was an allegory of pre-
Independent India’s progressive and nationalist aspirations. The film’s title echoed that of the song which rallied together nationalist’s in the country’ (2000: 40).

The construction of a unified pan-Indian nationalism built around an anti-colonial sensibility was, however, overtly Hindu. In other words cinema fostered an imagined national community that was forged through the discourse of Hinduism. As Rachel Dwyer points out, ‘the founding genre of Indian cinema’ — mythologies — set up a tradition of films depicting ‘tales of gods and goddesses, heroes and heroines, mostly from the large repository of Hindu myths’ (2006: 15). The explicit rendition of nationalism through the optic of Hinduism witnessed in the mythology genre shifted radically post-independence in 1947. As Mishra notes, post-independence films recast Hindu nationalism by focusing on ‘three concepts — epic genealogy, the persistence of dharmik codes (codes of righteousness) and the power of the renouncer’ (2002: 5). Films such as *Awara* (The Vagabond, 1951), *Do Bigha Zameen* (Two acres of Land, 1953), *Main Tulsi Tere Aagan Ki* (I’m the Holy Basil of your Garden, 1978), and *Mother India* (1957), are examples of films that shaped nationalism through a
religious lens, suggesting that popular Hindi cinema ‘is deeply embedded in certain mythic structures ... everything in the Hindi film, from the archetypal figure of the mother to the anti-heroic hero, appears to belong to the deep recess of the Indian past’ (Lal, 2002: 238-9). Beyond this, the framing of Indian-Hindu nationalism is done through the casting of Islam as the dangerous other. For example, in the Tamil blockbuster film Roja (1992), which won the President’s National Integration Award, Indian nationalism is depicted

in a new Hindu way, Hindu associations and ritual practices having been emptied of specifically religious content and made into markers of national cultural identity. [And here] Islam, not Hinduism, is rendered a sign of difference, a threat to secularism (Dirks 2001: 163).

Similarly, Devadas argues that Islam, Muslims, are “a central figure for staging nationalism in popular Indian cinemas, especially in films that deal with the trauma of Partition and those that emerged post 9/11 and the global war on terror such as LOC Kargil (2003) and Lakshya (Target, 2004)” (2013: 221). Numerous scholars have argued that Bollywood cinema has a long history and propensity to marginalize and demonise Muslim communities to underscore a pure Hindu India (see Devadas 2013, Kabir 2010, Chadha and Kavoori 2008, Hirji 2008, and Booth 2004). Collectively, they argue that the marginalization of Muslims takes places across various registers that continue to positions Muslims as outsiders, as those that do not belong to the Indian nation. To cite Devadas, the representation of Muslims takes place through different discursive registers of marking insiders/outsiders: through religion, films such as Baiju Bawra (1952), Khalyanak (The Anti-Hero, 1993), and Maa Tujhe Salaam (Mother, I Salute You, 2002) maintain the Hindu/Muslim binary; through the event of Partition, films such as Ghar (Home, 1945), Apna Desh (My Country, 1972), and LOC entrench not just religious and communal differences, but also the citizen/foreigner binary; and through the discourse of the war on “terror”, films such as Border (1997) and Lakshya reinforce a patriot/terrorist schema. Collectively, this history of representation within Indian cinema participates in a biopolitical ordering that uses different resources and investments to underscore the
hegemony of a Hindu-derived, anti-Muslim nationalism manifested through a process of violent othering, a rupturing, that disavows the possibility of Hindu-Muslim unity thereby reinforcing a politics of communalism (2013: 222).

In short the Muslim body is constituted through the figure of the foreigner and/or terrorists. The cinematic practice of marginalizing and oppressing Muslim communities and Islam intensified post 9/11 and the attacks in Mumbai on 26 November 2008 with the release of films such as *Mission 11 July* (2010), *My Name is Khan* (2010), *Ashok Chakra* (2010), *New York* (2009), *Kurbaan* (Sacrificed, 2009), *Black and White* (2008), *Aamir* (2008), and *A Wednesday!* (2008). These films, as Kabir notes, link Islam, Muslims with terror and seek to give terror a countenance and, more crucially, suggests that ‘practicing terrorist and practicing Muslims would seem collapsible categories’ (2010: 374). While there are exceptions to this, as seen for example in *Aamir*, when the title character, a member of the Indian Muslim diaspora in London refuses to join the ‘holy war’ even though his family is held ransom, this breaking the Muslim-terrorist equation, such modalities of representation are in the minority. And where they do occur, as Devadas points out, the recasting serves to underscore the secularism of Indian nationalism, its openness and commitment to the democratic imperative while showcasing the Muslim who refuses to enter into (holy) alliance as the ideal Indian patriot. Even though, writ large, popular Indian cinemas demonize and equate terror with Islam and Muslims, it also strives to render another modality of representation. While the latter textures of representations are limited, where they do emerge they serve a powerful function: of articulating Indian nationalism as a secular, multi-religious, multicultural constitution and of disavowing the processes and practices of othering that take place. In other words, they mask the disavowal that is foundational to Indian nationalism (2013: 223).

The shaping of a unified nationalism is not, however, contingent on the erasure of contradictions; rather it works through contradictions. Mishra, for example, notes with reference to *Kismet* (Fate, 1943), that ‘the film combines the newfound wealth of an emergent bourgeoisie with the necessity of the anticolonial struggle’ (2002: 31); Virdi in her
reading of Shri 420 (Mr. 420, 1955) focuses on how the film put together ‘the contradiction between commitment to nation and ... meeting the needs for food, shelter, clothing, and education’ (2003: 97); and Vasudevan (2001: 206) points to the contradiction in Bombay (1995) when the hero who saves the nation from communal violence, ‘while speaking in the name of humanity and nationhood ... simultaneously speaks the language of alienation, indeed of revulsion’. These contradictions are not, however, a problem because the universal (nation) can only be realized by overcoming contradictions, and in that sense the articulation of a unified nationalism is contingent upon contradictions. This is why Virdi comments that popular Indian films predominantly end ‘with a last-ditch effort to reinstate the official rhetoric, smooth the ruffled feathers of hegemonic ideology, and plead ... for a truce with status quo’ (2003: 97).

While I have suggested so far that popular Indian cinema is conservative and champions an unproblematic idea of Indian nationalism, it should be emphasised that there have been challenges to this dominant conception. The example of Tamil cinema during the period of fervent ethno-nationalism is a case in point. While films from the state of Tamil Nadu reinforced a pan-Indian, anti-colonial nationalism, since the late 1930s, particularly after the introduction of Hindi as *lingua franca* of the nation, and up until the late 1970s, Tamil cinema articulated an ‘ethno-linguistic “nationalism”, anti-Hindi and anti-north (India), and [emphasized] the glories, language and culture of the ancient “Dravidians”’ (Thoraval 2000: 318). This was a cinema that refused the Congress based conception of the Indian nation under the shadow of a north-Indian Brahmin-male subject, and which drew its political impetus from the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (Dravidian Progressive Front) and later the Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (Anna Dravidian Progressive Front), who championed
Tamil separatism. These two political parties ‘strategically used cinema to mobilize and disseminate Tamil ethno-nationalism and engage in agitation politics against the Congress Party, which it had been supporting to date’ (Devadas 2006). The symbiotic relationship between cinema and Tamil-ethno-nationalism, has been examined by numerous scholars (Hardgrave 1973; Dickey 1993, and Gopalan 1998) and as Devadas (2006) sums up: this period was marked by a cinema that ‘strongly affirm[ed] Tamil nationalism as a separatist discourse, and as antithetical to the idea of a singular nation … to set up an alternative version and vision of the nation, to break up established centre-periphery relations’. I take this up in Chapter Two.

On the one hand it can be said that Indian cinema has sought to articulate a hegemonic nationalism through the exclusion and marginalization of specific bodies, cultures, religions, and practices. On the other, popular cinemas have been critical of the shaping of hegemonic Indian nationalism. Criticisms of the dominant structuring tropes — family, urban-rural divide, gender, religion, class, and other forms of inequalities — exists and they seek to challenge and transgress established norms. As Mishra points out, films such as Garam Hawa (Torrid Winds, 1973), which provides ‘portraits of fully realized Muslim families’ and Fiza (2000) which connects ‘the rebelliousness of the Muslim youth … directly … to a growing sense of Muslim exclusion in recent years from the central issues of the nation-state’ (2002: 218) challenges the dominant inscription of Muslim bodies. As Virdi point out, Qyamat se Qyamat tak (From Judgment Day to Judgment Day, 1988) and Maine Pyaar Kiya (Yes, I’ve Fallen in Love, 1989) for instance ‘plot the unfinished business of mediating between the family and individualism’ (2003: 208). And as Devadas points out, “beyond popular Hindi cinema, films from other regions such as Bhoomi Kosam (For the Sake of
Earth/Land/Mother, 1974, Telugu), a critique of the village zamindari (landlord) system and an affirmation of the Naxalite ideology, Punashcha (Over Again, 1961, Bengali) a film that redefines the role of women, and Daham (Thirst, 1965, Malayalam) which ends without allowing the idea of a nuclear family to be established do contest the normative structuring principles of nationalism” (2013: 227).

But Indian cinema is not only constituted by popular cinema: it is also made up of other cinemas — documentaries, digital, short-films, independent films — and diverse modalities of production. These non-mainstream, non-popular cinemas while not having the same degree of visibility as popular Indian cinema, do engage with the question of Indian nationalism and the constitution of the nation. The documentaries of Shubhradeep Chakravorty (Godhra tak: The terror trail, 2003), Gauhar Raza (Junoon ke badte kadam, Evil Stalks the Land, 2002), Gopal Ram (Hey Ram: Genocide in the land of Gandhi, 2002), and Summa Josson (Gujarat: A laboratory of Hindu rasthtra, 2003) for example challenge the existing hegemonic principles of articulating nationalism. In Chapter Five I focus on one such non-mainstream filmmaker — Anand Patwardhan — whose work underscores key moments in postcolonial Indian history — the Emergency, the rise of fundamentalism, the nuclearisation of India, communal violence and continued gender and caste discrimination — with the aim of envisioning another form of nationalism structured around justice, humanity and equality.

This discussion of the various expressions of nationalism in Indian cinema is partial. I have not, for example, examined the construction of the non-resident Indian, parallel cinema or other somatic sites such as the male body in relation to the discourse of nationalism. That said, in this Introduction I have sought to demonstrate that Indian cinema is necessarily
heterogeneous; that there is a powerful hegemonic construction of nationalism that occupies Indian cinema — as Wimal Dissanayake puts it, Indian cinema tells a “unifying and legitimizing story about itself to its citizens [and] is crucial in the understanding of nationhood” (2000: 145); and that there are challenges to this dominant narrative. In the following chapters I examine Bollywood cinema, ethno-nationalist Tamil cinema, the cinema of Mani Ratnam, the films of Deepa Mehta, and finally, the films of Anand Patwardhan to both affirm Dissanayake’s point as well as challenge it to argue that Indian cinema’s articulation of nationalism is also multifaceted. In that sense, Indian cinema is a necessarily hybrid cultural formation.
This chapter will discuss the representation of the nation and nationalism in Bollywood cinema by examining two films — *Mother India* (Mehboob Khan, 1952), and *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (Aditya Chopra, 1995, henceforth DDLJ). These films, separated by 40 years, are proof texts for analysing the construction of the nation, gender relations, and sexuality in Bollywood cinema. I argue that a similar formula governs all three of these films in that there is a repetition of certain tropes within the films that enable it to be classified as an identifiable genre. In particular, the repetition of tropes such as (male) characters that embody a pan-Indian identity, the reinforcement of *dharmik* codes, and the stylistic conventions that govern Bollywood films such as the song-and-dance, lavish costumes, and adventurous action sequences are recognisable traits of this genre, known collectively as *masala* films — that is films that have “ample ingredients of action, romance, melodrama, and elaborate sing and dance spectacle ... [and which] draws on one of two predominant mythic and religious texts of India” (Dudrah 2012: 18). More crucially, the chapter will examine the role of Bollywood cinema in normalising a pan-Indian culture exemplified through the figure of the North Indian, Brahmin centric, (male) subject.

**Bollywood Cinema as National Cinema**

Bollywood cinema, the name given to popular Hindi cinema from Mumbai (formerly Bombay), holds the privileged position of being India’s national cinema.² It is a massive

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industry, far bigger than its western counterpart Hollywood, making over 800 films per annum for an audience of approximately 15 million viewers per day and “exported to about a hundred countries” (Mishra 2002: 1). And between 1931, when the first Indian feature was released “and 1981 more than fifteen thousand feature films had been produced in India ... grossing around $600 million annually and employing some three hundred thousand workers” (Mishra 2002: 1). It draws its audience from all class groups but the majority of its audience comes from the urban centred working class in India (Virdi 2003: 2). The reach of Bollywood is extensive, moving into almost all forms of cultural capital through music, fan clubs and magazines, video clips, and its structure and stylistic conventions are used in television programmes and T.V. dramas, and is now an integral part of the Indian Premier League T20 tournament. In that sense Bollywood is not simply the name for a cinematic form and practice: it is rather a heterogeneous cultural assemblage that connects with a range of cultural, creative, and commodified productions.

In addition to its size and output, Bollywood cinema holds a central place in the Indian imagination. As Mishra in his study of Bollywood cinema argues, cinema should be considered a ‘temple of desire’, a space which is now the site of “aggressive self-projection and demand for reciprocity, in the suturing of image and spectator” where the audience comes to pay homage to the images of new gods and goddesses. (Mishra 2002: 1). Cinema arrived in India through the city of Bombay, where the Lumiere Brothers moving pictures were screened in July 1896 at Watson Hotel, six months after the original unveiling in Paris. This historically entrenched Bombay as the foundational site of the Indian film industry, but it did not entrench it as a national cinema because, as Sangita Gopal and Sujata Moorti point out, “during the colonial era, the category of national cinema did not exist’ (2008: 11). The
advent of sound in 1930 revolutionized a new era of talkies and musicals (the first “talkie produced” in 1931 was Alam Ara, World-adorning), but more importantly:

it strengthened vernacular cinema insofar as films began to be made in a specific language. Filmic form reflected regional differences as well — thus Bengali cinema embraced the literary film, whereas the mythological was popular in Marathi cinema while a Gujarati studio like Ranjit Movietone specialized in domestic dramas in contemporary settings. Multilingual productions were common as well (Gopal and Moorti 2008: 11).

Talkies, in other words, entrenched linguistic diversity and differences and I would suggest, marks the fragmentation of the idea of homogenous Indian cinema. The question of a national cinema in India however emerged post-independence, and Bombay Cinema was entrenched as the national cinema when Hindi was constitutionally adopted on 26 January 1950 as the official ‘national language’ of India. The discussion however had been in place much longer: for instance, as Ramachandra Guha (2008) points out, both Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru had been champions of making Hindi the national language prior to independence in 1947. In that regard the political push for making Hindi the official language led to the regionalisation of other cinematic forms (Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, and so on), and entrenched the unproblematic equating of Hindi cinema as the national cinema.

As Gopal and Moorti eloquently put it,

this meant that Hindi film, could after 1947, begin to assume the shape and form of a national cinema that developed a distinct identity of its own and began to subsume regional cinema to a certain extent. ... Although Hindi film industry’s claims to the status of India’s national cinema remains contested ... it would seem that Hindi film is unquestionably nationally dominant. ... In other words, though Hindi film has remained one of the many constituents that make up Indian cinema as a whole, we would be justified in describing postindependence Hindi film as nationalist cinema (2008” 11-12).

The point that Gopal and Moorti are making is that while the contest over Bollywood cinema’s status as national cinema remains, this does not preclude a consideration of it as a
nationalist cinema, as a cinematic industry that ‘functions[s] alongside the Indian state in assembling a national spectatorship or defining its products as national culture’ (Gopal and Moorti 2008: 11-12). In that regard, while Bollywood cinema is not a national cinema per se, as “its status as a national cinema and its investments in nationalism remains a complex one” (Gopal and Moorti 2008: 15), it does play a key role in shaping Indian national culture. This is done through the repetition of specific tropes that facilitates the cinema’s mobility across different spaces and cultures. As Jyotika Virdi writes,

while I contest the idea of a formula in Hindi cinema, there are unquestionably a range of elements that get repeatedly strung together and reshuffled, ... creating patterns and making visible strands popular in the national imaginary (2003: 8-9).

This is why, she continues,

popular films touch a major nerve in the nation’s body politic, addresses common anxieties and social tensions, and articulate vexed [problems that are ultimately resolved by presenting mythical solutions to restore an utopian ideal ... [and foster] a collective social imagination (Virdi 2003: 9).

The next section will discuss some of the key stylistic characteristics of Bollywood cinema to underscore the point made by Gopal and Moorti, and Virdi: that the key characteristics of Bollywood films provide an insight into how it is able to negotiate differences and position itself as India’s national or nationalist film industry.

The Bollywood ‘Formula’

Bollywood films incorporate highly choreographed song-and-dance sequences, sentimental melodrama, sumptuous costumes and sets, identifiable character types that are grounded in the epic texts, and grandiose action sequences — what Salman Rushdie refers to as a ‘ethico-mythico-tragico-super sexy-high-masala — art” (cited in Mishra 2002: 2). In that

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3 There is a larger point here about what is a national cinema that requires address, but it is beyond the possibility of this current project on Indian cinema.
regard Bollywood films defy genre conventions as each film contains within it, elements of
the musical, comedy, drama, action and love story. While it is difficult to position Hindi films
into established genre categories, within scholarship on popular Indian cinema there is a
board agreement that one way to classify the genre of is through the term *masala*, which as
Dwyer and Patel in *Cinema India* suggest, was taken up and used to describe a genre that
“started to develop in the post-war period and today defines Indian cinema” (2002: 194).

In Hindi, *masala* means an assortment of spices used to prepare what is commonly known
as curry. The use of an assortment of spices release different flavours, mixing and matching
in strange ways to produce a complex taste that is simultaneously spicy, sour, sweet, hot,
and so on. The point is that in a masala it is difficult to distinguish individual spices. Within
the language of cinema the term alludes to the whole range of genres and emotions that
one can expect to find in a Bollywood film. As Jigna Desai notes, “masala films are the
intertextual films of Bollywood often with familiar structure, plot, sequences, and stock
characters” (2004: 108). The term *masala* finds parallel in what Sanskrit scholars call *rasas*
or ‘feelings’ and was first coined by Bharata Muni in his *Natya Shastra*, written between 400
B.C. and 200 A.D, and believed to be the oldest surviving text on stagecraft in the world
(Massey, 2004). As Massey points out, the *Natya Shastra* provides a set of precepts on the
writing and performance of dance, music and theatre and, furthermore,

examines in detail every conceivable aspect of production: the ideal playhouse,
metrics, prosody, diction, types of character and appropriate costumes and make-up,
tonation, the representation of sentiments, emotional and other states, style in
acting, movements of every limb, the setting and construction of a play, conventions
of time and place, and even the canons of criticism and assessment (2004: 131).

The *Natya Shastra* lists eight different *rasas* (feelings or sentiments) including: *Shringara*
(the erotic), *Hasya* (the comic), *Karuna* (the pathetic), *Raudra* (fury), *Vira* (the heroic),
Bhayanaka (the terrible), Bibhatsa (the odious), Adbhuta (the marvelous), and Shanta (serenity) (Sahai 2003: 13), which has been incorporated in masala films where all of the above mentioned states of emotions are at play. This is why although it has been argued that Bollywood masala films break genre conventions because it is heterogeneous, masala films are also in themselves generic (they obey genre rules) and is hence homogenous, fixed. Some fixed elements of the masala genre, as outlined by Gokulsing and Dissanayake, include the following:

Bollywood plots have tended to be melodramatic; it frequently employs formulaic ingredients such as — star-crossed lovers and angry parents, love triangles, family ties, sacrifice, corrupt politicians, kidnappers, conniving villains, courtesans with hearts of gold, long-lost relatives and siblings separated by fate, dramatic reversals of fortune, and convenient (2004: 28-31).

Further, they continue,

the plots revolve around twins separated at birth, children abducted from their parents, lovers torn apart because of caste difference, families split apart by calamities, and along with these commonplace scenarios there are also some essential, still quite unoriginal, thematic concerns including the pure-heartedness of the hero, eulogizing of the family, Manichean conflict (between good and evil), and the conflict between the spiritual world of light and the material world of darkness (Gokulsing and Dissanayake 2004: 28-31).

Other elements, as Gordon Gray (2010) notes, include characters, which are strong stereotypes, and songs and dances, love triangles, comedy, and dare-devil thrills — all are mixed up in a three-hour-long extravaganza with an intermission. Such movies are called masala films.

4 Having said that, it should be noted that Bollywood conventions are changing. As Mishra (2002), amongst others note, the Indian diaspora in English speaking countries, have shifted Bollywood films closer to Hollywood models; film kisses are no longer banned; showing of skin is now acceptable, and plots can be less melodramatic, more sophisticated.
The stylistic and narrative conventions that inform masala films are repeated in most Bollywood films, which steer away from realistic representations and yet they are some of the key cultural and historical documents/artefacts that inform Indian national identity (Virdi 2003: 23). Virdi makes the point that these films intersect political life and spill over into its social text. Film is able to confront and resolve, (through narrative formula and character tropes), whatever is threatening the imagined nation at that point in time (2003: 23-24). By using “a constellation of myths, utopias, wishes, escapism, and fantasies” (Virdi 2003: 23), popular Hindi cinema addresses topics such as the role of family in the nation, gender roles and how those are played out through heterosexual relationships, religious differences, and class (and caste) structures to name a few to affirm “a collective consciousness of nationhood through specific cultural references” (Virdi 2003: 7). The rasas, central to, and which informs the films’ narrative and stylistics conventions can be seen as “deploying an affective mode of address ... an emotional register and therefore a virtual teleprompter for reading the script called the ‘nation’” (Virdi 2003: 7).

One of the key tenets that informs the Bollywood formula, as identified by scholars such as Mishra (2002) and Virdi (2003), is the role of the Hindu religious epics, the Ramayana and Mahabharata, which function as the moral compass of Indian society through the principles of dharma, or ultimate Hindu law. The religious epics may be seen as the foundational texts of Indian society, and most films exhibit elements of the dharmik code. The religious texts function as “an informant of Indian culture as well as a spectacularly successful case of ideological transmission” (Mishra 2002: 41). More importantly, the texts regulate what can and cannot be said in relation to tropes such as gender, sexuality, domesticity, romance, and other categories that mark the social present. As the analysis of the two films exemplify,
the dharmik code is hegemonic and informs the expression of gender, sexuality, romance and so forth.

At the same time, there are sites and spaces for what Mishra calls “controlled transgressions … that introduce a disharmony, an ambiguity into the social” (2002: 257). These takes place variously — through the song-and-dance sequences, mother-daughter relationships, gender relationships, heroes-turned-villains — and challenge the normative dharmik informed codes through which the social is constituted. As Kasbekar (2001), Mishra (2002), Virdi (2003), and Dwyer (2000) all point out, these controlled transgressions are becoming more significant within Hindi film culture, where previously held ‘taboos’ such as pre-marital sex, marriage including inter-caste marriage, class divisions are no longer exceptional, and marks India’s shift towards a consumption culture in which the middle classes maintain cultural hegemony. However, as much as this is the case, Mishra (2002) maintains that the dharma-adharma-dharma formula only allows for transgression to occur as long as the dharmik order is restored at the closure of the film. In other words the restoration of the moral coded is an absolute non-negotiable. It informs, and is perpetuated by, popular Hindi cinema.

In most Bollywood films the song-and-dance spectacle is treated as a way to satisfy the voyeuristic desires of the audience, whilst controlling transgression in a way that does not threaten the moral social universe. The use of song and dance replaces erotic spectacle, and may be seen as a site of transgression. It makes the private, romantic or sexual encounter a highly choreographed fantasy. Bollywood film industry, as Kasbekar points out, use the song-and-dance sequence as part of “a variety of strategies and subterfuges” to get around the “idealised moral universe … to provide ‘unofficial’ erotic pleasures to its targeted
audience” (2001: 292-293). The song-and-dance montage sequence works doubly: on the one hand it is a subterfuge of a hegemonic Hindu moral universe informed by the dharmik codes; on the other, the subterfuge, that is the use of the song-and-dance sequence to mark “transgressive pleasure” (Kasbekar, 2001: 293), affirm hegemonic ideas about the femininity precisely because

the paradigmatic moments of song and dance mark a shift of registers that places them [the eroticised spectacle of female sexuality] well within the realm of fantasy, and dress and distances the moments of spectacle (with their display of costumes, settings, music, dance movements) from the syntagmatic narrative” (Kasbekar, 2001: 293).

In other words the song-and-dance distances the eroticism on screen from lived social experiences and both makes this a fantasy and a spectacle. It is only through such a rendition that the transgressive pleasure operates and in that regard does not make an intervention to the moral hegemonic universe. Kasbekar states that “the woman as spectacle is tolerated, not because it is un-contentious, but because the Hindi film takes great pains to devise ways to accommodate the moral concerns of its audience and coax their consent” (2001: 292). Virdi similarly states that the “song and dance sequences stand in for sex scenes” with the focus on the heroine and her body, through movement and provocative looks. (2003: 146). The heroine brings an un-assumed eroticism to the song-and-dance sequence through the voyeuristic gaze of the camera, she sings of intense and passionate love whilst sexual tension is built through the dance moves, the use of eye-line shots to reveal the ‘sensual gaze’ between the lovers (and the spectator), and the woman moving as if she is unaware of the power her body holds. These scenes are often heightened by the use of a wet sari (due to a downpour during the song), or through the use of fire and
shadow, or even framing the woman through not quite see through glass. The Item Girl phenomenon in popular Indian cinema is a case in point. To cite Sangita Gopal

First witnessed in the 1980s, this sexually-charged, upbeat song-and-dance sequence with ribald lyrics and titillating imagery is usually set in a bar, nightclub, or the villain’s den. Supposedly derived from ‘item bomb’ … the item number, performed by item girls … or a big star in a guest appearance … begins to show up regularly by the 1990s. This song-and-dance number often has no relation whatsoever to the film, and the ‘item girl’ plays no role elsewhere in the diegesis (2012: 40).

The rise of the item number is further testament to the way the song-and-dance sequence is used to engender a controlled transgression that pushes the boundaries of female sexuality for the male gaze, for patriarchal consumption. In that sense, she remains trapped within the hegemony of patriarchy, and within the dharmik code, as this is an acceptable resolution as Hindu law is a patriarchal law. Further to this, where such transgressions do take place, where the “female sexed body (Virdi 2003: 145) is expressed, in most instances popular Hindi films end with an affirmation of what Virdi calls “the good woman” (2003: 170). She is, therefore, doubly marked as she is the subject of “festishization and sublimation” (Virdi 2003: 174): as subject of desire and pleasure (the sexualized heroine) and as mother and wife (rendered as a nonsexual being) who has spiritual qualities that are representative of the nation such as “self-sacrifice, benevolence, devotion, religiosity” (Chatterjee 1989: 630).

As Ramaswamy points out

the female body which has been used to produce a possessive male centered sense of territory in which while the male citizen is interpellated as the active subject of the body politic, the female citizen is virtually erased as an active subject to be replaced by the idealized, stylized, and ultimately passive figure of Mother India (2001: 110).

In other words she “could be at the centre of a representation but yet not participate in the construction of that representation” (Rao, 1999, 319). And she has been at the centre of
nationalist discourses, which took up the image of the virtuous woman as the ‘new Indian woman’, while vilifying the immoral woman as sign of the progressive liberalisation of the west. This binary is repeated often and fits well into the melodramatic themes that are characteristic of Bollywood. Not only does the ‘vamp’ represent the moral degradation of thought, her interaction with (or tempting of) the hero in Bollywood cinema is reflective of attitudes about modernity and its effects on Indian culture. The hero or heroine may engage with the vamp/villain but it usually leads to his or her downfall, or at least to a long road of redemptive acts and self-pity before order is restored as we see in DDLJ. In what follows I examine two post-independence key films, separated by 40 years, to argue that across these a repeated modality of representing sexuality, gender, and dharmik order is discernible.

Case Study: MOTHER INDIA

Mehboob Khan’s much-celebrated iconic film Mother India, released in 1957, occupies a central location as the foundational text that epitomizes female embodiment of Indian nationalism. As Dwyer comments, the film is regarded as “a quintessential Indian film, a new national epic, particularly in its treatment of the essence of the Indian woman” (2005: 172). Khan’s film details the struggles of a woman, Rhada, who is trying to raise her two sons Ramu and Birju in abject poverty after both her father and her husband leave her. Her father is imprisoned and her husband, after being crushed and losing his arms, cannot stand the harshness of their living conditions and so deserts his young family. Rhada also faces the threat of the village landlord, Sukhilala, who exploits her poverty to gain sexual favours which she rejects. Her sons grow up under this oppression and Rhada forms a close bond with her youngest son Birju. He has witnessed his mother’s degradation and grows to be a vengeful young man. The end of the film sees him stabbing Sukhilala to death and abducting
Sukhila’s daughter Rupa. Rhada confronts her son as he is riding away with Rupa and shoots him to save Rupa’s honour (and her own).

Released 10 years after independence, the title connects with a longer history in India of locating the mother ‘as the substantial embodiment of national territory’ (Ramaswamy 2010: 1). It is also connected to a specific rendition of nationalism that Nehru’s Congress Party engenders: the economic development and industrialization of the nation without mortgaging Indian cultural values. We see this variously: in the opening mis-en-scene which invokes a complex relationship between women’s body, affect, earth (as mother), progress, and nation (as mother), weaved together to imagine a postcolonial Nehruvian nationalism. The encounter with the local moneylender who makes sexual advances (as payment on a loan) toward Radha confirms her vulnerability to a village-based system of exchange that exploits her. Here, Radha is made to stand in for India’s rural poor exploited through the village system, and implicitly champions the Congress Party’s call for the nationalization of banks in India as a way to redress her (and the poor’s) exploitation. And finally, when Radha kills her son Birju for making sexual advances on a girl, she sacrifices her most intimate relationship for the continuity of dharmik order and upholds the law (Mishra 2002: 87). The subtext is about the sanctity and purity of the nation: its contamination is an impossibility and the source of this must be killed. The modernizing ‘Western’ imperatives foundational to post-independence nationalism cannot contaminate Indian ‘tradition’. This is the larger point at stake. As various scholars (Mishra, 2002; Virdi, 2003; Sarkar, 2010) suggest, the suturing of the mother into, and as, the national geo-body, is multifaceted. Her body is inscribed through various discursive strategies which function to entrench ‘the symbolism of the “national mother”, India, as well as that of the mythical “mother-goddess”’ (Thoraval 2000: 75). The term mother enjoys a privileged position in terms of national mythic symbols
and it takes up various facets — as life giver, nurturer, self-sacrificing, avenger, upholder of dharma, and finally as ‘secular goddess’ or Nation (earth) (Dwyer 2005: 162). And Radha in *Mother India* embodies all of these different facets: she nurtures both her children and the village, sacrifices herself to give life to her children and for her village, avenges wrong-doings in the name of maintaining the dharmik code, and embodies the figure of the ideal national subject. As Mishra points out, *Mother India* is, without doubt, “primarily a nationalist ethnographic narrative” (Mishra 2002: 75). The post-independence nationalist project of industrialization is explicit in the film, as are the references to the Congress party, the songs about the land, the triumph of good over evil, the purity of Radha’s body, all of which collectively work to project a strong sense of post-independence nationalism. While the image of Mother India as used by the Nationalist movement was supposed to be representative of the ‘new’ Indian woman and the ‘new’ India, Virdi argues that this image is merely a reinvention of “the traditional Indian woman tempered by the mix of dominant Victorian and upper-caste Bhraminical values” and that this image has been framed in law and popular imagination (2003, 62-63). This is why Virdi argues that while ‘women exterminating men appeared in ... films such as *Mother India* and *Mamta* (Maternal Love, 1966) ... [their] fury and power service conservative patriarchal ideals apotheosizing motherhood ... [and they remain] objects of reverence rather than agents exacting revenge in the name of womankind’ (2003: 164). The reductive coding of the female body is a dominant trend in Indian popular cinema for as Virdi argues, ‘women’s roles [are] assigned in relation to the hero ... [and] maintain the male protagonist’s centrality. ... The range of women characters are limited to the archetypal Madonna/whore, lover/ “other” figures’ (2003: 121).
In that sense, while the figure of Radha might be seen as emancipatory for centering the figure of the mother in a masculinist nation building project, ultimately patriarchal authority is restored. We see this for example when the elder son Ramu takes the place of the Father, substitutes the phallic order, and the mother-son relationship played out between Rhada and Birju through what Mishra calls “the visual narrative of incestuous desire” (2002: 85). Mishra argues that the mother-son relationship in *Mother India* sees Birju rebelling against his mother at the end of the film when he abducts the village landlord’s daughter. He has therefore effectively gone against dharmik order, which is laid out as law through the idea of *laj* — sense of shame, honour, or self-respect (Mishra 2002: 70). Rhada repeatedly refers to her *laj* as an awareness of the shame that could befall her, should she stray outside of the law or cultural order she lives by, understanding that her honour and virtue are the measures of her worth. The narrative makes it clear at certain points that this is a key theme of *Mother India*. Examples of this include the tree branch falling on Sukhilala after he tries to assault Rhada, Birju killing Sukhilala, the abduction of the Sukhilala’s daughter Rupa by Birju, and Rhada’s killing of her son in order to restore Rupa’s honour, which she claims as her own. Because of his rebellion against the law as Rhada understands it, Birju must die. He has defiled his mother by taking Rupa, just as Sukhilala did. Mishra describes Radha’s position as being “an ethical subject (with humane, democratic values) who either loses out completely or is integrated back into the system and stands for it” (2002: 37). Rhada in that sense personifies not only the ideal woman but she also the ‘new India’ and the ‘new woman’ who remains under the law of dharmik-informed patriarchy.
DILWALE DULHANIYA LE JAYENGE (DDLJ, The Lover Wins the Bride)

DDLJ was released in 1995, when the Bollywood film industry began its interest with the Indian diaspora as a target audience. As Verstappen and Rutten note, this was “the first film that did not ridicule the diaspora, and instead tried to appeal to it” (2007: 213). Previous renditions of the Indian diaspora were critical of those who had left the nation, and representations of these displaced subjects focused on their sense of loss, hopelessness, and regret without a sense of empathy. This film however anticipates “the supposed desire of the Indian diaspora to rediscover their homeland, and treated their feelings of nostalgia and longing very seriously (Verstappen and Rutten 2007: 213). If previous renditions of the diasporic dilemma did not situate them as citizens of the nation on grounds that their loyalties to the nation is suspect, as Sharpe (2005: 65) argues, then DDLJ provides a refreshingly new lens for articulating ‘how notions of belonging, territoriality, and nation have been reconstructed in contemporary India” (Mankekar 1999: 731).

The recodification of the relationship between diaspora and homeland through this film has proven to be successful: DDLJ, as Mehta points out, “has become the longest running film in the history of Indian cinema” (2005: 144); “DDLJ, became a mega box-office hit; DDLJ’s success helped establish the overseas territory as a major market for Bombay filmmakers. The film bagged all the important Filmfare awards—the Oscars of India” (Mehta 2005: 145). DDLJ reconfigures the relationship between the Indian nation (and nationalism) and the diasporic collective around the question of homeland and identity and seeks to articulate a transnational Indian nationalism that “problematises a purely locational politics of global-local or centre-periphery” (Grewal and Kaplan 1994: 13). For example, the film opens with the figure of a Punjabi migrant feeding pigeons at Trafalgar Square and we hear him “murmuring and dreaming about his wish to return ‘to my land, to my Punjab’” (Verstappen 2007: 213).
and Rutten 2007: 213). This sets the context for us: here is a diasporic subject, who has lived in England for 22 years, we discover, but who is unable to embrace England as home and is haunted by the place he had left. In that regard the diasporic longing for India as home reaffirms the vitality of Indian nationalism.

Commercial success aside, the film was also well-received and endorsed by the Indian state who praised Aditya Chopra for creating a good family film, one devoid of vulgarity and violence. The Indian government expressed its approval for the film and assisted in its marketing by giving it the award for the ‘BEST POPULAR FILM PROVIDING WHOLESALE ENTERTAINMENT’ (Mehta 2005: 145).

Mehta argues that the award was in response to the changing media landscape in India, particularly with the introduction of satellite television which “was not subject to state censorship” and the film industry's pressure “for more liberal censorship guidelines with respect to sex and violence so that it could compete with satellite television” (2005: 144). As the question of sexuality on screen took hold and pushed the boundaries of what was considered ‘acceptable’ within the auspices of a Hindu-derived and informed nationalism, the state responded by first distinguishing “between ‘good’ commercial films, i.e. family films [to which DDLJ belongs] ... and ‘bad’ commercial films which contain vulgar songs” (Mehta 2005: 138) and revised its censorship guidelines to reflect this distinction. In that sense, DDLJ’s marks the state’s intervention into the representations of sexuality on screen, for the film reaffirms the significance of familial relationships and reinforces the dharmik code as fundamental to the Indian way of life. And more significantly, as Patricia Uberoi points out, “DDLJ proposes that Indian identity can survive translocation” (1998: 310).
Let me discuss the film more specifically to enunciate this point. The plot itself is relatively straightforward. As Jenny Sharpe sums it up:

The heroine, Simran (Kajol), is the British-born daughter of a modestly middle-class Punjabi shopkeeper, Chaudhury Baldev Singh (Amrish Puri), while the hero, Raj (Shah Rukh Khan), is also British-born, except that he is an idle millionaire’s son who wears a Harley-Davidson jacket, drives a Lamborghini, and jet-sets across the globe. While Simran’s family represents a prior era of migration when Indians had to struggle in small businesses to succeed, Raj’s family history belongs more to a more recent past in which enterprising NRIs have made their fortunes in computer and Internet-related businesses. The film presents the problem of the NRI’s national identity through Baldev’s desire to reconnect with his homeland by arranging a marriage between his daughter and the son of his best friend in Punjab (2005: 64-65).

Baldev, who belongs to the first-generation diaspora who longs for the homeland as exemplified by the values and traditions he maintains in his home, and the restrictions he places on his daughters and their interactions with members of British society. His home represents the Indian nation here, confining and regulating tradition within the sanctity of his four walls. As he states “In the heart of London, I’ve kept India alive” (Chopra, 1995). His comment to himself, in the opening scene of the film, finely captures the diasporic dilemma, of being here and there simultaneously, of being alien in the place where he lives:

*This is London, the biggest city in the world.*
*I’ve been here now for 22 years.*
*Every day I pass down this road and it asks me: ‘Who is Chowdhury Baldev Singh? Where has he come from? What is he doing here?’ What can I reply? I have spent so many years of my life here, and still this land is alien to me. Nobody knows me here, except these pigeons. Like me, they don’t have a country; they go to the place where they get food. Now necessity has enchained me. But one day, definitely, I will return to my country!* (Chopra, 1995).

The scene them seamlessly moves across space and time, and the mis-en-scene is full — we see the golden mustard fields of Punjab and the green and fertile land (after all Punjab is considered the rice bowl of India), we hear an up-beat Punjabi folk song sung by females in
colourful clothing — ‘Come home stranger, your country calls you back!’ — and a transposed Baldev, who is now in the field feeding his pigeons. The visual juxtaposition powerfully captures his sense of displacement and alienation and simultaneously underscores his link to ‘India’ (here read as nation, culture, and nationalism). India, for Baldev, remains untainted and survives beyond the boundaries of the nation-state. This is clear, according to Sharpe as the film “ends in the idyllic Punjabi countryside, [and] … does not tell the story of rural poverty” and when Baldev “moves his family back home after twenty years of living abroad and sees from the train the same scene that he imagined” (2005: 65). The father’s commitment to keeping Indian tradition and culture alive is also explicit in his response to Simran’s planned travel to Europe: for fear that she might be contaminated, the father is at first reluctant to let her go as it will place her in situations where her values and morals will be tested and potentially bring dishonour to the family if Simran steps outside the boundaries of Hindu social order. As Dwyer points out, “Indian-ness is not so much a question of citizenship as of sharing family values” (2005, 78).

Simran, while frustrated with her father’s relationship to Indian tradition and culture, nevertheless performs the very same identity — we see this when she convinces her father that she is a pious girl who prays to the goddess diligently, who takes her traditional upbringing seriously in an attempt to seek his permission for the trip. The replaying of the role of the ‘ideal woman’, in this case the dutiful daughter is deeply inscribed in her. She also fulfils her role as the ideal ‘new’ Indian woman.

On her trip, she meets Raj, who is the epitome of the liberalised, bourgeois, modern Indian man. He is shown as someone who has embraced western culture in the way he dresses, his exploits with his male friends including stealing and damaging Simran’s father’s shop, his jokes about Simran’s virtue, the car he drives, and even the music he listens to. They
nevertheless spend the trip together and through a drawn-out montage sequence of song-and-dance we discover that they are in love. One night after drinking too much, they wake up next to each other and Raj jokes that something may have happened between them while Simran was drunk. Simran returns home early and discovers that her Father is going to marry her to a man she has never met, and must travel to Punjab. This sequence of scenes is informative: for Dwyer it reflects “a new relaxed attitude to sexuality within the constraints of a traditional morality” (2005: 78); while for Mishra (2002), it marks the ability of Bollywood cinema to transgress and then restore the dharmik order. As he points out, “Bollywood can endorse the dharmik order even as it accommodates the modern and transgresses that order” (2002: 33). This is why the transgressions that we encounter on the trip are ironed out at the end of the film: we find out that Raj after all, [does] have traditional Indian values. The message of DDLJ is that, although the hero and heroine wear Western clothing and embrace youth culture, they have maintained their Indian values, particularly around questions of sexual morality. Raj will not challenge the authority of Simran’s father by eloping with her, while Simran is hot spirited and independent, but also chaste and morally upright (Sharpe 2005: 65).

And Simran struggles with the idea of marrying a stranger when she knows she loves Raj, but is told by her mother that she has no right to choose or to want better things for herself. The patriarchal hold over generations of Indian women is underscored through the conversation between Simran and her mother who insists that Simran must relinquish her affections for Raj. She argues with Simran about her freedom of choice, stating:

> when you were born I vowed you would not make the same sacrifices I did ... But Simran I was wrong. I forgot that a woman has no right to make such pledges. Women are born to make sacrifices for men ... I beg you to give up your happiness and forget him (Chopra, 1995).
For Virdi (2003: 198) DDLJ continues to articulate the injustices of tradition for women and in particular notes the transactional quality of marriage that still exists even in liberalised India. In other words, the film continues to subjugate women under the law of patriarchy and the institution of marriage. This is all, however, forgotten in the resolution of the film as the couple (Simran and Raj) come together, despite the narrative clearly upholding the very cultural order it was critiquing a few scenes earlier.

Simran’s understanding of the need for a good husband and the dangers that are presented in attaching herself to an immoral man are evidence of the weight that tradition still holds over a much younger and distanced (from the homeland) Indian woman. The value of a woman’s honour is prevalent in DDLJ, and much like Radha in Mother India, Simran is very much aware of her honour, and the significance of maintaining it. This is why even during ‘the morning after’ scene where despite appearances the audience is assured that Simran’s virtue is intact. And this is further emphasised by Raj when he responds angrily to her suggestion that he had sex with her:

You think I am a wastrel; I’m not scum, I’m Hindustani. I know what honour means to a Hindustani woman. I would never in my dreams imagine doing that to you (Chopra, 1995).

The film ensures that dharmik order is restored with Raj adamantly claiming his role as the male protector who rescues her from the distress of his making. DDLJ repeats the idea of what it means to be a Hindustani man or woman throughout the narrative and this culminates in acceptance of the couple’s love, but only after dharmik order has been affirmed.

Virdi argues that DDLJ as a Bollywood romance presents the young couple’s love as the opportunity for “emancipation, individualism, self-realisation, affirmation of the individuals’ personal qualities and equality of the sexes in the mutual experience of pleasure.” (2003:
198). The transgressive and modern character of the Bollywood romance, and DDLJ in particular does not find its resolution outside of the boundaries of patriarchy, and tradition. Throughout DDLJ’s narrative, patriarchal rule is avowed even as it is vilified. Simran’s father educates her to believe that she is only as valuable as her chastity and virtue and his continued concern about the impact living in Britain will have on his daughters weighs heavily throughout the film. Secondly, the film naturalises patriarchal law as Simran is still not able to make the choice about who she marries. She also understands that her husband must be of good character because it reflects on her. It is through her refusal to deny her duty and maintain her honour that Raj is forced to turn from the lifestyle he leads and take up his role as an exemplary husband. Her father and patriarchal society in general must approve of her choice, and thus she gives up her agency in sacrifice for her family. It is only through masculine agency, through Raj’s decision to become a better man, and maintain the pan-Indian identity he has taken up earlier in the narrative that resolution is found.

In this chapter I have sought to argue that Bollywood cinema functions as a nationalist cinema and that it seeks to construct a hegemonic rendition of the Indian nation and nationalism that privileges a pan-Indian culture that is articulated in the shadow of a Northern Hindu male subject as Mishra (2002: 3) puts it. Through the discursive regulation of the tropes of gender, sexuality, familial relations, tradition and culture, Bollywood cinema articulates the idea of an imagined community that is homogenous, and in that regard curtails the possibility of alternative imaginings of the nation. The films Mother India and DDLJ reinforce the hegemonic construction of the nation by circumscribing the limit-point of various forms of expression: this limit-point is built around the Hindu epic texts and the dharmik code.
Although divided by a 40-year gap, the films nevertheless are similarly inflected and informed in that they are driven by, and set up ‘allegorical oppositions between good and bad, sanctity and scandal, dharma and adharma, … into a Manichean world order’ (Mishra 2002: 16) that resolves itself through the triumph of the good, sanctity, and dharma. This is most acutely captured in the representation of the self-sacrificing ‘woman as nation’ figure that is based on the goddess Sita: she sacrifices for the nation, patriarchy and Hindu dharmik order. It is in this sense that I wish to suggest that Bollywood cinema as a nationalist cinema “privilege[s] notions of coherence and unity and to stabilize cultural meanings linked to the perceived uniqueness of a given nation ... It is implicated in national myth making and ideological production and serves to delineate both otherness and legitimate selfhood” (Dissanayake 2000, 145). The two films I discussed in this chapter emphasizes the argument that Bollywood cinema reinforces “official versions of national priorities” (Chakravarty, 2000, 224), and presents an unproblematic and unified idea of India and Indian nationalism. In the next chapter I discuss Tamil cinema to argue that this is an instance of a cinema that challenges the dominant inscription of the nation and nationalism and demonstrates that both the idea of the nation and nationalism, as well as the idea that Bollywood is Indian national cinema, are highly problematic.
Chapter Two
Tamil Cinema and the Ethno-Nationalist Project

Chapter One explored the tropes of Bollywood cinema and argued that it reinforces a pan-Indian identity built around the figure of a male, North Indian Hindu Brahmin centric subject as exemplary of the nation. This chapter will examine the ways in which Tamil cinema has expressed the Indian nation: it will argue that while Tamil cinema, prior to Indian Independence, participated in the construction of a pan-Indian homogenous national identity (against British imperial power), post-independence Tamil cinema, specifically between 1940s to 1970s, sought to foster an ethno-nationalist discourse founded upon Tamil culture and identity. In that regard Tamil cinema, post-independence, produced an alternative idea of the Indian nation.

Despite being labeled a regional cinema, Tamil cinema has been interested in the question of the nation (Devadas, 2006), and in this chapter, I seek to demonstrate, through an interrogation of a specific period in Tamil cinema history, 1940 to 1970, the part cinema played in fostering a sense of ethno-nationalism that challenged the hegemony of state endorsed Indian nationalism. Drawing on various scholars on Tamil cinema, I argue that Tamil ethno-nationalist cinema challenged the dominant expression of nationalism in India and in that regard, as Devadas (2006) points out, problematizes “the unproblematic imagining of the Indian nation in specific terms” and encourages a reconsideration of Indian nationalism as multiplicity. Further to this, the discussion also suggests that the question of a national cinema in the Indian context remains unsettled. The chapter ends with a discussion of what Sara Dickey calls ‘personality politics’ and the link to cinema. In particular, this chapter examines the phenomenon of MGR, the use of his star persona in building an ethno-nationalist Tamil identity.
Cinema made in appearance in the state of Tamilnadu in 1916, when the India Film Company released the first South Indian feature film, *Keechaka Vadham* (The Destruction of Keechakan). As Baskaran (2002) notes, early silent Tamil films echoed “however dimly at first, the dynamic of the contemporary social and political currents”. And, as Devadas and Velayutham note, “as anti-colonial struggles were gaining momentum across British India, filmmakers employed the allegories of morality and ethics found in Hindu mythology to politicise the freedom movement so as to circumvent the censors” (2008: 157). In other words, early silent Tamil cinema connected with a larger anti-colonial political sensibility and in that regard participated in the production of an undifferentiated pan-Indian nationalism. Films such as *Dharmapathini* (The Devoted Wife, 1929) and *Anadhaipenn* (Orphan Girl, 1931), *Balayogini* (Child Saint, 1936), *Sevasadan* (House of Service, 1938), and *Thyagabhoomi* (The Land of Sacrifice, 1939) are examples of what Baskaran calls films that were charged with ‘nationalistic ideas’ (1996: 7). As Devadas and Velayutham point out, *Thyagabhoomi*

used documentary footage of Mahatma Gandhi and makes an explicit reference to the Temple Entry Movement as illuminated in the opening scene with the *harijans* waiting at the temple doors. The reference here is to the Vaikam *satyagraha* (passive resistance) from 1924 to 1925, which offered Gandhi the first opportunity to act on behalf of the *harijans* who were denied entry into temples and the use of roads outside the Vaikam temple in the state of Kerala. Gandhi negotiated with the Nambudri Brahmin trustees of the Vaikam temple and managed to convince the temple authorities to open the temple roads to all (2008: 159).

The film thus participated in foregrounding a pan-Indian nationalism founded upon Gandhian principles, and in that sense was committed to the nationalist project. Alongside the trend of producing pan-Indian nationalistic films, there emerged films that offered a radically different conception of nationalism: one that was based upon Tamil cultural heritage. It is to the emergence of an ethno-nationalist cinema that I turn to next top
explore the ways in which Tamil cinema challenged a pan-Indian nationalism that manifested in Bollywood cinema.

**Ethno-Nationalist Tamil Cinema**

The trend of producing films that drew from and glorified Tamil culture began in the late 1930s, and this, as Thoraval (2001: 318) comments, signalled the beginnings of “an ethno-linguistic ‘nationalism’, anti-Hindi and anti-north (India), and as its corollary, the putting forward, in literature and on the screen, of the glories, languages and culture of the ancient ‘Dravidians’”. That is to say a commitment to producing ethno-nationalist Tamil films began to dominate the Tamil film industry as seen, for example, in films such as *Ambikapathy* (1937) and *Kambhar* (1938), and was amplified with “the introduction of compulsory Hindustani in 1938” (Barnett 1976: 52) by the Congress Party. The making of Hindi as the official national language was not well received in the state of Tamilnadu: “the Dravidian movement [began to] engage in agitation politics against the Congress Party, which it had been supporting to date” (Devadas and Velayutham 2008: 161); and according to Chadda, the move by the Congress Party, helped consolidate the hegemony of Tamil identity “rooted in the Tamil literary movement of the early nineteenth century” (1997: 71). The construction of a homogenous nation (through the synchronisation of language) thus worked against the very idea for as Devadas and Velayutham make clear, post 1938 Tamil cinema worked inward into an unproblematic, uncontaminated, and unchallenged notion of Dravidianism based on linguistic and cultural differences ... that were mobilised during the period of the DMK and later AIADMK stranglehold of Tamil cinema” (2008: 161).
It should be added that while the Dravidian movement found ideological resource in Tamil culture, civilisation and heritage as discursive foundations for the formation of a viable sense of cultural nationalism and autonomy in Tamilnadu, the movement, spearheaded mainly by Tamil leadership, went through many phases, from the narrow anti-Brahminism of the pro-British Justice party to the more militant and radical Self-Respect movement ... which dominated Tamil Nadu from the mid-1920s to the end of the 1940s (Chadda, 1997: 72).

The Dravidian-centred political map of postcolonial Tamilnadu is quite complex and according to Subramanian, the shifts can be articulated in this way: Tamil nationalism was embraced in 1938 and in 1949 the DMK (Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, Dravidian Progress Federation) was formed. The DMK was strongly anti-Brahmin, anti-Hindi and sought state autonomy based on Tamil, or more precisely, Dravidian, culture. The demand for autonomy was however de-emphasised in the early 1970s, and in 1972 the AIADMK (All India Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam; All India Dravidian Progress Federation) was formed. The AIADMK “abandoned non-Brahminism and did not emphasize language and state autonomy” (Subramanian 2005: 122). That said, as the studies by Hardgrave (1973), Pandian (1992), Dickey (1993), Devadas (2006), and Devadas and Velayutham (2008), amongst others confirm, “a symbiotic relationship existed between Tamil cinema and Tamil Nadu politics” (Devadas and Velayutham 2008: 161). In other words cinema and politics both informed each other and had a very cosy and intimate relationship. As Devadas and Velayutham point out,

At a thematic level films such Velaikari (Servant Maid, 1949), Mandhirikumari (The Minister’s Daughter, 1950), Parasakthi (The Goddess, 1952), Madurai Veeran (The Soldier of Madurai, 1956), Sivagangai Seemai (The Land of Sivagangai, 1959), Veerapandiya Kattabomman (The Hero Kattabomman, 1959), Parthiban Kanavu (Parthiban’s Dream, 1960), Pavamannippu (Forgiveness of Sins, 1961), Kappalotiya Thamizhan (The Tamil Who Launched a Ship, 1961), Tangaritinam (Precious Stone, 1967), Engal Thangam (Our Beloved, 1970), and Agraharathil Oru Kazhuthai (A
Donkey in the Brahmin Enclave, 1977) returned to the general theme of caste and language which were the principal bases of Tamil nationalism so as to engender a radically different version of the postcolonial nation (2008: 162).

_Velaikari_, for example, a film adaptation of a play by C. N. Annadurai was released with “the founding of the party” (Baskaran 1996: 104) and champions the main principles of the DMK: “the film is laced with anti-caste, anti-religious and socialistic rhetoric” (Baskaran 1996: 105). C. N. Annadurai, popularly known as Anna or elder brother, was the first non-Congress Chief Minister of Tamilnadu, elected to office in 1967. As Kannan notes:

Anna ... and his mentor E. V. Ramasamy ‘Periyar’ ... tried to forge a Dravida political construct seeking Dravida Nadu, a Dravida homeland, approximating today’s southern India. By transforming the British-allied non-Brahmin Justice Party into the popular political Dravider Kazhagam (DK or Dravida Front) in 1944 they had laid the foundations of Tamil cultural and political nationalism in the Madras state (2010: 4).

The film is highly critical of Hindu religion, Nehru’s drive to modernise India, the imposition of Hindi as national language, and the caste-system, and seeks to demonstrate that this vision of postcolonial India is highly exclusive and does not include Tamil culture and heritage. This is one trajectory of critique that we find in films that had a symbiotic relationship with the DMK and later AIADMK.

The other, as seen in “films such as _Mandhirikumari, Pavamannippu, and Engal Thangam_” sought to glorify Tamil culture and “affirm the hegemony of Dravidian culture” (Devadas and Velayutham 2008: 162). Here, cinema is employed in the service of privileging Dravidian culture, and more importantly, connects with established Tamil scholarship which argues that “Saiva Sidhanta, a specifically Tamil or Dravidian religion, predated the spread of Sanskritic civilization and establishment of Brahminical priesthood in India” (Chadda 1997: 71). The connection served to legitimise the DMK’s ideological position, and more crucially confirm the political party’s claim that the nation is founded upon Dravidian culture while
denying the hegemonic construction of the nation through a North-Indian, Brahminical optic. This is most clearly articulated in the film *Parasakthi*, the screenplay for which was penned by M. Karunanidhi, who has been the leader of the DMK since 1969, after the death of C. N. Annadurai, and has been chief minister of Tamil Nadu on five occasions. For Devadas and Velayutham, this “can be seen through the opening film-song which reiterates the splendour of Dravidian heritage, the main themes of the film (triumph of rationalism over religiosity; anti-priesthood; and self-respect)” (2008: 163); while for Hardgrave, this is most clearly expressed by Karunanidhi, who declared: “intention was to introduce the ideas and policies of social reform and justice ... and bring up the status of the Tamil language as they were called for in DMK politics” (cited in Hardgrave 1973: 292). Other films that continued the trajectory of glorifying Dravidian culture included *Madurai Veeran*, *Veerapandiya Kattabomman*, *Kappalotiya Thamizhan*, and *Sivagangai Seemai*.

Beyond the films themselves, this period of ethno-nationalist Tamil cinema also witnessed the strategic use of “personality politics”, that is the use of cinema to create “movie star-politicians” (Dickey 1993: 341). And the iconic figure of this conjecture was M. G. Ramachandran (MGR). As Dickey notes, “the most successful and notorious of these leaders has been MGR, a popular movie star for forty years and Tamil Nadu’s chief minister from 1977 until his death in 1987” (1993: 241). In her detailed study of MGR as the exemplary movie star-politician, Dickey comments on the way in which the DMK constructed MGR’s star-image and used it strategically for its own political end — the reproduction of an ethno-nationalist Tamil identity:

Annadurai asked the young M. G. Ramachandran to star in one of his movies in the early 1950s. Ramachandran was a great success, and soon became a member of the DMK party. He and other movie stars were utilized to ‘decorate’ party functions and draw crowds. MGR began to use the DMK colours of red and black in his movies (after the switch to colour in the late 1950s) and made frequent allusions to party policy and
rhetoric, much of it anti-Congress. Injections of political spice became very popular in the 1950s and ’60s, and it was said that no movie could succeed without some reference to the DMK. MGR, the main star allied with the DMK, gained a large and devoted following and soon controlled many aspects of his movies, using himself as the saviour of the poor (1993: 55).

The calibration of the MGR image — as saviour of the poor, as philanthropic everyday hero, playing “typical roles, like that of a vagrant who becomes king due to his exploits and who decides that each citizen should get a house and livestock” (Thoraval 2001: 321) — connected with the people: films such as Nadodi Mannan (Vagabond King, 1958), Enga Vitu Pillai (The Son of our Home, 1965), Nam Nadu (Our Country, 1969), Adimai Penn (Slave Girl, 1969) and Engal Thangam reproduced the stereotypical hero image and this proved to be highly successful. As Devadas and Velayutham note:

MGR entered politics in 1953, used cinema strategically as a means of political communication and was Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu between 1977 and 1986. At the same time, the shift in political dominance of parties that MGR was associated with testifies to the success of the cinematic formula. The DMK, which MGR was aligned with until 1972, dominated state politics until the declaration of Emergency in 1975, lost the 1977 state elections to AIADMK, the party that MGR founded (2008: 164).

Clearly, as the political shifts demonstrate, MGR had a significant influence in the direction, power and ideological thrust of the politics of Tamil Nadu. More significantly, for the purposes of this chapter and the central argument of the thesis, the intimate relationship between cinema and politics played out through the figure of MGR, underscores that Tamil cinema during this period was forcefully ethno-nationalist. This is precisely why Lalitha Gopalan foregrounds the relationship between Tamil cinema and cultural nationalism in Tamil Nadu in these terms:

Self-assertion of Tamil culture has persistently interrogated the centrifugal forces of Indian nationalism [...] nowhere else in India has cultural nationalism worked so successfully to dislodge upper caste hegemony, to carve out a non-Brahminical public sphere. (1998: 196)
And this is also precisely why Devadas (2006) argues that,

Tamil cinema has been particularly concerned with the idea of the nation, most overtly and powerfully during the period that witnessed the strategic use of cinema for political purposes by the [various political parties] which did not support any form of national commonality and which problematised the official version of the nation.

This chapter has argued that Tamil cinema provides an alternative representation of the nation and nationalism to that which is offered by Bollywood cinema. Tamil cinema, specifically during the period between 1940 to the 1970’s shored up a strong commitment to producing an ethno-nationalist cinema that challenged the dominant articulation of the Indian nation through the figure of the North Indian subject. This Tamil based ethno-nationalism was premised on the discourse of Tamil cultural nationalism and the cinematic productions of the period up to the 1970’s in Tamil cinema’s history allowed for the expression of a robust politicized ideology, and challenged the national unity expressed through Bollywood cinema. However, like Bollywood during the height of the 1960’s and 1970’s, Tamil cinema functioned to endorse the hegemonic ideology of the political parties who were in power. In that sense, like Bollywood cinema, Tamil cinema, through the production of an ethno-nationalist discourse, maintained those in power. At the same time, what was offered on screen during this period also calls into question the constitution of national cinema in the Indian context. Tamil cinema, has participated in questions of the nation quite vociferously, and in that sense is very interested in the national question. Given this, the labeling of Tamil cinema, as a regional cinema, is highly problematic because it is also a national cinema. In other words, Tamil cinema’s interest in the question of the nation problematizes the Bollywood cinema as national cinema equation and calls for us to conceive of Indian cinema as necessarily multifaceted and hybrid.
Chapter Three  
The Terror Trilogy: Rethinking Nation, Reinventing Tamil Cinema

In this chapter I examine three films by Mani Ratnam, an internationally acclaimed Tamil auteur, collectively known as the terror trilogy: two films in Tamil, *Roja* and *Bombay* released in 1992 and 1995 respectively and one in Hindi, *Dil Se* (From the Heart), released in 1999. Drawing from the numerous debates around these films, I argue that what Mani Ratnam achieves in the trilogy is a chronicle of the Indian nation that is highly disjunctured. This is the first argument. The second is that both the Tamil films — *Roja* and *Bombay* — mark a significant intervention into the cinematic culture of articulating the idea of an Indian nation in highly ethno-communalised ways that had previously dominated Tamil cinema. In that sense, the films open up a disjunctured idea of the nation to challenge the history of screening the nation in postcolonial Tamil cinema, and reinvents Tamil cinema itself. However, at the same time, this chapter argues that Ratnam’s representation of women continues to endorse a masculinist nationalism that subjugates women to archetypical roles expressed in Bollywood cinema.

**Locating Mani Ratnam**

Mani Ratnam is, without doubt, one of the most significant contemporary filmmakers to have emerged out of Tamil Cinema and whose work is now seen as pan-Indian. Labelled ‘a Wunderkind at Madras’ by Thoraval (2000: 338), Ratnam, has, in just over a period of twenty-nine years, directed thirty feature-length films across a range of linguistic and regional divides that inform Indian cinema and culture. He debuted with *Pallavi Anupallavi* (Pallavi and Pallavi) in Kannada (another regional language and cinema) in 1983, and recently released *Kadal* (Love, 2012, Tamil). To date he has directed twenty-one films in Tamil, seven in Hindi, one in Kannada, one in Malayalam, and one in Telugu and has played
a significant role in nine other films for the story, screenplay and production. As Lalitha Gopalan remarks, ‘of all the contemporary directors in India, Mani Ratnam stands out for his cinematic virtuosity and commercial success, a combination that few other directors have matched’ (2002: 111).

Additionally, Ratnam has directed films that have had global acknowledgments. The list of accolades is quite long, but here is a snapshot: *Nayakan* (Hero, 1987), which draws from Coppola’s *Godfather* trilogy, was selected in 1996 as part of ‘Time Magazine’s All-Time 100 Movies’; in 1994, a retrospective of Mani Ratnam’s Tamil films was shown at the Toronto International Film Festival ‘and his films have become a regular feature at the Washington, DC, International Film Festival’ (Gopalan 2002: 111); *Bombay* (1995), which focused on communal violence was bestowed a special award in 1996 by the Political Film Society in the United States and was banned in Singapore and Malaysia where a significant Indian diasporic community resides; while *Kannathil Muthamittal* (A Peck on the Cheek, 2002), a film about the Sri Lankan civil war, the Tamil diaspora, and the politics of displacement, won various awards at six international film festivals between 2003-4. To unpack and examine Mani Ratnam’s terror trilogy, specifically the articulation of the nation, I draw from Colin McCabe’s pertinent observation that an interrogation of films must be located ‘in the widest possible intellectual and cultural context’ in which they circulate (2001: vii).

**The Terror-Trilogy and the Nation**

The three films that make up the terror-trilogy were made between 1992-1999, a significant decade within Indian history for this was a period marked by economic liberalisation and accelerated economic growth. This was also a period marked by increasing communal agitation and violence after the implementation of the Mandal Commission report, the
demolition of the Babri mosque in 1992 and the subsequent communal riots and killing\(^5\). And the decade also witnessed further violence and tension between India and Pakistan over Kashmir, culminating in the breach of a 28-year old peace accord in 1999 with the intrusion into Kargil by the Pakistan army. Further to this, this decade also witnessed the coming to power of the right-winged political party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP, Indian People’s Party) in May 1996, which championed a Hindu nationalist or Hindu-India ideology; the formation of the United Front coalition by the Janata Dal Party that included the secular Congress Party; the collapse of the coalition; and the re-election of the BJP in the 1998 elections. In the same year, India conducted a series of underground nuclear tests, prompting economic sanctions, pursuant to the 1994 Nuclear Proliferation Prevention Act.

This is the larger socio-political climate within which Ratnam’s terror trilogy can be situated in that the films respond to, reflect, and comment upon the religious fundamentalism, communal violence, and rampant right-winged nationalism at that time. Much has been written about the terror trilogy collectively (Chakravarty 2000) and each film individually (Niranjana 2000; Vasudevan 1997) with the debate centered on the kind of India Ratnam fosters on screen (see for instance Benjamin 2006; Kabir 2003; and Mallhi 2006). So, for example, Dissanayake and Gokulsing advance that Ratnam has highlighted the self-defeating nature of extremist thinking and xenophobia and stressed the need to take a more rational approach to the whole question of religious loyalties and ethnic affiliations in the context of multiracial, multi-religious India’ (2004: 28).

In contrast, Akhtar, writing about *Bombay*, has this to say:

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\(^5\) The Mandal Commission, passed in 1979, was put in place to tackle caste discrimination. Babri Mosque, in Ayodhya, was destroyed in 1992 when a political rally organised by the Hindu Right turned into a riot involving more than 150, 000 people. It is variously reported that more than 2, 000 people were killed in ensuing riots in many major cities in India (Mankekar, 1999).
If you make a film about Germans and Jews, and the Nazi Party says it’s a good film, then there must be something wrong. The movie is the particular view of a benign, tolerant but communal-minded Hindu [nation]’ (1995: 30).

Kabir, writing about *Dil Se*, argues that the film works against the ‘homogenising majoritarian discourse’ and urges communities alienated within the construction of the nation to ‘claim their rightful place’ (2003: 141). Whereas Chakravarty argues that the terror trilogy stages fantasmatic encounters with the other, played out at the borders and interstices of social life and consciousness: the space between civil society and the state in *Roja*, between Hindus and Muslims in *Bombay* and between the terrorist and the non-alienated, ‘benign’ individual in *Dil Se*. All three films allude to actual groups or events (Kashmiri militants in *Roja*, the Ayodhya stand-off and Bombay communal riots in *Bombay*, a terrorist plot involving a suicide bomber reminiscent of the Rajiv Gandhi assassination in *Dil Se*) as dramatic backdrops for tales of passion and ineluctable desire (2000: 231-2).

Chakrabarty’s take up of the terror trilogy, focusing on the relationships formed with the other — the Muslim community, the terrorists — builds from the views expressed by Niranjana and Bharucha earlier, in 1994. Collectively, these scholars, amongst others, argue that these films ‘deify a new middle class that is distinctly Hindu at heart with Hindutva (Hinduness) in its soul, and does so by consistently ‘othering’ Muslims (and Kashmiri militants)’ (Benjamin 2006: 425). *Roja* for instance is a story about the personal ordeal of a newly-wed innocent village girl from the Southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Her husband Rishi is a cryptologist working for the Indian Government. He is assigned a post in an Army Communication Centre in Kashmir where he is abducted by a group of Kashmiri Muslim separatists who demand the release of their leader Wassim Khan in exchange. Roja who does not speak Hindi or English pleads in Tamil and with hand signals to politicians and military officials to help secure the release of her husband. But Rishi manages to escape in time without any assistance from the Indian authorities and the movie ends with the
reunion of Roja and Rishi and the Muslim terrorist leader Wassim Khan still in prison in India. The climax of the narrative thus not only secures the Indian nation but more crucially reinforces the hegemony of a secular postcolonial Indian nation as constructed by the state. The highlight of this movie is not so much that it is set in the disputed territory of Kashmir or its emotive depiction of the impact of terrorism on the lives of people concerned but the powerful rendition of an unproblematic secular, postcolonial version of nationalism.

Similarly, Ratnam’s next blockbuster *Bombay* (1994) is set in the backdrop of the communal riots in Mumbai following the destruction of the Barbi Mosque. Here too, the story begins in a Tamil Nadu village where a Hindu journalist Shekhar falls in love and marries a Muslim girl, Shaila Bano. The newly wed elope to Mumbai and later are embroiled in the communal riots. As Angie Mallhi writes, while the film seeks to promote values of secularism by placing the experience of an inter-religious family at the centre of the irrational violence caused by religious strife, it ultimately undermines this through what is essentially a proclamation of Hindu hegemony (2006: 2).

And *Dil Se* which ends with ‘a bomb-induced death’ (Chakravarty 2000: 232) of the protagonist and the female terrorists affirms the patriotism of the Indian hero who gives up his life for his country: on one level, his death ensures the survival of the Indian nation; on another its serves to legitimize and foregrounds the necessity of a militarized India, one that is able to protect itself from both internal and external threats. To cite Chakravarty again, the nation fostered through the trilogy does not ‘suggest that the territorial integrity of the Indian nation-state is open to negotiation or violation’ (2000: 233). This is why Naregal argues that Ratnam’s films renormalize ‘Hindu identity with modernity, patriotism, and the voice of reason’ (2004: 529). In short the terror trilogy, according to the key voices that I have cited, perpetuates and reinforces a Hindu-informed, patriotic, modern vision of the
Indian nation.

The reading of the terror trilogy in this way is, however, reductive in that the arguments predominantly fall on the side of articulating the terror trilogy as a conservative gesture: one that sustains the dominant construction of the Indian nation. The exception to this trajectory of reading is few and far between. Let me be clear: of course I do agree that the trilogy affirms a dominant form of the nation, but I do not agree that that is all we can say because there is so much more going on within and across the films. To supplement this reductiveness I wish to offer another reading: one that argues that the India represented in the trilogy slips between what Homi Bhabha (1994) termed as the pedagogic and the performative, simultaneously normalising and rupturing the imagining of the nation through the spectre of separatism, the threat on national security, linguistic divergence and cultural alienation. The performative refers to that “which requires you to be the author of your own utterances and actions” (Donald 1992: 2); it is the mark of agency and the mark of the potential for change. The pedagogic, on the other hand, refers to the strategies employed by dominant power to consolidate a specific sense of identity or culture. In short, I am suggesting that an analysis of the three films reveals a much more multifaceted, complex ideological struggle between the pedagogic and the performative.

Across these films the image of the nation on screen is one that is multicultural, multiethnic, and calls for intercultural and inter-religious reconciliation; such a constitution of the nation is productive insofar as it goes against the grain of the socio-political climate of that time in that the nation affirmed on screen rejects the way in which the nation is cast through the lens of Hindu fundamentalism for whom intercultural reconciliation is not a political option. This is why while I agree with Vasudevan (2001: 191) that while the films do stereotype and
reduce the figure of the Muslim (in Roja and Bombay) and replays the overtly-reductive, fetishized image of the terrorists (in Dil Se), they do not reject these figures as non-participants in the nationalist discourse, as framed by the ruling right-wing coalition at that time. Rather, the films, in their detailing of Hindu and Muslim aggression, Hindu and Muslim loss, pain and suffering, the humanism of the terrorists, the violence of the state and the insufficiencies of the state apparatus such as the police and army, do work to produce a much more robust idea of the nation and seeks to map the multiple narratives, affiliations, and prejudices of the Indian nation. As Vasudevan (1997: 161) points out, most critics failed to observe that “in the original version, language functions to highlight differences of identity which are entirely suppressed in the Hindi version: the protagonists come from Uttar Pradesh, not Tamil Nadu”. But the Hindi and Telugu version of the film was a major box-office hit and it held currency for a national audience. The fact that the characters were Tamil caught in a frontier political dispute in the north-western border of India, and that Roja, a girl from a small remote village, who never left the village, hardly spoke any English, let alone a word in Hindi was completely ignored. These circumstances were not merely accidental but poignantly highlight that even if Ratnam’s intention was to transcend regional and linguistic differences and celebrate the triumph of nationalism in the face of terrorism, the border dispute and the language spoken by army officials were both alien and incomprehensible to the Tamil audience — as experienced by Roja. The India represented in the film Roja, and I would add Bombay and Dil Se, slips between the pedagogic and the performative, simultaneously normalising and rupturing the imagining of the nation. Further to this, it must also be added that the nation articulated through the terror trilogy is also productive when cast alongside the dominant ways of representing the Indian nation that has preoccupied Bollywood cinema, which articulates the Indian nation in the shadow
of what Mishra calls a ‘north-Indian Hindu majoritarian discourse’ (2002: 3). Across the trilogy however, we see the rendition of a heterogeneous, multiple and disjunctured take up of the Indian nation, one that interrupts the dominant form of articulating the nation that characterizes Bollywood cinema.

The readings of the films I have advanced — as interventionist for its time, for intervening into a homogenous conception of the nation by affirming differences, and for intervening into Bollywood cinema’s history of screening the nation — do not appear in the debates I have alluded to earlier. Given this, I would suggest we reach what we might call a theoretical or analytical impasse: how might we reconcile these various readings of the films and the multiple ways in which the trilogy articulates the idea of the nation. More precisely, given that the nation on screen in the trilogy is inscribed variously, how might we conceptualize Mani Ratnam’s screening of the nation as multiplicity? I wish to suggest that Ratnam’s representation of the nation as multiplicity can be grasped through what I call constellations of disjuncture.

**Constellations of Disjuncture**

I develop the theme — constellations of disjuncture — by drawing from the work of Arjun Appadurai (1990), who introduced the concept of disjuncture as an alternative to conceptualise the new global cultural economy. Appadurai argues that the flow of people, capital, ideas, money and images ‘now follow increasingly non-isomorphic paths’ at an unprecedented speed, volume and scale which has compelled us to take up the concept of disjuncture as ‘central to the politics of global culture’ (1990: 301).

What the concept of disjuncture offers is a much more precise rendition of the movement, flows, of people, ideas, cultural artefacts (and culture itself), and an astute demonstration
that such accelerated movements, characteristic of the global present, simultaneously engenders collisions, fractures, linkages, and reproductions. It is in these terms, for instance, Appadurai argues, that we can grasp the reformulation of martial arts traditions ‘as mediated by the Hollywood and Hong Kong film industries … to meet the fantasies of contemporary (sometimes lumpen) youth populations, [and] create new cultures of masculinity and violence’ (1990: 305). And it is also in terms of disjuncture, as Hamid Naficy points out, that we can apprehend the emergence and demand for ‘new approaches to questions of national cultures and identities, national cinemas and genres, authorial visions and styles, and audience reception and ethnography’ (2003: 203). And so ethnicity, for instance, can no longer be simplified in terms of self/other distinctions; film style should not be reduced to a universal form; and the economies of distribution must be seen as cutting across traditional national borders and as much more multifaceted. It is to articulate the complexities of the present that Appadurai turns to the concept of disjuncture, characterised by a simultaneous emphasis on sameness and differences, universals and particularities, singularities and multiplicities to produce a complex map of the social world, one marked by both inter-connectedness and divisions that refuse any kind of simple, polemic and largely unproblematic staging of the condition of the global present.

Reprising Appadurai’s contribution, I take up the concept of disjuncture to emphasise that it provides a useful analytical frame for examining the terror trilogy, to demonstrate that the nation on screen that Ratnam inscribes is simultaneously articulated in universal terms and in terms of differences. Collectively these films strive to foreground the heterogeneity of the nation, simultaneously emphasising differences and sameness, exemplifying the constellations of disjuncture through which Ratnam articulates the idea of the nation. In
that sense this thesis calls for a shift from being engrossed with the question of what type of nation is on screen (as if the nation can be universally captured in the first place) to one that inquires as to the multiple narratives that are excluded and included in the nation. Such an inquiry recognizes the heterogeneity, multiplicity, that is the nation, and more crucially, suggests that Ratnam’s representation of the nation works through the constellation of disjuncture. This is the first argument.

The second argument, as articulated by Devadas and Velayutham (2008) is this: both the Tamil films, Roja and Bombay, mark a significant intervention into the cinematic culture of articulating the idea of an Indian nation in highly ethno-communalised ways that had dominated Tamil cinema. In both Roja and Bombay, the nation is constructed well-beyond the older form of a Dravidian nation and invites into the Tamil cinematic world, ‘other’ narratives that make up the nation to constitute a much more heterogeneous, complex and contradictory national imaginary. The nation on screen, in and through, Tamil cinema is no longer simply bordered by, and through, ethno-specificities but is much more in contest, where other narratives, struggles, differences, that make up the nation are brought to bear much more forcefully to open what has been a closed semiotic of the nation in Tamil cinema (Devadas and Velayutham 2008: 161).

The use of cinema for political purposes, namely the construction of an imagined community based on linguistic homogeneity was one of the central themes that preoccupied postcolonial Tamil cinema up to the late 70’s as I argued in Chapter Two. However, the emergence of Mani Ratnam in the 1990s marked a decisive shift in the history of Tamil cinema’s articulation of the nation. As noted by Gokulsing and Dissanayake (1998: 75), “the conjecture of nationhood and modernity in which the new citizen emerges also produces a secularism that proclaims its transcendence of caste and religion”. In other words, post 1990s Tamil cinema is marked by a consolidation of a unified Indian nation. To cite Devadas and Velayutham, ‘the shift in imagining the idea of the nation beyond ethno-
communal borders that emerges in *Roja* can also be seen in films such as *Bombay* ...

particularly in terms of the ways in which larger national concerns are centralised within the narrative thrust of the film” (2008: 167).

**Gender Roles in *Roja***

While Ratnam’s films does engender a different representational modality for articulating the nation, an examination of the representation of women in his films reveals a conservative coding of female subjectivity that continues to marginalise her. In other words, the female body, while central to inscriptions of nationalism is, nevertheless, marginalized, as seen in *Roja*. She is mediated through a passive subject-pleasurable object binary, qua Bollywood cinema, that entrenches patriarchal norms and silences her agency.

In contrast to the representation of Rishi as the exemplary figure of Indian masculinity, Ratnam presents Roja as a heroine who is fighting to save her husband, but then he deliberately renders her agency obsolete when she has to confront the power of the state and the discourse of patriarchy. At these encounters, we find that she in unable to communicate as she speaks only Tamil and a little English — not enough to convey what had happened to the officer in charge. Roja is therefore excluded from the nationalist project and it becomes clear that patriarchal dominance is confirmed when she falls to Rishi’s feet at the site of their reunion. By metaphorically bringing her to her knees at the sight of her husband, Ratnam ensures that the final message of the film is one that reaffirms the status quo of both the legitimacy of the secular state and patriarchal hegemony. This inability to communicate leaves Roja without a voice, and she is characterized as hysterical for most of the film. Her hysteria leads to her marginalisation by the state and by almost all the male characters she encounters throughout the course of the narrative. Dirk suggests that within
the film “the failure of the state, which cannot defeat the militants, cannot rescue its employee” actually turns this woman’s defiance against her and eventually disempowers her, as it is not through her actions that Rishi is saved, but rather his own” (2001: 177).

As an upper caste woman Roja is respectfully addressed by the army officials when she first asks for help, until she crosses the line and puts her own wishes before the integrity of the nation. Although she tries to play the part of the dutiful daughter and then wife, she is often depicted as free spirited and naive: a key example of this is the scene where she leaves their hotel in Kashmir to roam around a park by herself and pray despite the obvious danger in the region. She does not understand the situation in the contested zone that is Kashmir, and the implications her actions have for Rishi. She also does not understand why the army will not search for her husband and what the implications of releasing Wassim Khan are for the state. Because of her lack of understanding of the situation in Kashmir and the threat that the separatists pose to the nation, she is represented as a petulant, ignorant child who becomes hysterical when state officials explain that they will not be releasing Wassim Khan for her husband. Roja in this sense rejects the “states political logic and her own husband’s calculus of sacrifice” because she lacks reason and fails to understand the risk to the nation due to her life experience in the village (Dirk 2001: 169). The inability to comprehend what is at stake (national security, sovereignty, and territory) reinforces the view that Roja is naïve, and this is an extension of the staging of her as a rural (code: ignorant, traditional) village girl at the beginning of the film when the two of them first meet. We encounter Roja in the opening scenes of the film as an idyllic village character, singing and dancing in the fields by the waterfall and diligently praying to her gods. In these first few scenes Roja represents purity, but we are also shown that she is adventurous and independent. Roja is presented as a loveable character, one who is adventurous and intelligent, but who
understands the importance of tradition and spirituality. She is shown to be diligent in her prayers and is also a dutiful daughter; ultimately Roja is what Virdi (2003) calls an “idealised woman”. By the end of the film she takes her place by her husband’s side and assumes her central role as a loyal wife, daughter, and member of the middle class who prioritizes the nation. The encounter with the army captain is telling in this regard for it underscores the discourse of sacrifice — her need to sacrifice her emotions, affect, relationships, intimacy, desire for the sake of the nation. The scene explicitly, in this way, conjures the sacrificial female figure of Sita in the *Ramayana*.

At the same time, as Dirk argues, the encounter also demonstrates that “the nation has in fact failed to sustain the loyalties of many of its subjects, and can only hope to reclaim their loyalty once the betrayal of an opposing nation drives them back” (2001: 173). Roja, who is plainly articulated as the disloyal subject against the state, who is ignorant of larger geo-political and historical tensions, becomes a true nationalist once the naivety of her world is shattered by Rishi’s kidnapping. This is when she realizes that there are forces which she cannot break, and boundaries (the bridge at the end of the film which separates her from her husband is the key metaphor) she cannot cross. The couple’s embrace in the middle of the bridge marks this turn: Roja has finally, as a true nationalist, understood that she must be patient, be sacrificing and wait for her husband to return. She understands that the national interest and investment must take priority.

In sharp contrast to Roja, her husband saves himself from his captors at the same time as he defends the nation from a security threat. Rishi is always portrayed as steadfast in his belief in the integrity and sovereignty of the nation, beginning with his conversation with his ailing boss, who apologises for sending him and his new wife to Kasmir on assignment. Rishi’s response to this apology is “Kashmir is in India isn’t it? To go anywhere in India is a part of
my job” (Ratnam 1992). The response is telling for it unproblematically claims Kashmir as part of India’s territoriality and sovereignty, erasing the contested geo-politics between India and Pakistan over Kashmir. It serves to establish the Indian nation in terms that acquiesce with the state’s own relationship to Kashmir and Pakistan. And, within the domain of cinematic representation, it establishes the hero as a nationalist who is ideologically attuned to the idea of an imagined India as constructed by the state.

Rishi is also presented by Ratnam as having a stereotypical view of village life and custom, and in particular what village women are like, expressed most clearly in the scene when he meets Roja for the first time and tells her that he “wishes to marry a girl from the village” (Ratnam 1992). He then details what he imagines a perfect wife to be — purity, tradition and religious piety — which he declares she embodies. This reductive coding of village life and by extension villagers is further exemplified through the interactions between Rishi and his mother, Rishi and the villagers, and later between Rishi and Roja, which underscore, in binary fashion, the differences between rural and cosmopolitan Indian lives: the village is articulated as an uncontaminated space, idyllic, where traditions survive and are kept intact, and where rituals and traditional expectations govern their lives; the villagers are, similarly, cast as carefree beings, who are perpetually happy, and who have a deep understanding of their identity and the role each person plays in the village. Cosmopolitan India, in contrast, is figured as chaotic, too modernised, without traditions, and where people are too busy getting on with their lives and have lost a sense of community, family. As a redress to the chaos that marks cosmopolitan India, Rishi has come to the village to find his antidote in the figure of Roja. As Niranjana argues, “what the village stands for in Rishi’s eyes is a newly formulated traditionalism” (2000: 152), suggesting that the ‘traditional’ representations in
the village scenes are not at odds with the modern, but rather that the traditional holds a place in the new modern liberalised India of the 1990’s. What then is the nature of this place? Or, to put it differently, how is the traditional and the modern reconciled? In *Roja* (and *Bombay*) the reconciliation takes place through the affirmation of the differences between village and city life, masculinity and femininity, and ignorance and reason. In other words, the reconciliation is premised upon playing up the differences to accentuate the idea that while India is modernising, the nation, as constructed in *Mother India* through the village, remains intact. This suggests, qua Chatterjee, that “it is not a dismissal of Western modernity, the attempt was rather to make modernity consistent with the nationalism project” (1989: 625).

Furthermore, the distinction between the gender roles as played out in *Roja* exemplifies how the traditional finds its place in a new nationalism. Chatterjee situates male roles predominantly in the external or material space, while females occupy the role of the upholding the integrity of the inner or spiritual, in particular the space of the home. She states that “the home in its essence must remain unaffected by the profane activities of the material world — and woman is its representation” (Chatterjee 1989: 624). Virdi takes up Chatterjee’s argument stating that Indian women have been able to take on their identity under the new nationalism as long as their traditional roles in the domestic sphere remained untouched by Western modernism which threatens the integrity of Indian national identity (Virdi 2003: 65). Both Chatterjee and Virdi argue that no matter what the external condition of the world, for women in particular, they must not lose their feminine virtues, in particular their modesty and decorum. What both Chatterjee and Virdi suggest is that the ‘new Indian woman’ is a part of the new patriarchy and that she embodies the ‘spiritual essence’ that the nation holds onto while accepting a Western modernity and
liberalised economy (Chatterjee 1989: 627). The spiritual signs of femininity are marked in her religiosity, demeanour, dress, and are typically associated with bourgeois sensibilities. It is recognised that a woman could acquire education and interact with the modernised society without becoming tainted like Western women who do not understand the importance of maintaining the sanctity of the home. Chatterjee defines the new woman as having the following traits:

- she must not eat, drink, or smoke in the same way as men; they must continue the observance of rituals which men were finding difficult to carry out; they must maintain the cohesiveness of family life and solidarity with the kin to which men could not now devote much attention (1989: 629).

*Roja* provides us with examples of this new identity in the way that Ratnam treats Roja as she faces the responsibility of maintaining the spiritual integrity of the nation while being under a new form of “legitimate” subordination that is sanctioned by the nationalist movement. Our first introduction to Roja shows her diligently praying to the village gods, laughing with the children and older people of the village and loving her father. She is portrayed as innocent, loving and focused on the integrity of her life in the village which represents the spiritual sphere. Her marriage ceremony to Rishi acts as a transition from the old tradition to a modern (read Western), middle class way of life with Rishi. He enables her to move into her role as a modern Indian woman by bringing her into the material world essentially. Likewise he is able to access the spiritual core of traditional Indian culture through his interactions with the villagers and by taking a wife from there. By having a traditional wedding, Rishi connects with these traditions which are powerfully depicted during the wedding song and dance performed by the older women of the village (who in doing so pass down their knowledge of love, sex and life in general). Dirk argues that this is an example of the “cosmopolitan fantasy of (male) urban (middle class) romance with
(female) village (peasant) India, marriage and love, legitimate sanction and sexual passion” (2001: 167).

When Roja attempts to engage with the material world it is through her desire to maintain the integrity of the spiritual domain. Her husband and her home are at risk and she takes on her role as the guardian of the spiritual with vigour much to the disgust of the men she engages with who are unable to see her perspective. This is because their role is in the material world, and there is a redeeming feature in Roja in her ferocious defence of the ‘nation’ which finds its essence in the spiritual (Chatterjee 1989: 630). When Roja is pleading and begging with the officer for her husband’s life he rebukes her for only thinking of her own family when there are hundreds of men sacrificing their lives for their nation. He is repulsed by what he considers her personal selfishness, her willingness to sacrifice many more Indian lives with the release of Khan in exchange for her husband. What we see in this scene is the traditional/modern dichotomy again being played out. The physical security of the nation is what is at stake if Rishi is to be returned to her via the demands of terrorism which is unacceptable to the militarised nation state. However according to both Virdi (2003) and Chatterjee (1989) the integrity of national identity is also at risk if Roja does not fulfil her role as the sacrificing wife and upholder of the inner essence of Indian culture.

The assignment of these roles to women as the gatekeepers of national cultural integrity does not give them a voice, nor does it present an alternative to that which is presented in Bollywood. Women are still defined against a moral code, despite the fact they are now able to participate in the material world as Chatterjee (1989) points out as either the ‘new Indian woman’ (read as pure and idealised) or the ‘common woman’ (read as vulgar, tainted, and uncouth). While the nationalist project promised freedoms to women, it still ensured that
women were still held in a subordinate position to men. Despite the fact that they had greater access to social freedoms, education and employment, women were still inherently linked to a “privileged ‘essentialised tradition which was defined by system of exclusions” (Chatterjee 1989: 632). The use of the state, represented by the army, in halting Roja in this film both endorses the position of women in the home, and excludes them from participating fully in the material sphere that men could now freely engage in under a new nationalism.

In this chapter, I examined Mani Ratnam’s trilogy in relation to, and in connection with, the construction of the nation to underscore that Ratnam’s representation of the trope of the nation is highly disjunctured. I argued that Mani Ratnam strives to articulate and represent the idea of the nation through what I call a constellation of disjuncture. It is this, I suggest, which marks Ratnam’s attempt at retelling the ‘vital structuring principles’ that constitute Indian society and culture. In other words, Mani Ratnam is committed to articulating the ‘vital structuring principles’ (Virdi 2003) of the nation in terms of their disjunctures, marked simultaneously by sharp breaks and reconfigurations of the constitution of the nation and affirmations and continuities which replay dominant versions of the Indian nation. In short, I argued that the constellation of disjuncture persists as a powerful strategy of circumventing neat, easy and largely polemical conceptions of the nation. At stake in Ratnam’s construction of the nation is a commitment to shoring up the uneasy coexistence of heterogeneous forms and practices of articulating discourses within the postcolonial nation’s topography. I then briefly argued that his two Tamil films go against the grain of articulating the nation in Tamil cinema, reinventing Tamil cinema’s relationship to the nation. Roja is exemplary in that regard for it is an example of a critical point in Tamil
cinema history when questions of the nation were taken up again but were no longer from an ethno-nationalistic perspective. Rather, questions of the nation in Roja reinforce a secular, ultimately pan-Indian male, representation of the nation.

The chapter also explored the representation of gender roles in Roja, and argued that Ratnam’s articulation of female subjectivity reproduces the very the same assumptions, stereotypes, and reductive forms of representation of women that appears in Bollywood films. In that sense Ratnam’s modalities of representing women reinforces Chatterjee’s notion of the new patriarchy, and in doing so reduces Roja to little more than a voyeuristic image of an ideal woman, waiting and longing for her husband, fiercely protective of the nation and her home-life, but ineffective in the material world of men. In the next chapter I will examine Deepa Mehta’s film Fire in relation to representations of women.
Chapter Four
Fire at Home: Exploring ‘the new woman’ in Deepa Mehta’s Fire

The previous chapter examined Mani Ratnam’s terror trilogy to underscore a shift from the strident ethno-narratives that dominated Tamil cinema previously, as discussed in Chapter Two, and the reaffirmation of a pan Indian secular Indian national identity that connects with Bollywood’s modality of representing Indian nationalism. Further, the previous chapter also explored the construction of gender roles in Ratnam’s films, specifically Roja which privileges patriarchy and normalises a view of women as the domestic(ated) subject. This chapter examines the representation of women in Deepa Mehta’s film Fire and argues that the film challenges the representations of women in both Bollywood and Tamil cinema, showing an alternative to the idealized woman who dominates both cinemas. In Fire, Mehta produces what Gayatri Gopinath calls a “counterhegemonic representation of queer female desire” (1998: 631) that undercuts the hetero-normative staging of female desire in Indian cinema as well as the idea of the Indian nation. If, as I have argued previously, she is insignia for the nation (stands in for the pure Indian nation and its brand of nationalism), then the re-articulation of female subjectivity through the optic of queer desire reconfigures how we might conceive of the nation. In short, here the nation is dislodged from its heteronormative security and recast as a heterogeneous assemblage. To reprise Gopinath’s comment, Fire “challenges dominant Indian nationalist narratives that consolidate the nation in terms of sexual and gender normativity” (1998: 633)

As I have stated in previous chapters, both Bollywood and Tamil cinema represent Indian women dialectically within the ‘ideal’ woman’/’immoral’ woman binary. These representations appear in Mother India, DDLJ, and Roja, with the ideal women all reinforcing the social order and national identity constructed for women by the nationalist
movement. Bollywood and Tamil cinematic representations of the ideal woman has not altered over the course of its history, with these figures characterized as “passive, victimized, sacrificial, submissive, glorified, static, one-dimensional, and resilient” (Virdi, 2003:60). The relentless repetition of the traditional feminine image finds its roots in Hindu religio-mythical discourse, which links her to the image of the goddess Sita, and is firmly cemented in the popular imagination throughout the history of Indian cinema (Virdi, 2003: 60-65). And the film industry, particularly Bollywood, as Kasbekar points out, has been instrumental in perpetuating this image of the good wife as a strategy “to create an idealized moral universe that upholds the ‘official definition of femininity” (Kasbekar, 2001, 293). The mythical idealized woman has been normalized and “is used both within the culture, and through film, to reinforce traditional beliefs of patriarchy through the mythologized depiction of the ideal woman” (Silva, 2003, 13). It is against this normalization that Fire works.

**Contextualizing Fire**

Deepa Mehta is, undeniably, one of the leading filmmakers of Indian origin and highly acclaimed following the release of the elements trilogy: *Fire*, *Earth* (1998), and *Water* (2005). As Manju Jaidka points out, Mehta is a diasporic, transnational, filmmaker and her trilogy ‘deals mainly with women’s issues as they merge with national issues’, focusing ‘on Indian women and their oppressive social system’ (2011: 20). As Jaidka further comments, while the preoccupation with women dominates, or more precisely, holds the three films together, the films individually concern themselves with different issues:

- in *Fire* the primary concern was women’s sexuality and their right to choose, in *Earth* the focus is on women in times of violence (the Partition of the Indian subcontinent) … 
- [while] in the third film, *Water*, the concern with women is given yet another backdrop — the conservative Indian society and the treatment it accords to its widows (2011: 59).
Across these three films, Mehta mobilizes the question of gender oppression, female sexuality, and patriarchal hetero-normativity and links this to the project of colonialism, anti-colonialism and postcolonial nationalism. Further to this, the films seek to empower female subjectivity by reading her body against the grain of normative forms of representations. This is precisely why the three films generally, and Fire in particular, generated much controversy. As Gopinath writes, ‘the controversy surrounding .... Mehta’s Fire makes startlingly clear the ways in which discourse of women’s sexuality are mobilized in the service of imperial, national, and communal projects’ (2005: 132). In other words, the controversy was not simply about the re-articulation of female subjectivity that goes against the grain of normative representations: more crucially, and perhaps more powerfully, the trilogy connects the female body to the nation and, in that regard, is explicitly is critical of Indian nationalism.

Fire opened at the Toronto Film Festival in 1996 and made its appearance on Indian screen in November 1998. As Jigna Desai remarks,

In India, the English version of Fire was submitted to the censor board for review on 13 May 1998; on 8 June it was approved with an adult certificate. In August, the Hindi version, too, was approved after it was determined that Mundu the servant does not masturbate while watching the Hindu epic serial Ramayana and after the name Sita was changed to Nita in the film. Because the figure of Sita is highly esteemed in popular Hindu culture, the name was most likely changed to avoid offending Hindu sensibilities. Fire opened in mid-November, playing in theaters to full houses (80 to 100 percent full) without any disruptions until early December. Women-only screenings were also well attended (2002: 70).

On 2 December, however, things changed: as Gopinath writes,

In early December 1998, movie theatres in Bombay, New Delhi, and other major Indian cities were stormed by dozens of activists from the Shiv Sena, the Hindu right-wing organization that formed the militant wing of the BJP-led Hindu nationalist government then in power. The activists were protesting the screening of Fire, the 1996 film by the Indian Canadian director Deepa Mehta which depicts a lesbians relationship between two sisters-in-law in a middle class, joint family household in
contemporary New Delhi. Screenings were forcibly stopped, film posters burnt, and property vandalized (2005: 131).

Mehta’s *Fire* appeared during a period (1991 onwards) which witnessed a powerful shift to the right within postcolonial India, with the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP, Indian People’s Party) and its brand of politics founded upon religious, specifically Hindu hegemony. The BJP projected itself as a champion of the socio-religious cultural values of the country’s Hindu majority, conservative social policies, and a strong national defense. It was during this decade that the rapid nuclear militarization of India took place; and this was also the period when the persecution of the minority Muslim population gathered momentum, culminating in the demolition of the 16th century Babri Masjid (Babri Mosque) in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh, India, on December 6, 1992 by Hindu fundamentalists and the 2002 genocide of Muslims in the state of Gujarat. For almost fifty years, since 1947, when India achieved Independence, the nation has been governed for the most part by the Congress Party — a party that maintains itself as both secular and centrist. The party’s position however shifted in the 1980s, and marked the beginning of a turn to the right: in the late 80s the Congress Party worked to open India up to world trade by removing its protectionist policies and embraced economic liberalization which it carried into the 1990s and which is the dominant mode today. The shift in economic policies however disillusioned many voters, particularly those from the lower caste community, the Muslim minority, and the poor, who had traditionally supported the Congress Party. Further to this, the failure to Congress to prevent communal violence turned even more supporters away from the party. It is in this context that the social production of religious hate was engineered and disseminated by the BJP, and which *Fire* appeared.
The violent reception of Mehta's film was ‘rationalized’ through three key narratives: the Hindu Right argued that the film’s ‘depiction of lesbianism was an affront to Hinduism and “alien to Indian culture” (Gopinath 2005: 131), both the Right as well as leftist and moderate argued that ‘Mehta was a diasporic filmmaker ... and therefore was not authorized to speak about ‘Indian culture’, while ‘the mainstream national newspaper The Hindu ... opined that ‘Fire has very weak links to the true Indian milieu’ (Gopinath 2005: 131). In short, Mehta had no right to produce this film because she was a foreigner who was alien to the sensibilities of Indian culture. However, as Jaidka notes, this argument about having no right to speak because Mehta is a Canadian is highly fraught — “as far as Mehta is concerned ... [her] subject position remains inside and yet outside, concerned yet detached’ (2011: 19). This inside-outside position, which informs diasporic consciousness, is highly productive precisely because it fosters ‘the capacity to “see” a story from more than a single perspective’ (Jaidka 2011: 19).

The debate here is staged in terms of the right to enunciate: Mehta is deemed as a non-citizen, an outsider, who is not cognizant of Indian culture and hence does not have the right to speak about Indian society. National belonging is thus staged in terms of the question of citizenship without taking into account that Mehta’s relationship exceeds the discourse of citizenship. She is a diasporic Indian, who is culturally connected to India, like most other diasporic communities (Chinese, Jewish, Greek), and in that sense while not a citizen, is still nevertheless part of the national collective. Her simultaneously inside-outside position, that is, her diasporic subjectivity, opens another way of seeing that is rejected. In short, the rejection is premised upon the challenge that the diaspora poses. Steven Vertovec in a review of the notion of diaspora proposes “three meanings of the concept of diaspora ... ‘diaspora’ as social form, ‘diaspora’ as type of consciousness, and ‘diaspora as mode of
cultural production” (1997: 277-278) while maintaining that a distinct demarcation is impossible as the categories leak into each other. In the first, the “emphasis remains on an identified group characterized by their relationship-despite-dispersal,” (1997: 278) as a socio-cultural formation situated in a diaspora-homeland-adopted country triad for example. The second meaning places the emphasis on “a variety of experiences, a state of mind, and a sense of identity” (1997: 281) The focus is upon the disjunctured relationship of the diaspora to the nation, to the fractured relationship the diaspora has with nation it had left. The fractured relationship produces “the awareness of multi-locality … stimulates the need to conceptually connect oneself with others, both “here” and “there,” who share the same “roots” and “routes” (1997: 282). For Vertovec, the diaspora’s sense of belonging, to both here and there, fosters a sense of multiplicity that is a challenge to projects that seek singularity, such as the project of nationalism. Fire, in that sense, is a material filmic exemplification of the capacity to see from more one perspective: the recoding of female subjectivity, sexual desire, and patriarchy, against a singular representation that preoccupies mainstream Indian cinema. Further to this, and more significantly for this thesis, is that the staging of the criticism in this way (Mehta as a foreigner and hence unable to understand the nuances of Indian ‘culture’) is a response, I argue, against Mehta’s offering of the possibility of articulating the nation and nationalism differently. In the next section I examine this other way of articulating the nation, focusing principally on the re-presentation of female subjectivity, which I argue transgresses the dharmik code that preoccupies Bollywood and Tamil cinema as discussed in previous chapters.
**Stirring the Elements in Fire**

*Fire*, set in postcolonial, post-Partition India, opens with an image of a young girl, Radha, and her family sitting in a field of flowers. The melodious background music, borrowed from Mani Ratnam’s *Roja* plays while the mother narrates the story of a mountain community (land-locked) who had never seen the sea but have heard of it. And ‘this made them feel very sad. Then an old woman in the village said, “don’t be sad; what you can’t see, you can see. You just have to see without looking”’. This opening statement about visibility and invisibility sets up what is at stake, as we learn later, is the politics of seeing and not seeing, gender, sexuality, desire as heterogeneous. The scene then fades to a shot of a couple facing each other against a silhouetted door entrance. The woman walks away and the camera follows her; she sits and the camera pans to image of the Taj Mahal seen through an opening, which is the entrance to the building the scene opened with. The two scenes have a sense of the romantic to it, but it soon becomes evident that the couple, Sita and Jatin, who are on their honeymoon, are not in love with each other.

So begins Mehta’s examination of the lesbian relationship that emerges between two married women in a middle class Indian family. As Gairola remarks:

In the film, Sita (Nadita Das) is an unfulfilled bride in an arranged marriage with Jatin, the owner of a video rental store in Delhi. Living in the same house are Jatin’s mother, Bhiji, his older, celibate brother Ashok, Ashok’s wife, Radha (Shabana Azmi), and the family servant Mundu. Mehta weaves these characters in and out of a filmic narrative that visually juxtaposes her lesbian heroines against the more traditional members of the household (2002: 316).

At stake is not only simply homosexual relationships and desires, that is the relationship between Radha and Sita, but also the force of hetero-normative, patriarchal, and religious power that imposes specific codes that work as discursive regulators: these dominant codifications reduce the multiple, heterogeneous expressions of sexuality, desire, and
gender. As I discussed in Chapter One, Mishra (2002) notes that the cinematic coding of the Indian nation works through a Hindu eschatology, then Fire seeks to challenge this representational modality by returning to the ur-text of Hinduism, the epic Ramayana, and reading this against the grain. To quote Gairola again:

[Mehta] does so by establishing a parallel between the narrative of the film and a scene from the ancient Hindu epic Ramayana, in which Sita is asked by her husband to walk through fire to prove her chastity. This scenario comes up on a number of occasions: 1) Mundu masturbates in front of Bhiji, and after he has ejaculated he plays a film of the Ramayana, telling Sita, who arrives shortly thereafter, that Ram’s Sita walks through a towering bon-fire. Mundu tells Sita that the goddess says to Ram, “Let the flames be my witness, if I am impure then the flames will destroy me, but if I am not, they won’t touch me”; 2) Ashok goes to see a performance of the Ramayana with his Swami, and the scene that appears on screen is Sita’s trial by fire; and 3) the same scene is playing on the television as Mundu apologizes to Bhiji in front of the family for masturbating (2002: 316-317).

The key moment in the religious epic-text, where Sita’s chastity is legitimated (affirming her purity as the exemplary female subject), after she was abducted by Ravana, the demon-king of Lanka, is re-appropriated and intersected with other instances: Mundu’s fulfilling of his sexual desire, Ashok’s rejection of sexual desire, and Mundu’s apology to the matriarch. At one level, the transgression is explicit: a pure, uncontaminated, epic moment in the religious text which reconfirms the hegemony of patriarchy and normalizes the subordination women is recoded into the domain of sexuality and desire. In short, the pure religious moment is contaminated. Scholars such as Gairola (2002), Desai (2002) and Kapur (2000) read the transgressive moment similarly: as an intervention into Hindu eschatology. Kapur, for example, confirms this, noting that the Hindu Nationalist’s,

argued that the film was an assault on Indian cultural values, by representing the sisters-in-law in a lesbian relationship and appropriating a litany of cultural rituals such as kharvachuth, a fast kept by wives to ensure the longevity of their husbands, to celebrate the ‘perverse’ bond between Radha and Sita. They argued that the film was a threat to the institution of the family, and obscene by virtue of its sexual content. These self-proclaimed defenders of Indian cultural values, thus
took it upon themselves to save Indian culture and Indian audiences from the celluloid contaminant (2000: 56).

For the Hindu nationalist, at stake in the cinematic re-appropriation is the legitimacy of Hindu India, founded upon different tropes — patriarchal, heterosexual, hetero-normative conceptions of family, traditions, hierarchies of gender, sexuality — that collectively reinforce a closed conception of the nation. The critique by the Hindu nationalist relies, and is premised upon, a reductive and exclusionary idea of Indian nationalism. It is this that *Fire* seeks to open by offering another rendition of sexuality, gender, power that challenges how Indian nationalism is dominantly constituted. While the film is closely critical of these tropes, at another level, the film continually reminds of the haunting spectral presence of the epic-text, cultural knowledge, expectations and practices, thus emphasizing the hegemony of Hinduism in various aspects of contemporary everyday life in India. Across the three scenes, the stranglehold of Hinduism, the *dharmik* code, remains as a powerful reminder of the hegemony of Hindu India.

The recodification takes place at several levels because “so much of the film ... [as Kapur points out] is transgressive” (2000: 56). Before I go on to discuss a short list of transgressive encounters in the film, I wish to first situate the centrality of the *Ramayana* “the mythological text that may be termed India’s nation-building narrative” (Zacharias, 2001: 31). In his article ‘Trial by Fire: Gender, Power, and Citizenship in Narratives of the Nation’, Usha Zacharias (2001) traces the ways in which the *Ramayana* has functioned to foster a sense of national community, specifically between 1920-1990, the period between anti-colonial struggles and the rise of the Hindu Right and argues that the text was employed by various political movements to build a sense of community or more precisely communalism that was Hindu at its core. This is one side of the argument: the *Ramayana* was employed as
a nodal text to foster an imagined national community. The other side of the argument is that the national imagined community fostered in and through the *Ramayana* inscribes “women’ as subjects of national tradition, as citizen-subjects, and as subjects of community tradition” (2001: 31). In other words women become the discursive figure, signifier, and embodiment of the nation; their subjectivity functions as a discursive regulator that articulates how this national community is imagined. And this women figure is “epitomized in the mythological figure of Sita, the central female protagonist of the *Ramayana*” (Zacharias 2001: 31).

Thus for example Gandhi and other anti-colonial figures mobilized the religo-text in the 1920s as part of the nationalist, anti-colonial discourse in a way that centers on the figure of Sita, who “signifies the feminine, “un-colonizable” domain of the nation that is semiotically timeless but politically contingent” (Zacharias 2001: 32). As Zacharias notes:

Anticolonial leaders of diverse political persuasions, such as Mahatma Gandhi, Bhimrao Ambedkar, and E. V. Ramaswami (Richman 1994), as well as painters, artists, and novelists (Mitter 1994), drew on the epic as a meta-language for political commentary, critique, and re-envisioning of the imagined nation. In nationalist rhetoric, the central theme of four sections of the twenty-five hundred-year-old epic — the forest exile of Rama and Sita; the capture of Sita by the demon Ravana; Rama’s long search for the lost Sita and his effort to win the assistance of the monkey army, including the magical Hanuman; and the arduous battle to win her back — was reworked as a masculine war for lost feminine territory that metaphorically evoked the battle for the freedom of the nation from British colonizing forces (2001: 32).

In that regard Sita functions as both the figure “for the colonization of the nation and as a trope for its decolonization” (Zacharias 2001: 32). This project of mobilizing the *Ramayana* generally, and Sita more specifically, to foster a sense of imagined community (Anderson, 1983) continued into the post-independence period, and it was “employed … by both Hindu and Muslim conservative groups … [to consolidate] patriarchal norms by using the ‘woman as subject of the community tradition’” (Zacharias 2001: 33). The narrative of the *Ramayana*
and Sita within nationalist discourse emerged most significantly in the 1980s with the rise of the Hindu Right who used the religious epic as “a mythical framework for the assertion of Hindu cultural nationalism, with the Muslim male substituted for the British invader” (Zacharias 2001: 33). Here, what is asserted is the right to belong to the nation and this right is staged in terms of a Hindu eschatology that affirms a Hindu India. In short the nationalism constructed through the Ramayana is an exclusionary discourse that seeks to emblematize a hegemonic idea of the nation. The force of such a rendition of the nation was played out most violently in the December 1992 destruction of Babri Mosque by the Hindu Right who ‘reclaim[ed] the site of the Babri Mosque as Lord Ram’s birthplace … [resulting] in a series of riots all over the nation …. in one of the most tragic outbreaks of violence since the Partition of India” (Mankekar 1999: 165). Further to this, as Zacharias (2001: 33) notes, “in nationalist discourse, Sita embodied the purity, power of sacrifice, and spiritual authority of the upper-caste Hindu woman who can form the wellspring of sustenance for the Kshatriya-Brahminical male’s battle against Ravana like invaders, British or Muslim”.

The hegemony of the religious modality and its rendition of the nation is what Fire challenges through a semiotic rendering that displaces the dominant meanings and interpretations of the texts. The counter reading opens the text to other possible readings and interpretations and in that sense challenges the authority and hegemony of the epic-text, and by extension the articulation of Indian nationalism. Here is a short list of transgressive encounters that demonstrate Fire’s intervention into the religio-based construction of the nation.

The title of the film itself, Fire, marks it relationship with the Ramayana: in the religious epic fire is a central motif, specifically as a symbolic manifestation of purification. It is also a strong motif in the film which Mehta uses as a point of reference to the epic text to critique
normative Hindu practices as discussed above. The connection between film and epic text is explicitly staged through the choice of naming her two female protagonists Sita and Radha, after the names of the key female figure in the Ramayana and the Mahabaratha (the second major Sanskrit epic of Hinduism). The naming is a powerful appropriation for as Madhu Kishwar notes, Mehta had claimed that she named her two heroines after the cultural icons Radha and Sita because they are the two wronged women of Indian mythology. Also that the idea of ‘two goddesses in bed together’ was bound to provoke a certain set of people (1998: 2).

To take Mehta’s point that Sita and Radha are the two wronged women from Indian mythology, her characters of the same name are equally set up as deeply unhappy in their traditionally prescribed roles and find solace, comfort, and desire in each other. As Marsh and Brasted point out, Radha is aware of the unquestioning obedience and devotion to her husband that was a Hindu woman’s dharma, her religiously ordained duty … the highest expectation of the Hindu female was to be pativrata—a chaste and obedient wife (2003: 288).

Nevertheless, she refuses to occupy this subject position. Both Sita and herself challenge hetero-normative conventions and develop a close, intimate and sexual relationship. They decide to leave but before they depart, Radha decides to ‘explain things’ to her husband Ashok but this leads to a heated quarrel that takes places in the kitchen. For Ashok, at this moment, Radha has lost her spiritual essence and has become, to quote Chatterjee, a “‘common woman’ who has spurned the identity that the nationalist project constructed for her” (1989: 629). While Radha is attempting to explain that she “is leaving to save herself, for without desire she has merely existed; she had not been fully alive”, Ashok knocks over the lamp and Radha’s sari catches fire (Marsh and Brasted 2003: 287). And as Wijegunasingha (2000) comments:
Ashok who had been asserting all his male authority to substantiate his condemnation of Radha is unable even to raise a hand to put out the flames enveloping her. It is significant that precisely at this moment the spectator is made aware that the fire enveloping Radha is being transformed ... into a character of the film — a character with a symbolic significance.

The symbolic significance is precisely the use and abuse of fire or Agni\(^6\). In the *Ramayana*, Sita after her abduction by Ravana the demon-king, had to perform the “Agni-Pareeksha (literally a test by fire — the accused is made to enter a fire and emerge unhurt to prove her innocence). Agni does not harm Sita, thus proving her chastity” (Wijegunasingha, 2000). In the film, Agni is similarly mobilized: the fire that threatens Radha does not harm her, thus establishing her chastity but it also simultaneously underscores her choice, to leave her marriage and build a relationship with Sita, as one that is also pure. In short, Agni here, and by extension Hinduism, endorses same-sex relationship: “therefore the Agni we come to know in the film *Fire* is a revolutionary god” (Wijegunasingha 2000). What Mehta does here is to appropriate the mythological ideals of Hinduism in the context of contemporary life in Delhi and to narratively counter those ideals. *Fire* is thus a critique of Hindu myths and Hindu India, and Mehta deploys this cinematic critique by framing “*Fire* in a conventional modern versus traditional paradigm, where sexuality becomes the vehicle of modernist transformation” (Silva 2003: 8). Through the development of a sexual relationship between Sita and Radha, Mehta seeks to suggest that escape from hetero-normative oppression is possible by entering into a relationship entirely outside the traditional boundaries women are situated in. The development of a homosexual relationship between these two women was intended by Mehta to be a political statement on the sexuality of women in India, and

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\(^6\) As Wijegunasingha, 2000 notes, “according to ancient Hindu tradition, fire or Agni is the constantly present purifying god of the household on whom also falls the task of bearing witness to the chastity of women and accordingly deciding their fates”.

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to show that women can have power over their desires and choices. Here we see that “each character is constrained by the roles dictated by their allotted identity, and each is striving for his or her version of freedom or fulfillment” (Marsh and Brasted 2003: 291). This reconfiguration also challenges the dialectic that women are framed through in Indian commercial cinema as I had established in previous chapters.

The focus on sexual desire is not confined to the two lead female protagonists; rather it pervades the film, suturing each main character as desiring-subjects who respond to their desires in different ways: the weak and sickly matriarch Bhiji is forced to watch pornographic films whilst Mundu exposes her to his masturbation. He is a key example of how primal desire over-runs the traditional values that constrain each member of the household. Whilst Mundu gives into his desires, almost all characters in the film echo this fixation on their own desires at some point. Jatin focuses on life with his girlfriend Julie; Ashok focuses all his efforts in quashing his desires, while Sita and Radha explore completely new realms of desire. The point is that desire is multifaceted, heterogeneous, and open; going against the singular expression of desire in the religious text — as one between a man and a woman within the traditional institution of marriage. Further to this, as Marsh and Brasted point out, with specific reference to the relationship between Sita and Radha, their sexual awakening and discovery turns their “servitude and silence into voices of agency and autonomy” (2003: 292). Here the expression of sexual desire, its performance, is emancipatory: it is read as a moment of release and rupture from the confinement of hetero-normativity. This rendering of sexual desire as emancipatory is disruptive on two fronts: one the one level it goes against Hindu eschatology as set up through the Ramayana — in the epic text Sita’s sexual desires are suspected and she has to prove her chastity thus
confirming herself as a subject who is without sexual desires. On another front, the articulation of sexual desires as emancipatory challenges the nationalist project, qua Gandhi, who practiced *moksha*\(^7\) as a means of resisting temptation. For Gandhi, the temptations of sexual desire must be rejected, kept in check, to champion a pure nationalist cause. In that sense what Mehta does in re-inscribing a different response to sexual desire (one that does not want to keep it in check but which affirms its expenditure and performance) is to reject the nationalist project (both of the Hindu Right and the Congress Party) of constructing the nation as pure (hetero-normative) and affirm a conception of the nation as contaminated and heterogeneous. The critique is finely delivered by Radha who responds to Sita’s question, after their first sexual encounter, if they have done something wrong. Radha replies “in our language there is no word for what we are” (*Fire*, 1996), signaling the impossibility of representation (of their sexual desire, their heterosexual relationship) within the narrative of the nation.

How might we conceive of Mehta’s visual project here? I wish to suggest that *Fire* extends the project of postcolonial historiography in the visual medium to offer an alternative way of conceiving India. In his book *Postcolonial Cultures*, Simon Featherstone situates the project of postcolonial historiography in these terms: one of key tasks that postcolonial studies has set itself has been ‘the task of examining and challenging … narratives [of progress], developing other ways of telling histories, and re-evaluating other ways of remembering’ (2005: 167). Such a task has been central to postcolonial studies precisely because ‘one of the ways by which colonialism [and nationalism] maintained power was by writing its own histories’ (Featherstone 2005: 167). This is well captured by Edward Said in

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\(^7\) In Hinduism it is believed one can achieve *moksha* (liberation, release and redemption), from Samsara, the eternal cycle of birth and death by renouncing worldly desires.
For instance, Orientalism demonstrates the complex investments of those narratives ... [scholarly, personal, and imaginative] within systems of political and economic power that conceived and administered empires and colonies’ (Featherstone 2005: 167). If, postcolonial historiography, as suggested by Featherstone, is a project that is involved in examining and challenging dominant power, established ways of telling history as well as proposing alternative ways of remembering, then we can situate Mehta’s work as extending the project of postcolonial historiography in the visual medium. Her film is engaged in a critique of postcolonial India, the silencing of female subjectivity and desire, as well as articulating another way of recovering what Prakash (1994: 1480) calls the “autonomy of the oppressed”. More precisely, this critique is a project that seeks to develop another way of telling the story of female subjectivity and desire, another way of telling the narrative the nation: one that is open, heterogeneous, and non-exclusive. In this instance, women as the excluded subjects of knowledge are reinserted as the emancipated figures of postcolonial India. This is why her films are seen as a challenge, interventionist, by the Indian status quo. Like Mehta, Anand Patwardhan’s films, which I examine in the next chapter, work similarly in that it seeks to articulate another way of conceiving the Indian nation and nationalism.
Chapter Five
The Political Documentaries of Anand Patwardhan and an Alternative India

In the February 17 2007 issue of *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vinay Lal observes that there is a global renaissance of the political documentary but cautions that ‘the emergence of political documentaries as an aspect of world culture is a phenomenon which so far has received little attention’ (2007: 544). This is a pointed observation, particularly with reference to the political documentaries of Anand Patwardhan, a noted Indian documentary filmmaker. While numerous interviews, commentaries by the filmmaker, film reviews and press reports are readily available there are only a few scholarly publications critically engaging with his films. Furthermore, within the Indian context, ‘censorship remains … the most pressing problem for documentary film-makers’ (Lal 2005: 175). Patwardhan’s struggle with Indian Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC), threats from religious fundamentalists (both within India and the larger Indian diaspora), and difficulties with gaining distribution continue to hurdle the visibility of his documentaries.\(^8\)

To date the Indian state has intervened in all of Patwardhan’s documentaries, ranging from requests for cuts through the CBFC, a quasi-judicial body under the jurisdiction of the Indian government, and refusal of screening on Doordarshan, the state-owned national television network, on grounds that the documentaries could potentially cause civil disorder.\(^9\) While

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\(^8\) Patwardhan himself acknowledges this in his commentary on the censor board’s demands for cuts to his film *War and Peace* (2002) in the journal *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* (2003).

\(^9\) The only two documentaries that evaded state intervention were *Prisoners of Conscience* (1978) and *A Time to Rise* (1981): although the CBFC at first required cuts to *Prisoners of Conscience*, as reported by *India Today* (1-15 Dec 1978), the state body recanted after receiving a letter from Satyajit Ray (the renowned Bengali filmmaker) commending the film. Similarly, the CBFC required cuts to *A Time to Rise* — a 40-minute documentary co-produced with Jim Morno examining the appalling labour conditions among Chinese and East Indian immigrant workers in British Columbia that led to the formation of the Canadian Farmworkers Union in 1980. Here the CBFC argued for cuts
the visibility of his films are slightly increasing as Patwardhan notes, due to the emergence of DVD technology (cited in Maclay 2004) and the development of multiplexes, the State’s consistent intervention has resulted in lengthy delays in screening Patwardhan’s documentaries on television, which has a significant penetration rate nationally. It has deferred the documentaries from being publicly visibility when the very conditions of oppression are in place and forcing on-time screenings in India to go underground. *Bombay Our City* was completed in 1985, at the height of the city’s beautification program which displaced slum-dwellers, the city’s principal workforce, but was only screened on Doordashan in 1989; *Father, Son, and Holy War*, completed and ready for distribution and screening in 1995 only made it to television in October 2006, eleven years after completion and a significant time after the rise of the right-wing Hindu conservative force in India in the 1990s. *And War and Peace*, completed in 2002, and which won the best film category at the Mumbai International Film Festival (2002), only made it to Doordashan in October 2006. Quite clearly, the Indian state’s commitment to obstructing the screenings of Patwardhan’s documentaries points to the threat that his work poses. Put another way, the censorship regulations imposed testify to the critical force of Patwardhan’s political documentaries.

Anand Patwardhan has been making political documentaries for a little over three decades, beginning with *Business as Usual* (1971), on fund raising for Bangladeshi refugees, and culminates in *to the children of Swat, from the children of Mandala* (2009), a 5-minute documentary that connects the struggles of the children in the slums of Mandala, Mumbai, on grounds that it would damage external foreign relations between India and Canada, but later retracted its opposition when it was pointed out that the film was being distributed in Canada by the National Film board of that country. A detailed summary of the litigations that Patwardhan has had to confront is available at http://www.patwardhan.com/Censorship/Litigation.htm. Accessed 9 March 2012.
to their fellow disenfranchised in the slums of Swat, Pakistan. His films interrogate the terrains of nationalism, religious and cultural fundamentalisms, sexual and gender oppression in India, the war on terror, the exploitation of migrant labour, and the nuclearization of the world. Across his oeuvre we find a commitment to fostering another social world — one that is more ethical, equitable, and less exploitative and oppressive. Patwardhan’s visual archive is vast, and the issues he engages with are varied; restricting my proof texts to three documentaries — *In the Name of God*, *Father, Son and Holy War*, and *War and Peace* — I consider Patwardhan’s visual critique and his mediation on an alternative India.

The period that the three documentaries explore, 1991-2002, is significant for it marks the period between India’s neoliberal reform policies in 1991 and the post 9/11 world, and captures well the key decade in India where decisive changes were implemented by the government that set the template for the global India of the present. Since 1947, postcolonial India has been governed for the most part by the Indian National Congress party, which brands itself as both secular and centrist, and which championed an ‘import-substitution industrialization model, more inward-oriented and state regulated than elsewhere’ (Vanaik 2001: 44). This changed significantly in 1984, when the Congress Party, under the lead of Rajiv Gandhi, responded to the demands of ‘a bourgeoning ‘middle class’ ... hankering after higher levels of consumption [and] pushed for a cautious integration into global markets’ (Vanaik 2001: 44). And this marked the move from post-independence ‘Nehruvian principles that had officially guided India’s modernizing project since 1947 — socialism, secularism, democracy and nonalignment’ (Vanaik 2001: 43) to ushering in neo-liberal principles, which ‘materially and discursively construct[ed] a new India’ (Oza 2006:
Socialism and non-alignment, as Vanaik writes, were ‘abandoned; [secularism] ... redefined to accommodate Hindu nationalism, while the third, [democracy] ... is threatened as never before’ (2001: 43). The Congress Party initiated significant changes in policies that included giving consent to

the broadcast of Hindu serials as a staple of the national program, ... overruling ... a Supreme Court judgement on Muslim women’s right to divorce with a controversial bill that addressed the conservative Muslim constituency and ... opening ... a mosque (Babri Masjid) that was the subject of a decade-long dispute in order to placate the Hindus angry over the Muslim Women’s Bill (Rajagopal 2001: 51).

In short, the Congress Party set the scene for ushering neoliberal reform, sowed the seeds of religious and cultural fundamentalism, and failed to prevent communal violence. It set the scene for the rise of the BJP and Hindu fundamentalist politics. It is this context in which Patwardhan’s documentaries are situated and to which they are responding: In the Name of God, 1992, responds to the social production of religious hate engineered and disseminated by the BJP; Father, Son and Holy War takes up the issue of the violence of religious fundamentalism and connects this to aggressive masculinity and violence toward women; and War and Peace weaves together several threads — corrupt political parties in India, religion, fervent militarism, nationalism, caste politics and American hegemony — to emphasise the violence of the social present and the urgency of embracing Gandhian principles as an antidote. These three documentaries thus embody Patwardhan’s critique of the constitution of the global Indian present as well as his vision for an alternative India. Patwardhan’s films work to underscore key moments in postcolonial Indian history — the Emergency, the rise of fundamentalism, the nuclearisation of India, communal violence and continued gender and caste discrimination — with the aim of producing a genealogy of the disenfranchised and alienated subjects as citizens in the contemporary political modernity.
of postcolonial India. And in the case of the three documentaries it is the ‘de-humanization of the specific other’ (Guneratne 1998: 271) — the Muslim, the secularist, the non-believer, the non-masculine, and hence the non-nationalist — that takes place in the construction of knowledge of, and about, India by those in power — that Patwardhan critically engages with.

_In the Name of God_ opens with a caption reminding spectator that while the film was completed in 1991, one year before the destruction of Babri Mosque, it was only being screened in 1997, on order of the Bombay High Court, immediately bringing back into the foreground the sanctions imposed on the film and the difficulties confronted in screening the film to the general audience. It then goes on to display a collage of images (people, posters, and activities) with a voiceover of a religious priest, whom we are introduced to later, affirming the rebirth of Hinduism and the call for a commitment to rebuild a new temple for the god Ram at the exact site of the Babri mosque in Ayodhya. The priest’s voiceover then provides a date for this — 30th October — without mention of the year, but we can infer this precisely because the date that he is flagging — 30 October 1990 — is significant in that it refers to the date when thousands of volunteers from the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP, World Hindu Council), an offshoot of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS, National Volunteer’s Union), a right-wing Hindu fundamentalist collective, converged onto the Babri mosque in an attempt to reclaim the site for a temple. The opening continues with images of fundamentalist groups journeying to Ayodhya with the priest’s voiceover appealing to the people, or more precisely Hindu devotees, to return to Ram. The return here functions doubly in the sense of calling for a return to the supposed site of Ram’s birth and a return to religious faith in the face of increasing trans-nationalisation of the country.
brought on through economic liberalisation introduced by the Congress government, which had contaminated pure Hindu space.

The title of the documentary then cuts in before a female voiceover begins narrating the history of Babri mosque in Ayodhya, tracking it from 1528 to the present to highlight the reductionism of the history as produced by the VHP and demonstrate the impossibility of affirming a narrative of origins upon which the Hindu fundamentalist claims to Ayodhya is staged. The re-historicisation of Ayodhya and Babri Masjid serves to disrupt the way in which the narrative had been constructed by the Hindu fundamentalist: it first shows that Babri Masjid was built in 1528, and it was only 50 years later that Tulsidas wrote his version of the Ramayana which popularised the legend of the Hindu God-King Ram. In that sense the documentary seeks to show that the argument championing Ram’s birth at Babri Masjid is historically flawed and inaccurate. The re-historicisation then goes on to show that the very idea that the Mogul Emperor Babar had destroyed the temple of Ram in Ayodhya to build a mosque, which is the basis for the Hindu Right’s claim, was in fact a rumour produced by the colonial British to disrupt Hindu-Muslim unity, which had become a threat to the reign of the Empire. Although the rumour sowed the seeds of communal discord, it did not have the desired effect as anticipated by the British. On the agreement of a compromise in the face of a common enemy, Hindus and Muslims lived harmoniously in Ayodhya and it was only after independence, in 1949 to be precise, that the claim over the site has been in contest. The reference here is to the year when Hindu militants broke into the mosque and placed Ram idols in it and the Congress Party in power refused to remove the idols on grounds that it would cause religious discord. The re-historicisation of this narrative (of Ayodhya, Babri Masjid, and postcolonial Hindu militancy) through interviews with members of the minority Muslim population who narrate the effects of the events,
from destruction of material possession to the loss of lives, challenges the claim of the Hindu fundamentalist and puts into crisis the idea of a Hindu nation. One significant scene is a lengthy interview with Pujari Laldas, the priest of the Hindu temple at the contested Ram Janmabhoomi (Birthplace of Ram) site, conducted on 30 October 1990. The priest openly criticizes the actions of the Hindu Right, pointing out that the religious violence has been manufactured by politicians from the VHP and BJP, those from the upper castes and class with the aim financial and political gain. Laldas’s candid comments, which disputes the Hindu Right’s claim on the site specifically, and the project of constructing a Hindu India, more generally, has added significance given his position as temple priest from which he was removed in 1992 when the BJP seized power in the state. On 17 November 1993 he was assassinated.

The narrative of the documentary follows a linear progression tracing the development of Hindu fundamentalism in postcolonial India through a juxtaposition of archival footage, political speeches, photographs, religious rituals and rites as well as interviews with a variety of people (political leaders, priests, Hindu activists, lower caste men and women, as well as those of the Islamic faith). The use of linear progression not only allows us to ‘understand how certain options become the logical recourse in a perverse chain of reasoning’ (Akomfrah and Halberstadt 1997); more importantly, in terms of what is at stake here — the deceit of religious fundamentalism and the fabrication of the nation in terms of a pure religious discourse — opens up the contradictions and processes of normalisation that take place in the name of the nation.

This is the same driving force that encapsulates Father, Son and Holy War, a two-part documentary filmed over a tumultuous seven-year period — 1987 to 1994. It was
completed shortly after the destruction of the Babri Masjid and the bomb blasts that tore apart Bombay in early 1993. Here, Patwardhan weaves together the discourses of masculinity, patriarchy, Hindu religious fundamentalism, sexual potency, and widow sacrifice as a biopolitical program of fracturing and reassembling contemporary India in the shadow of Hindu India. Through this complex assemblage he seeks to show ‘the construction of masculinity as a fundamental aspect of the fascist [national] enterprise’ (Kapur 2006: 337), as well as trace the ‘bloody Hindu-Muslim conflict of India to the inherent phallocentrism of these religions’ (Guneratne 1997: 186).

The documentary not only moves across various discursive structures; it also moves across India, drawing on various contexts, locations, and key events of oppression and violence to demonstrate the pervasiveness of the biopolitical program of the Hindu Right. As Rustom Bharucha observes:

Patwardhan’s documentary negotiates a wide range of locations and contexts, ranging from the developments following Roop Kanwar’s murder at the sati site of Deorala, Rajasthan in 1987; communal tensions in Ahmedabad, Gujurat, also in 1987; the International Puthrakameshti Yagna (the ritual for the birth of sons) in Cochin, Kerala, 1992; the aftermath of the Babri masjid crisis leading to the devastation of the Bombay riots in 1993 (1995: 1610-1611)

However, as the links drawn between Hindu religious practices, potency pills, the sporting-celebrity icon ‘Macho Man’ Randy Savage, images of Hindus rallying and glorifying sacrifice, and interviews with members of the Hindu community across different class categories illustrates, patriarchal violence crosses various social categories. In this regard the documentary refuses to ‘essentialise the masculinity of the Hindu Right, ... but sees its configurations in relation to different pressures, tensions, capitulations, threats, to which
men respond differently, despite the larger hegemonic thrust of its movement’ (Bharucha 1995: 1614).

The film opens at nightfall in the city of Bombay, just after the Babri Masjid riots, and we see images of burning Muslim shop-houses and a collective masculine voice-over cuts in — ‘Yeah, we enjoyed it’. This is the collective voice of the Hindu Right affirming the joy of looting and destroying the property of members of their community: ‘they knew exactly which shops were Muslim, after all, they had been neighbor’s for years’ (Minault 1996: 235). The next scene is of a charred body, and we can safely assume it is a Muslim body, on the street with people walking past, getting on with their everyday lives. This is a powerful scene, and Patwardhan recognizes this as his camera lingers on the corpse for a lengthy period of time. In locating death against life, dead (Muslim) body alongside living citizens of the nation, Patwardhan seeks to show the quotidianness of religious violence to the Indian national texture. This lingering scene is broken by a quick cut to a close-up of faces of young men collectively pronouncing ‘We taught then a lesson ... we don’t wear saris’, providing us with the justification for the violence. Those who wear saris, and the signifier here is multiple, and includes Muslims, women’s groups, and secularists, interrupt the promise of a Hindu India. The crude politics of gender that is played out here in the present, is grounded historically by Patwardhan in relation to nationalist independence movement of India, particularly the ‘Hindu reaction to British stereotypes of, and about ‘effeminate’ Hindus ... and the ... Kshatriyazation [masculinization and militarization] of Hinduism ... with the warrior god Rama and the warrior king Shivaji emerging as symbols of resistance to foreign rule’ (Minault 1996: 235). The reading of the present in relation to, and as connected with, the independence movement, especially the masculinisation of nationalist resistance offers
a fuller account of the gendering of Indian nationalism and at the same time goes against established scholarship (Chatterjee 1989) that read women’s bodies, lives, as symbols of the nation and nationalism. In doing so, Patwardhan seeks to entrench the discourse of patriarchy and the violence of masculinity as foundational to the nation, as a critical site for the symbolization of the nation and nationalism.

Part Two, ‘Hero Pharmacy’, furthers the connection between masculinity, Hindu religious fundamentalism and nationalism, but pushes this in a different direction to emphasize the reductiveness of framing the violence of masculinity and patriarchy as a property of the Hindu right. Instead, Part Two asserts that masculine violence and patriarchal biases ‘cut across party, community, and religion, even though they are repressed in different ways for different reasons’ (Bharucha, 1995, 1614). It even cuts across gender as shored-up variously with interviews with women, images of women present at the fundamentalist rallies, and women politicians from the BJP delivering speeches at political rallies. One scene deserve particular attention: it is that of a BJP political rally where a speech by Sadhvi Rithambara is taking place; Rithambara is an active member of the VHP and RSS and is the founding member of the women’s wing of the VHP known as Durga Vahini (Army of Durga) who has been accused of playing a central role in the destruction of the Babri mosque (Sarkar, 2001).

She begins her hate-speech by hailing ‘Victory to Lord Ram’ to which the crowd responds by uttering the same and then claims that numerous young men had approached her asking for weapons ‘to kill the enemies of Hinduism’ to which Rithambara says she responded by asking ‘To kill a eunuch, why waste a bullet?’ The crowd applauds and chants ‘Victory to Lord Ram’ and Rithambara retorts ‘Say with pride: ‘We’re Hindus and India is ours’.”
The various references to the operations of caste hierarchy and religious bigotry in *In the Name of God* and *Father, Son and Holy War* are significant in that the references are to those histories of repression, exclusion, and regulation — the silenced narratives of the nation — and also to what Partha Chatterjee (1986 & 1993) calls the process of normalization, to delineate the process by which the national elite sought to normalize those “aspirations for community and agency in the drive to create a modern nation-state” (Prakash, 1994: 1481). What Patwardhan does in returning to the scene of normalization is to shore-up the impact of this normalization — the loss of homes, livelihoods, and lives — and the contradictions within the process of normalization. In *War and Peace* for instance, a film about the nuclearisation of India specifically and the world more generally, Patwardhan spends a considerable time focusing on the victims of nuclear violence including the villagers near Pokaran, Rajasthan, where the 1998 nuclear tests were conducted, the indigenous people in Bihar, whose local economy and ecology are dominated by the uranium mill, Japanese survivors of the bomb, the grief of parents of soldiers killed in Kashmir, and the people caught up in the Kashmiri border dispute. Against the backdrop of larger geopolitical alliances and collisions including the role of the United States in the nuclearisation of the world, the Indian-Pakistani nuclear arms race and the confluence of politics, religion and militarism in India and Pakistan that saw support for the further nuclear armament development, Patwardhan offers a critique of the project of nuclearisation by focusing on the victims, and through them, offers another vision of India and the world. He constructs his alternative India and world through his camera, which travels across various nations, capturing the voices and faces of the victims of nuclear violence, supplemented with detailed, personal interviews with victims, and journeying with peace activists who organized the Global Peace March Movement which travelled 1500 kilometers in three
months from Khetolai, a village near Pokaran, to Sarnath, Varanasi, ending on 6 August 1998, Hiroshima Day.

Between the three documentaries Patwardhan attempts to do a number of things: expose the contradictions within the discourse of religion, nationalism and governance to underscore the normalisation of specific biopolitical regimes; and trace the intricate relationship between religion, nationalism and capitalism to emphasize that the appeal to the purity of Hinduism by the Hindu Right as the basis for fostering a pure Hindu India against the territorialisation of neoliberal capitalism is incongruous. Patwardhan’s films attempt to develop another way of telling the story of contemporary global India — one that is not focused on the glitz and glam of Bollywood, the IPL, and/or the nation’s techno-industrial success, but on the violence, forms of oppressions and exploitations upon which the Indian present is constituted. In short, Patwardhan is keen to critically investigate the normalisation of violence, oppression and marginalisation as the basis for the nation. The documentaries collectively work against the normalization of certain practices, institutions and discourses that have come to animate the postcolonial Indian nation. Against the normalization of Hindu eschatology as the national foundation, against the marginalization of the Muslim community, against the perpetuation of caste and gender differences and violence, against the normalization of masculinity, and against the nuclearisation of the nation in the name of the security of the nation, Patwardhan offers a powerful critique and the possibility of an alternative India.

I wish to suggest that the national community that Patwardhan constructs through his critique works through what Chakrabarty calls a politics of ‘horizontal affiliations such as
‘the traditional organization of kinship and territoriality or on class consciousness depending on the level of the consciousness of the people involved’ (2002: 16). This is opposed to a politics of vertical mobilization, which is a characteristic of elite politics that involves the affiliation of people according to established, state-sanctioned parliamentary institutions, legal and constitutional structures, culturally sanctioned divisions such as caste and gender and those produced through uneven access to capital. There are numerous instances which reaffirm this point: Patwardhan’s activities ‘on behalf of the rights of the urban poor, slum-dwellers, refugees, the industrial proletariat, tribal [communities] and political dissenters’ (Lal 2005: 182), the coming together of peace activists across the India-Pakistan borders in War and Peace, the consistent use of women from the lower castes as interview subjects (in all the films discussed here), and those of the minority Muslim community exemplify the way in which such a community is imagined. It is one that cuts across various boundaries and which attempts to engender a community that challenges established forms of belonging predicated on violent forms of differentiation. This is finely captured toward the end of Father, Son and Holy War as Patwardhan surveys the destruction in a number of Mumbai neighborhoods in 1993 through interviews with the victims — men, women, and children of different faiths, caste and class, who had been affected by the violence. We hear the plight of a poor young mother who is waiting at the railway terminal with thousands of others to leave Bombay as her husband has been without work since the riots: She asks, ‘What can we do?’ and replies, ‘The children are hungry, so we’re leaving. We are going to Calcutta, back home’. At the station we also met Asraf Ali, a Muslim man who has been working as bus-driver in Bombay and is now returning to Lucknow. Ali tells us, or more precisely reminds us, of his father — Sheikh Firangi — a freedom fighter who had fought for India’s independence. The irony is evident: the freedom fighter’s son now cannot find a
home in the city of Mumbai, part of the country his father had fought for; just as the
displaced woman and her family who could not find residence in the city. We cut from the
railway station to a relief camp and meet the organizer who tells us that the camp had been
set up by ‘the people of Mahim [a multicultural neighborhood in Mumbai] and some social
work groups as well’ that is feeding about 8000 people. The organizer goes on to detail the
destruction as the camera pans slowly, capturing a hall filled with people jostling for space
to sit or lie down, and ends with a close-up shot of a young malnourished women starring,
eyes empty, into the camera as she clutches her malnourished child. We cut to a lengthy
scene of an exchange between a Hindu and Muslim woman. The Muslim woman recounts in
detail how her husband was murdered and how she was gang raped and paraded naked
around her neighborhood by Hindu fundamentalists during the violence. The Muslim
woman’s testimony is interrupted as she breaks down while recollecting the horror of the
incident; she is consoled by the Hindu woman and the testimony continues. The final scene
in this collage of scenes takes place outside the Indian People’s Human Rights Tribunal
which was set up to investigate the atrocities. A Hindu woman, armed with a loudspeaker is
speaking to a crowd of women and men who are gathered. She says:

To those who think cruelty is bravery, I say it cannot be. You and I must not allow our
neighbour’s homes to be attacked. Whatever their religion, they are neighbours. We
live together, in this country. My sisters listen. [The voiceover continues but the scene
changes to one of women marchers protesting the violence] Whenever there is a riot,
we women must stand against it. If the lower castes, Muslims, aboriginal people, the
oppressed were all united together we would outnumber them. Brothers and sisters,
I’ll end with this call. [The Hindu woman concludes and the chant of the marchers is
heard] ‘All women with one slogan. Humanity is our religion. Indian women say no!
Rivers of blood won’t flow. Indian children say no! No one’s blood need flow. We
Freedom. From atrocities. Freedom. From sexual harassment. Freedom. From the
police. Freedom. We want. Freedom.
The weaving together of images, voices, and stories of people from different faiths, castes, and gender captures well the India that Patwardhan envisages. This is a collectivity that comes together against forms of oppression, refusing to enter into a polemical us/them caricature of the violence, and champions a sense of solidarity and belonging that is not tied to established religious, cultural and/or political structures of identity. It is an India constructed beyond, outside institutionalized forms of belonging, and whose sense of community is built on a politics of horizontal affiliations. Thus, in the case of the three of the documentaries discussed here we can see how Patwardhan seeks to produce a critique of India through an exposition of the contradictions and gaps within the nation and articulates a different sense of community. This is a critique that calls upon the state to recognise the legitimate rights of marginalised communities in India. Patwardhan does this, as I have mentioned, in his weaving together of various lives across different social categories protesting the violence of religious fundamentalism, nuclearisation, masculinity and so on. And, as he makes clear in War and Peace, these various identities, bodies, and voices are brought together under the discourse of Gandhianism. In other words, the multiple identities of the social world — Hindu, Muslim, women, secularist, indigenous — are collapsed, in the name of solidarity, under a larger representable Gandhian ethos.

This is explicitly made clear through the opening with the assassination of Gandhi, which ‘symbolized the death of the potential for a tolerant, multi-ethnic and multi-religious society’ (Derr 2003: 167), references to ‘the Indian defeat by the Chinese, in 1962, when Nehru was persuaded by the scientist Homi Bhabha to move away from Gandhi’s anti-nuclear stance’ (Halberstadt 2004: 24), recalling ‘the impact of Gandhi’s assassination in 1948, two years before the film-maker’s birth, on his own family’ (Halberstadt 2004: 24),
and showcasing ‘Gandhian scientists and doctors who, in the face of governmental denial and neglect, have made concerted efforts to help and to present their research to villagers suffering the after-effects of nuclear testing’ (Halberstadt 2004: 24). The affirmation of Gandhianism as the foundation for an alternative India is in opposition to the discourse of militarization, caste-ism, violent masculinity, and religious fundamentalism — the dominant order of the present

The affirmation of a Gandhi-inspired nationalism as a critique of contemporary India is simultaneously critical of the limits of such a basis for a national community. Patwardhan is keenly aware of this, as demonstrated in the scene of a meeting of Dalits where the speaker narrates:

the story of Gandhi’s disagreement with Dr Ambedkar, the Dalit leader who fought for separate electorates for Dalits as a form of positive discrimination aimed at overcoming centuries of enforced backwardness. Gandhi fasted in order to make his point against separate electorates. The Dalit leader compromised his stand in order to save Gandhi’s life. In the film the Dalit speaker sings and the audience sings in chorus: 'A Brahmin killed him; we saved his life (Halberstadt 2004: 25).

The scene underscores the key (historical) moment when Gandhianism forecloses, normalizes, silences and excludes. In composing the scene in this way, Patwardhan seeks to situate Gandhi as a figure who refused to concede to a politics that provided political security to the Dalit community. It also positions the Dalits as saviours of Gandhi, thus reminding us that in saving Gandhi the Dalit community gave up the possibility of robust and engaging political participation in postcolonial India.

Patwardhan’s documentaries provide a rich critical exposition of contemporary Indian nationalism. In War and Peace, Patwardhan reveals the violence of identity through a forthright mediation on the violence of Hindu religious fundamentalism of the BJP; he then
reappropriates Hindu identity and the discourse of religious fundamentalism as seen in the scene where he is asked by a citizen of Pakistan living in a worker’s colony, 'Are you Muslim or Hindu?', and Patwardhan responds, 'Hindu,' and the worker, who is a Muslim, replies, 'It does not matter,' and invites Patwardhan into his home for tea. The latter scene re-appropriates the fundamentalist mediation on Hindu identity, as Manichean to Muslim identity, and stages it differently by expressing identity non-polemically and non-antagonistically. Beyond the challenge to Manichean construction of nationalism, Patwardhan also captures the vitality, creativity, and potential of the Dalits, the Muslims, women, non-fundamentalist Hindus, secularists, and other exploited communities to strike back at state power, religious fundamentalism, and patriarchal violence. The scenes of protesting woman shouting for freedom or of Dalits engaging in political forums in *War and Peace* are exemplary in this regard. Patwardhan’s visual critique, seeks to unmask the violence of identity and affirm the creativity and power of marginalized identities as the basis for constituting an alternative India. Such an aim is both noteworthy and challenging in that it combats the vestiges of dominant ideology.
Conclusion

This thesis has argued that a national cinema is by nature inherently multi-faceted because it can never present the nation in the singular; rather a national cinema privileges fragments of the nation in order to reinforce a specific dominant ideology. To construct this argument the Introduction to the thesis discussed the history of inscribing the nation and nationalism within Indian cinema to make the point that the relationship between cinema as a technology and the project of nationalism is an intimate one. Within the Indian context, cinema, and not print, qua Anderson (1983), that was instrumental in fostering a sense of the Indian nation and nationalism. This was done variously, as the Introduction demonstrated — through different bodies (women, Muslim), particular ideological prescriptions (Hindu religiosity for example), and specific political motivations, which collectively sought to underscore a dominant Indian nationalism through the figure of the North Indian (male) Hindi speaking subject.

Chapter one explored the position of Bollywood cinema as a ‘national cinema’, arguing that it naturalises a pan-Indian culture, of which the North Indian male subject is its exemplification. The chapter also sought to show how the modalities of representing gender, sexuality, culture, and politics is inherently informed and driven by a dharmik code that also functions to naturalise a Hindu-based and derived notion of the Indian nation and nationalism. Using two key texts, Mother India and DDLJ, separated by four decades, the chapter argued that across this period, a consistent modality of representing the Indian nation can be traced. And this representational framework closes down the heterogeneity of the national texture while affirming a Hindu-derived nationalism.
Chapter Two explored the development of ethno-nationalist Tamil cinema and argued that construction of the nation here differed significantly from that put forth through Bollywood cinema. Tamil cinema sought to articulate the nation in stridently ethno-nationalist terms by drawing upon the culture, language and heritage of the Tamil people. Staged as a response to the compulsory introduction of Hindi as the national language, Tamil cinema expressed a version of nationalism that was separatist, anti-caste, and anti-Brahmin. In that sense this was a radical cinematic representation that challenged the hegemony of Hindi, the Congress Party, and the construction of the Indian nation. Moreover, given that Tamil cinema was significantly invested in the idea of the nation, the chapter also suggests that it challenges the conception of Bollywood as national cinema because of Tamil cinema’s interests in the question of the nation.

Chapter Three examined three films by Mani Ratnam, collectively known as the terror trilogy, and argued that Ratnam articulates a highly disjunctured idea of the nation. The chapter also argued that the Tamil films — Roja and Bombay — mark a significant intervention into the cinematic culture of articulating the idea of an Indian nation in highly ethno-communalised ways that had previously dominated Tamil cinema. What is presented here is a secular, ultimately north Indian male, representation of the nation. The chapter concluded with a discussion of the representation of gender roles in Roja, and argued that female subjectivity continues to be central to the articulation of the nation, but she remains marginalised.

Chapter Four explored Deepa Mehta’s film Fire, specifically the representation of women and argued that the film challenges the ways in which women have been represented in Bollywood and Tamil cinema. In Fire Mehta articulates a counter-hegemonic representation
of female subjectivity, sexual desire, and cultural norms that disrupts the dominant cultural narrative that is constructed by the Hindu Right. Further, as the chapter suggested, the critique of hetero-normativity is also a critique of the way in which the nation is articulated. In other words, Fire offers an alternative idea of the nation that is dislodged from the cultural moorings that dominate the national texture.

Chapter Five examined the political documentaries of Anand Patwardhan and argued that his films seek to foster a horizontal community that cuts across categories such as caste, religion, and gender, to imagine another India. This is a national community that refuses to subscribe to a dominant Indian nationalism that is constructed by those in power. Such a project is definitely interventionist as it goes against the dominant inscription of nationalism: as militarised, masculine, and nuclearized.

Throughout this thesis I have argued that the expression of the nation and nationalism as constituted by Bollywood cinema is highly exclusionary. Other cinemas, such as Tamil cinema, diasporic cinema, and political documentaries, provide an alternative conception of the nation, and at the same time problematize a singular conception of national cinema in India. Because there are multiple cinemas within and beyond India that engage and negotiate with the questions of the nation it is clear that Bollywood’s position as the national cinema is problematic at the very least. As Tom O’Regan expressed in his 1996 book Australian National Cinema, a national cinema must be conceived of as necessarily hybrid, as it cannot be contained with a universal, undifferentiated notion of the nation. It is in these terms that we might grasp Indian cinema, as a necessarily hybrid manifestation.
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