

The Role of Propaganda in Cinema: A Historical and Contemporary Analysis

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Abstract

Propaganda has long been a powerful tool in shaping public opinion, influencing behavior, and advancing political and ideological agendas. Cinema, as a mass communication medium, has played a crucial role in disseminating propaganda, from the World Wars to contemporary films. This paper examines the historical use of propaganda in cinema, its impact on society, and the evolving role of propaganda films in India. Through case studies of films such as *The Kashmir Files* (2022), *The Kerala Story* (2023), and *Veer Savarkar* (2024), this study explores both the positive and negative consequences of propaganda in shaping political discourse, national identity, and social cohesion.

Introduction

Propaganda is the deliberate manipulation of information to influence public perception and behavior. Edward Bernays, regarded as the father of public relations, considered propaganda a means of benefiting society if used constructively. Jacques Ellul emphasized its pervasive role in modern societies, particularly in mass media and political communication.

The intersection of propaganda and cinema dates back to World War I, where films were utilized to support war efforts. The Bullet Theory by Harold Lasswell further underscored the effectiveness of propaganda in mass communication. Over time, cinema has evolved into a powerful medium for shaping ideological narratives, from Nazi Germany's nationalistic films to Cold War-era ideological battles between the United States and the Soviet Union.

Historical Perspective of Propaganda in Cinema

World War Era Propaganda Films

During World War I and II, propaganda films were produced to boost morale and nationalistic sentiments. The Battle of the Somme (1916), a British documentary-style film, depicted the realities of war to garner public support. Similarly, German Expressionist cinema under Adolf Hitler aimed to strengthen national pride through films such as *Triumph of the Will* (1935) by Leni Riefenstahl. In the Soviet Union, Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) and Dziga Vertov's *The Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) used montage techniques to promote socialist ideals.

Both Allied and Axis powers employed cinema as a tool for ideological warfare. Frank Capra's *Why We Fight* series in the United States and the Soviet film *The Fall of Berlin* (1950) exemplify this strategic use of film to rally public support for war efforts and political ideologies.

Cold War and Vietnam War Propaganda Films

During the Cold War, films such as *Red Nightmare* (1962) and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) reinforced anti-communist sentiments, while the Soviet Union responded with counter-propaganda films. In the Vietnam War era, the U.S. film *The Green Berets* (1968) sought to justify American involvement, whereas North Vietnamese cinema aimed to depict U.S. forces as imperialists.

Propaganda in Indian Cinema

Indian cinema, emerging under British rule, initially refrained from direct anti-colonial propaganda due to censorship. However, films such as *Raja Harishchandra* (1913) and *Do Bigha Zameen* (1953) subtly incorporated nationalist themes.

Post-Independence Era and Nationalistic Cinema

After independence, Indian cinema embraced nationalism as a central theme. Films like *Mother India* (1957) and *Shaheed* (1965) reinforced patriotism, emphasizing the sacrifices made for the country's freedom. Government-funded documentaries and state-sponsored films also played a role in shaping public perceptions about economic and social policies, particularly during the Nehruvian era.

State-Controlled Media and Emergency Era Propaganda

During Indira Gandhi's Emergency (1975-77), cinema and television were used to promote government policies. The government-controlled media outlets such as Doordarshan broadcast content glorifying state policies, suppressing dissenting narratives. Films that opposed the emergency, such as *Kissa Kursi Ka* (1977), were banned, showcasing the extent of censorship and propaganda in shaping public opinion.

Rise of Political Propaganda in Contemporary Indian Cinema

In recent years, Indian cinema has witnessed a surge in politically motivated films that align with contemporary ideological trends. These films serve to reinforce narratives that support ruling parties or specific ideological movements.

Veer Savarkar (2024) and Political Propaganda

Directed by Randeep Hooda, *Veer Savarkar* is a biographical film that traces the life and ideology of Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, a controversial but significant figure in Indian political history. Known as the ideological father of Hindutva, Savarkar's legacy has long been debated. The film attempts to recast him not merely as a freedom fighter, but as a visionary whose ideas laid the foundation of modern Hindu nationalism.

Political Context and Timing

The release of *Veer Savarkar* coincided with the 2024 Indian general elections, a period marked by heightened political campaigning. The film's timing and narrative appear strategically aligned with the ideological stance of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which has consistently worked to elevate Savarkar's status in the national consciousness.

Cinema as a Tool for Historical Rebranding

The film employs several cinematic strategies to shape public perception:

- **Heroic Portrayal:** The movie presents Savarkar as a revolutionary hero, downplaying his controversial views on caste, religion, and his alleged role in Mahatma Gandhi's assassination trial (from which he was acquitted due to lack of evidence).
- **Selective Emphasis:** The storyline selectively highlights Savarkar's imprisonment in the Cellular Jail and his opposition to British rule, while avoiding contentious aspects of his ideology, such as his support for a Hindu Rashtra.
- **Myth-making:** By using emotionally charged music, patriotic symbolism, and idealized dialogues, the film crafts a mythic image of Savarkar, further blurring the lines between historical fact and ideological fiction.

Mass Communication and Electoral Mobilization

The film is an example of how cinema can be used as soft power to:

- **Influence Voter Psychology:** It reinforces the idea of a strong, Hindu-centric leadership model, resonating with a significant section of the electorate.
- **Polarize and Consolidate:** By glorifying Hindu nationalism, the film contributes to the consolidation of Hindu votes, while marginalizing secular or minority perspectives.
- **Set Political Agenda:** It provides cultural ammunition for political debates, shifting public discourse toward the reinterpretation of historical figures aligned with a specific political vision.

Controversies and Critical Response

- Critics have accused the film of **historical revisionism**, pointing out that it glosses over the complexities of Savarkar's legacy.
- Some historians and activists argue that the film promotes **ideological propaganda** under the guise of patriotic storytelling.
- Others view it as an attempt to **rewrite India's freedom struggle** by replacing Nehruvian and Gandhian narratives with those of right-wing icons.

Implications for Indian Society

- **Reinforces Polarized Narratives:** The film deepens ideological divides between liberal and right-wing interpretations of Indian history.
- **Impacts Youth Perception:** For a younger audience unfamiliar with Savarkar's multifaceted legacy, the film may serve as a primary (and potentially misleading) source of information.
- **Strengthens Cultural Nationalism:** It fosters a sense of cultural pride among supporters of Hindutva, further embedding nationalist ideology into popular culture.

Mass Communication Strategies in Veer Savarkar

The film employs various mass communication strategies to effectively influence public perception, reshape historical narratives, and reinforce ideological beliefs. These strategies include emotional storytelling, visual representation, and ideological alignment with contemporary political discourse.

1. Mobilizes Public Sentiment Through Nationalist Themes

One of the key strategies of the film is its use of nationalism to evoke strong emotional responses. This is achieved through:

- **Glorification of National Struggle:** The movie portrays Savarkar as a central figure in India's independence movement, often emphasizing his suffering and resilience in the Cellular Jail (Kala Pani). This creates an emotional bond between the audience and the protagonist.
- **Symbolism of Patriotism:** The film frequently uses patriotic imagery such as the Indian tricolor, prison hardships, and slogans that reinforce the idea of sacrifice for the motherland.
- **Rhetoric and Oratory:** The dialogues are crafted in a way that inspires pride and admiration for Hindu nationalism, aligning with contemporary narratives of self-reliance and cultural revival.
- **Portrayal of External and Internal Threats:** The film subtly presents the British as oppressors while also depicting ideological opponents of Savarkar's views as hurdles to India's progress. This dichotomy reinforces the idea of "us vs. them," a classic propaganda technique.

2. Shapes Historical Understanding to Align with Political Ideologies

The film strategically presents history in a manner that aligns with the ideological goals of Hindu nationalism:

- **Selective Representation of Facts:** While highlighting Savarkar's contributions to the freedom struggle, the film downplays or omits his petitions to the British government for clemency during his imprisonment.
- **Reframing of Controversial Aspects:** His alleged connections to Nathuram Godse (Gandhi's assassin) and his trial for conspiracy are either glossed over or presented in a way that distances him from any wrongdoing.
- **Heroification of Savarkar:** Instead of presenting him as a complex historical figure with conflicting ideas, the film elevates him to an unquestionable heroic status, simplifying history into a good vs. evil narrative.

3. Strengthens Emotional Connections with Ideological Figures

The film ensures that audiences emotionally invest in Savarkar and his ideology by:

- **Dramatic Personal Struggles:** His hardships, including torture in the Andaman Cellular Jail, are shown in intense, close-up sequences, making viewers sympathize with his pain.
- **Characterization as a Visionary:** Savarkar is depicted as someone who foresaw the threats to Hindu identity long before others did, reinforcing the idea that his ideology remains relevant today.
- **Music and Background Score:** Patriotic and emotionally charged music accompanies pivotal moments, heightening the audience's connection to Savarkar's struggles and beliefs.
- **Repeated Ideological Messaging:** Throughout the film, Savarkar's vision of Hindutva is reiterated through powerful monologues and speeches, ensuring that the audience internalizes his perspective.

The Kerala Story (2023) and Ideological Manipulation

Directed by Sudipto Sen, *The Kerala Story* portrays the alleged mass conversion of Hindu and Christian women to Islam for recruitment into ISIS. The film, criticized for lacking substantial evidence, perpetuates Islamophobic narratives and fuels communal tensions. It aligns with right-wing political agendas and reinforces societal mistrust.

Impacts of *The Kerala Story* on Society

1. Raises Awareness About ISIS Recruitment Tactics but Exaggerates Figures

While the film attempts to highlight the genuine concern of extremist organizations like ISIS recruiting young individuals globally, it does so by:

- **Dramatizing and Generalizing Cases:** The film suggests that thousands of women from Kerala were converted and trafficked to join ISIS, but no verified data or government records support such a large number. This exaggeration weakens the credibility of the actual threat and can cause public confusion.
- **Spreading Fear Rather Than Education:** Instead of using a fact-based approach to educate the public about online radicalization and extremist grooming, the film sensationalizes the issue, promoting fear and distrust.

2. Reinforces Gender Stereotypes and Emotional Manipulation

The narrative framework of the film leans heavily on portraying women as:

- **Naive, Easily Misled Victims:** The female protagonists are shown as easily manipulated by romantic or emotional deception, reinforcing a stereotype of women lacking agency or critical thinking.
- **Tools of Terrorism Post-Conversion:** After their conversions, the women are depicted as either helpless or complicit, feeding into the narrative that women who step outside traditional roles are vulnerable to corruption.
- **Overuse of Emotional Scenes:** The film frequently uses intense emotional manipulation—family breakdowns, tears, and dramatic revelations—to amplify impact rather than presenting a balanced view, leading audiences to form strong but potentially misinformed opinions.

3. Contributes to Communal Disharmony and Political Polarization

One of the most significant criticisms of *The Kerala Story* is its role in deepening societal divides:

- **Portrayal of Muslims as Predators:** The film indirectly paints an entire community with suspicion by associating Islamic conversion with terrorism, which fuels Islamophobia and mistrust among different religious groups.
- **Political Utilization:** Released in a politically charged environment, the film was embraced by right-wing parties as validation of their concerns over "love jihad"—a controversial and largely debunked theory. This created further polarization between communities and political factions.
- **Impact on Social Harmony:** In states like Kerala and West Bengal, the film sparked protests, debates, and even bans, illustrating how art can significantly influence political discourse and public sentiment—positively or negatively.

The Kashmir Files (2022) and Nationalistic Narratives

Vivek Agnihotri's *The Kashmir Files* dramatizes the 1990 exodus of Kashmiri Pandits, blending historical facts with fictionalized elements. While the film raises awareness about a significant event, it has been accused of distorting facts to promote an anti-Muslim narrative.

Impacts of *The Kashmir Files* on Society

1. Sheds Light on the Plight of Kashmiri Pandits

- **Uncovering a Forgotten Tragedy:** The film brought widespread attention to the 1990 exodus of the Kashmiri Pandit community, a topic that had often been underrepresented in mainstream discourse. By showcasing the trauma, displacement, and violence faced by the community, it created a national conversation around their suffering.
- **Emotional Engagement:** Through intense and often graphic scenes, the film evokes empathy for Kashmiri Pandits, highlighting their sense of loss, identity crisis, and yearning for justice. This emotional portrayal has helped many viewers understand a painful chapter of Indian history.
- **Demand for Justice and Rehabilitation:** Following the film's release, there was a renewed demand for the rehabilitation of displaced Kashmiri Pandits, as well as official recognition and documentation of their suffering.

2. Encourages Political Action Against Militancy in Kashmir

- **Heightened National Security Discourse:** The film reignited public debates about terrorism, separatism, and the influence of radical ideologies in Kashmir. It reinforced support for government actions against insurgency and separatist movements in the region.
- **Support for Tougher Policies:** Many viewers and political leaders used the film as a justification for more aggressive counter-terrorism policies and the abrogation of Article 370, citing the need to restore peace and protect minorities in the region.
- **Electoral Influence:** The emotional weight of the narrative has been leveraged in political campaigns, particularly by right-wing parties, to strengthen nationalist sentiments and emphasize the threat of terrorism.

3. Exacerbates Communal Tensions Between Hindus and Muslims

- **Simplified and Polarizing Portrayal:** Critics argue that the film presents a black-and-white narrative, where Muslims are often depicted as aggressors and Hindus as passive victims. This portrayal risks demonizing an entire community and overlooking the complex socio-political realities of Kashmir.
- **Rise in Islamophobia:** In several regions, there were reports of inflammatory speeches, social media hate campaigns, and a rise in anti-Muslim sentiments following the film's release. Viewers emotionally moved by the film were seen using it to justify communal hostility.
- **Disruption of Social Harmony:** In multicultural and religiously diverse societies like India, such narratives can strain inter-community relations, leading to mistrust, resentment, and sometimes violence, especially when amplified by political rhetoric.

Overall Impact of Propaganda Films

Positive Impacts

1) Effective Mass Communication Tools for Education and Awareness

- Propaganda films often succeed in bringing lesser-known historical events, social injustices, or ideological debates into the mainstream. For example, *The Kashmir Files* educated many about the Kashmiri Pandit exodus, while *Veer Savarkar* introduced younger audiences to a controversial yet significant historical figure.
- Such films make complex socio-political issues accessible to the general public, using emotion, storytelling, and visual dramatization as powerful teaching tools.

2) Promotes National Identity and Cultural Revival

- Films like *Mother India*, *Shaheed*, and *Veer Savarkar* reinforce a shared national identity by celebrating patriotism, sacrifice, and cultural values.
- They help revive interest in historical and cultural narratives that may have faded from public memory, contributing to a sense of pride and belonging, especially in youth and diaspora communities.

• Mobilizes Public Opinion on Critical Social and Political Issues

- Propaganda films have the potential to galvanize public sentiment and spark discourse on pressing national concerns. For instance, *The Kerala Story* brought terrorism and radicalization to public attention, even if controversial.
- Governments and political movements often use such films to rally support for policy changes or electoral goals, shaping voter behavior and public consciousness.

Negative Impacts

1) Polarizes Society and Fuels Communal Conflicts

- Films like *The Kashmir Files* and *The Kerala Story* have been criticized for presenting one-sided narratives that deepen divides between religious communities.
- These portrayals can escalate tensions, especially when consumed without critical engagement, potentially leading to social unrest or hate speech both online and offline.

2) Manipulates Facts for Ideological Gain

- Propaganda cinema often simplifies or distorts historical events to fit a predetermined ideological agenda. For example, *Veer Savarkar* selectively glorifies Savarkar's contributions while downplaying controversial aspects of his political philosophy.
- This manipulation can create biased historical consciousness, leading audiences to accept constructed narratives as unquestioned truths.

3) Deepens Political and Religious Divides

- When films are used as tools for political gain—as seen in the endorsement or promotion of certain films by political parties—they risk turning cinema into a battleground for ideology rather than art.
- The communal overtones of certain propaganda films may reinforce existing prejudices and alienate minority communities, threatening India's pluralistic and secular fabric.

Conclusion

Cinema, as a medium of mass communication, possesses unparalleled power to influence public opinion, construct national narratives, and reinforce or challenge dominant ideologies. Propaganda films—whether overt or subtle—have historically served as tools for governments, political parties, and ideological groups to shape collective memory and guide political discourse.

From World War-era propaganda to Cold War dramatizations and modern nationalist cinema, films have consistently mirrored and molded societal sentiments. In the Indian context, this tradition has taken new forms with contemporary releases like *The Kashmir Files*, *The Kerala Story*, and *Veer Savarkar*, each of which reflects deeper socio-political undercurrents in the country. While these films succeed in raising awareness about historical events and reviving nationalistic pride, they often do so by simplifying complex issues, reinforcing binary narratives, and sometimes fueling communal polarization.

The dual-edged nature of propaganda cinema cannot be ignored. On one hand, it serves as an effective tool for education, cultural revival, and mass mobilization. On the other, it risks promoting historical revisionism, marginalizing minority voices, and deepening ideological divides. The responsibility, therefore, lies not only with filmmakers but also with audiences, critics, and policymakers to critically engage with such content—balancing emotion with evidence, and nationalism with nuanced understanding.

In an era of heightened political awareness and digital amplification, propaganda in cinema will continue to evolve. Its impact will depend on how societies choose to interpret, question, and respond to the narratives portrayed on screen.

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