Research Article

Indian Narrative Setting of 1971 War: A Cinematic Memory Study

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ABSTRACT

Cinema acts as a soft power to narrate the story to the people irrespective of age and nationality. It is also a powerful tool to spread propaganda. In south Asia the Indian film industry is a very stronghold for making powerful cinema. They often compose cinema on historical events and narrate the story which they want to disseminate. Sometimes this narration of events creates distortion of historiography. In this study we examine carefully how the Indian films tell the story of the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War. We have used three Indian films for this study: *Pippa, Children of War*, and *Gunday*. This paper uses ideas from cultural memory studies and national cinema theory to show how these movies make India's military and political involvement seem bigger while downplaying the role and contributions of Bangladesh's political leaders, resistance fighters, and civilians. The study finds two main narrative strategies: leaving out Bangladeshi agency and making Indian humanitarian involvement sound bigger. The study also talks about how nationalist storytelling and themes from commercial movies build a version of history that backs India's geopolitical agenda. These movies are examples of soft power that support a dominant regional memory that sees India as a liberator and downplays Bangladesh's own fight. The results show that history-based movies need to be more balanced and include Bangladesh's own struggle for its freedom. This work adds to the academic dialogue about historical memory, how movies show events, and how culture affects South Asian geopolitics.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 remains a defining moment in South Asian history, marking the culmination of East Pakistan's struggle for independence from West Pakistan after decades of political, economic, and cultural marginalisation (Ahammad, 2024). The conflict, characterised by widespread atrocities and genocide, resulted in the creation of Bangladesh and reshaped regional geopolitics. The Pakistani military's brutal crackdown during Operation Searchlight resulted in mass atrocities, genocide, and war crimes, which eventually led to the origin of Mukti Bahini (Freedom Fighters of Bangladesh) and massive civilian support (Hossain, 2024). India supported the war for Bangladesh's independence with full valour and hosted the Bangladesh interim government in its territory. Sheltered almost 10 million refugees, and the country's economy took a great hit (Biswas, 2023). It trained the Mukti Bahini (Freedom Fighters of Bangladesh), armed them, pushed them into the Bangladeshi border, and aided them further. Indian efforts were not limited to this, but they sent envoys to many European, American, and Asian countries, including Russia, and signed treaties with them (Drong, 2016). India's military intervention in December 1971 hastened Pakistan's surrender. So it is completely clear that India truly made a tremendous effort to aid the Bangladesh War of Independence. In spite of the assistance by India, the war's outcome was fundamentally rooted in the resilience of the Bangladeshi people and the efforts of the Mukti Bahini resistance (Hossain & Hoque, 2024). The civilians of Bangladesh contributed to the war greatly. With their support and cooperation, the Mukti Bahini, under the command of General MAG Osmani, orchestrated the liberation war. The political leadership was vested in the Awami League and other communist/leftist parties. Tajuddin Ahmed and his cabinet, when Sheikh Mujib was detained in a West Pakistani jail, coordinated the war. But overlooking the inherent role of the people of Bangladesh the war of independence of Bangladesh through a complex lens of nationalism shaped by historical, social, and political dynamics. This nationalist narrative setting from India distorts history and creates confusion in the geopolitics of the region.

To tell the story of the war, people often depend on the visualization through writing books, making cinemas, composing songs and cartoons etc. Cinema is a powerful tool for presenting the story of a war or a movement. It shapes nationalistic feelings by constructing and reinforcing collective identities, historical narratives, and cultural values. Through various genres, films evoke shared memories and ideals, often portraying a common enemy or heroic figures that resonate with audiences. This synthesis of cinematic storytelling and nationalism manifests in several key ways. Films usually appropriate historical events to forge a sense of unity among diverse populations, creating an "imagined community" (Chowdhury, 2022). Biopics glorify national heroes, reinforcing the myth of nationhood and promoting values such as sacrifice and moral virtue (Kumar, 2013). War films serve as propaganda tools, depicting military struggles in a way that elevates national pride while downplaying civilian contributions (Irawanto, 2020). Mainstream cinema increasingly aims to awaken patriotism through relatable narratives, blending history with modern themes (Zhu, 2024).

Since cinema can be a weapon for opinion-building, Indian cinema is no exception. It has become a vital tool for the propagation of the national and regional agenda (Rai and Rai 2023). The Indian film industry has produced countless nationalistic films. For example, *Jhansi ki Rani* (1953), *Begum Jaan* (2017), *Neerja* (2016), *Raazi* (2018), *Manikarnika* (2019), *Gunjan Saxena: The Kargil Girl* (2020), *Naya Daur* (1957), *Mother India* (1957), *Upkar* (1967), and *Purab Aur Paschim* (1970), etc. These films portray monolithic structures of nationhood (Rai & Rai 2023). Like the other films based on historical events, a number of movies were made about the Bangladesh War of Independence. For example, *Shongram* (2014), *Abar Tora Manush Ho* (1973), *Amar Bondhu Rashed* (2011), *Children of War* (2014), *Dhire Bohe Meghna* (1973), *Hangor Nodi Grenade* (1997), *Muktir Gaan* (1995), *Ora 11 Jon* (1972), etc. In this list, there are a good number of movies that were made in Bollywood, the Indian film industry based in Mumbai. In these movies, the war of Bangladesh independence is depicted differently according to the idea of the writer's ideology and constitutes historical narratives as per the nationalistic views. The films, particularly Indian films, often reframe the history of the Bangladesh War, emphasising India's role as a "saviour," overshadowing the agency of Bangladeshi struggles. The movie as powerful tool for spreading ideology or propaganda it can put things on new perspective (Kaberi, 2015). This paper critically examines how Indian cinema constructs and propagates a nationalistic narrative of the 1971 war, focusing on the films *Pippa, Children of War*, and *Gunday*.

Cinema wields immense power in shaping collective memory, often privileging emotive storytelling over historical accuracy (Rosenstone, 1998). In the context of the Bangladesh liberation war, the Indian films narrate the story centring India's military contributions, marginalising the Bangladeshi resistance movement, political leadership, and civilian suffering. The liberation war of Bangladesh is often portrayed as a war between India and Pakistan. In these narratives, the story of Bangladesh is totally silent. The struggle for freedom and self-rule of the Bengali people is buried under the heroic narrative of the Indian role in the war. Such portrayals risk distorting public understanding of the war, reducing a people's liberation struggle to a simplistic narrative of Indian heroism. This distortion not only undermines Bangladesh's historical agency but also perpetuates a one-sided perspective that aligns with India's nationalist discourse. By analysing cinematic techniques and characterisations, this study addresses the following question: How do Indian films about the 1971 war reinforce a nationalistic narrative that privileges India's role over Bangladesh's liberation struggle?

The paper focuses on three films released between 1997 and 2023, chosen for their thematic engagement with the war and popularity in Indian cinema. By employing textual analysis and comparative historiography, this study highlights the ideological underpinnings of cinematic storytelling and its impact on public perception.

The following are the main contributions of this research:

1. Uncovering narrative biases: Shows that Indian films on 1971 systematically erase Bangladeshi agency – notably

omitting Bangladeshi leadership and resistance – while overstating India's military/humanitarian role, casting Bangladeshis as passive victims.

ii. Analyzing genre and ideology effects: Demonstrates how nationalist framing distort history – e.g. *Gunday* employs commercial masala conventions and *Pippa* foregrounds nationalist themes – each simplifying or reshaping the Liberation War story for mass audiences.

iii. Interdisciplinary theoretical lens: Applies cultural memory studies together with national cinema theory, treating cinema as a "cultural technology" that reconstructs collective memory and national identity. This framework critically links the film's narrative techniques to the communal recollection of 1971.

iv. Soft power framing: Interprets these filmic portrayals as a form of Indian soft power – privileging India's heroism in the war narrative – arguing that this intentionally shapes South Asian public memory in line with India's geopolitical interests.

v. Recommendations for historiography: Advocates balancing the war narrative by empowering Bangladeshi voices and co-produced films. The paper calls for more inclusive historiography – encouraging Bangladeshi filmmakers and scholars to tell the 1971 story – so that future narratives fully acknowledge Bangladesh's agency and resistance.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows: An overview of the related literature is given in Section 2. Section 3 elaborates on the proposed methodology. In Section 4, the results of the research are briefly given. In Section 5, we discussed the research question of the article. Lastly, section 6 concludes the article.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW
2.1. Cinematic nationalism
The portrayal of the 1971 war in Indian cinema builds nationalistic narratives through cultural and historical elements to establish national hegemony at the expense of other cultural perspectives. The films promote nationalistic fervour and cultural unity as mechanisms to satisfy democratic powers while supporting the objectives of ruling parties (Sherfudeen *et al.*, 2024). Indian cinema commonly uses a revisionist approach to retell the 1971 war by strengthening Indian pride and justifying its cause, yet it may demonise Pakistani or Bangladeshi perspectives (Danish & Ahmed, 2023). In the same way as "Sarfarosh," Bollywood uses identity politics and enemy portrayal of Pakistan to construct national security narratives that reinforce cultural superiority and broader ideological apparatuses (Khan & Pahore, 2021). The films create a unified national discourse that overlooks multiple historical accounts and complex political situations from that period to construct a one-sided nationalistic narrative (Danish & Ahmed, 2023). Indian media follows a pattern of developing national myths during the 'post-truth' period, when multiple convictions and historical reinterpretations frequently occur (Ranganathan, 2019).

Bollywood movies and Indian cinema use different cinematic elements to praise India's involvement through dialogue, symbolic imagery, and hero-villain binary systems. Films establish binaries between traditional values and modern approaches and right and wrong to build nationalistic feelings

and cultural recognition (Ayob & Keuris, 2017; Biswas, 2024). Signifiers such as body language along with visual metaphors utilising colour help deliver social messages about caste structures and gender relationships (Swamy, 2022). Advanced VFX technologies enable filmmakers to integrate innovative storytelling techniques while maintaining cultural authenticity, resulting in sophisticated narratives that audiences can connect with (Singh, 2024). The depiction of women remains limited to male-dominated narratives, which reflect the broader patriarchal social structures of society (Kumari, 2023). These methods unite to create a cinematic environment that represents and influences the development of India's national identity based on the role of their forces in the region.

2.2. Historical revisionism
Historical films hold many incorrect details and missing sections, especially when depicting marginalised groups and their historical achievements. Two popular films, "Rang De Basanti" and "Chittagong," try to restore the revolutionary Indian movements. Still, their final message reinforces non-violence as the dominant Gandhian interpretation while downplaying the complexities of militant anti-colonial struggles (Kachwala, 2018). Filmmakers choose to simplify historical narratives by emphasising emotional engagement over factual details because they want to provide audiences with stories of justice and heroic action (Kugler, 2019). Historical figures get reduced to single narratives in films while the Mukti Bahini, along with other groups, face complete erasure from historical accounts (Schultz, 2014; Umanath *et al.*, 2012). These widely popular films function as educational tools, yet they maintain the risk of promoting false historical information about past events and multiple historical participants.

2.3. Cultural memory studies and national cinema theory
Cultural memory refers to the ways in which groups, civilisations, or cultures collectively remember their past. It extends beyond individual recollections, encompassing shared practices, narratives, rituals, monuments, literature, films, educational systems, and other cultural artefacts that help sustain communal remembrance. Defined as the dynamic interplay between the present and the past within specific cultural and social contexts, cultural memory shapes how communities interpret history (Erll, 2008). A community's identity and sense of self are deeply intertwined with its cultural memory (Hermann, 2013), influencing not only its current values, beliefs, and behaviours but also its aspirations for the future (Merolla, 2019). This perspective suggests that our recollections of the past are always filtered through cultural frameworks, rather than existing in isolation. Moreover, memory is not solely an internal or private act; it is embedded within cultural engagement. A key dimension of cultural memory is how societies respond to traumatic or catastrophic historical events (Weedon & Jordan, 2012).

2.4. Theoretical framework
This study employs an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that combines cultural memory studies and national cinema theory to critically examine the representational politics of

Indian film depictions of the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War. Incorporating Jan Assmann's work (2011), cultural memory studies frame memory as a dynamic, socially controlled process through which cultures formulate and maintain communal interpretations of the past. This perspective perceives memory not as a static repository of historical facts but as integrated within cultural products and communicative activities that are influenced by, and subsequently influence, contemporary socio-political discourses. As a crucial nexus of cultural memory, cinema significantly mediates public history by emphasising specific events and figures while sidelining others. In the context of the 1971 war, Indian films like Pippa and Children of War serve as instruments of memory creation, portraying India's military and diplomatic actions as the principal engines of liberation, thereby dominating the agency, sacrifice, and political leadership of the Bangladeshi populace. By frequently circulating these selected memories, such films contribute to the establishment of a prevailing memory framework that validates India's heroic self-perception while ignoring the intricate, local aspects of Bangladesh's quest for statehood.

Additionally, Andrew Higson's (1989) National Cinema Theory examines how national identity is developed, consolidated, and carried through film narratives. Higson argues that national cinema is not simply a reflection of the nation, but a dynamic arena of ideological creation that shapes and governs perceptions of national identity. In this context, Indian war films function as ideological tools that advance state-centric narratives of patriotism, righteousness, and geopolitical legitimacy. The cinematic glorification of Indian warriors and political leaders—frequently contrasted with portrayals of passive or victimized Bangladeshis—establishes a hierarchical narrative framework that reinforces India's status as a regional hegemon. This process is representational and instrumental, aiding in perpetuating nationalist beliefs that correspond with state goals in both domestic and transnational arenas.

This study synthesizes two theoretical frameworks to provide a critical tool for assessing the function of film as a cultural technology of memory and power. This dual paradigm facilitates examining the narrative techniques, character development, visual symbolism, and ideological commitments that underlay cinematic representations of the 1971 war. It enhances comprehension of how these films mediate historical awareness and contribute to the geopolitical restructuring of postcolonial South Asia by articulating selective, state-approved narratives.

India assisted Bangladesh during its independence war; nonetheless, there exists a prevailing narrative among Indians asserting that the credit for Bangladesh's freedom solely belongs to India. This argument hinders the diplomatic relations between the two neighboring nations. Although numerous studies have investigated nationalism and soft power in Indian cinema, scant research critically analyses how films depicting the 1971 Liberation War obscure Bangladeshi agency—political leadership, freedom fighters, and civilians—by portraying the conflict as an India-centric humanitarian intervention. Furthermore, there is a deficiency of comparative, film-specific analyses that elucidate the narrative and cinematic approaches

influencing these selective memory frameworks. This study addresses that deficiency with a targeted analysis of Pippa, Children of War, and Gunday.

3. METHODOLOGY
3.1. Research design
The proposed qualitative study uses a comparative case analysis that explore how Indian films represent the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War. It combines critical analysis of films, as well as discourse analysis, and places individual films within their wider cultural and ideological frames.

3.2. Selection criteria of the film
The three movies were selected using a purposive sampling method to guarantee thematic depth and breadth. To begin with, all three films are based on the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War: Children of War focuses upon the refugee struggle and guerilla action, Gunday uses the war as context to a commercial story, and Pippa plays out a single battle. Second, we wanted a mix of genres, a historical drama (Children of War), and mainstream masala cinema (Gunday and Pippa) to reflect how they practice different storytelling conventions. Third, the timeframe 2014-2023 will enable us to see the development of representational strategies within nearly ten years. Lastly, the films were chosen on the basis of their access and acceptance in South Asia- box office collection and media reviews of the film in Indian as well as Bangladesh media- to make sure it was culturally influential.

3.3. Data collection and coding process
Both breadth and depth of analysis was made by watching each film twice. On the initial viewing, researchers made general memos regarding narrative arc, character orientation, and explicit themes. During the second viewing, a coding scheme was used: emergent themes (e.g., erasure of Bengali leadership, depiction of heroism) were recorded along with deductive categories based on our theoretical framework (e.g., agency, victimhood, nationalist framing). Timed notes helped to remember important scenes, lines and visual patterns.

3.4. Analytical framework
Our analysis weaves together Cultural Memory Studies and National Cinema Theory. Jan Assmann's concept of cultural memory guides our attention to how these films select, omit, or transform historical events to forge collective remembrance. Andrew Higson's national cinema theory situates the films within India's commercial and ideological filmmaking traditions, showing how industry norms and audience expectations shape narrative choices. We further employ discourse analysis to unpack cinematic techniques—camera angles, music cues, archival footage intertexts—and their role in reinforcing or subverting nationalist tropes.

3.5. Validity & rigor
To bolster credibility, the study adopts methodological triangulation. Film-based findings were cross-validated against historical scholarship on 1971 and contemporary critical reviews from leading South Asian media outlets.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Pippa (2023)

The movie *Pippa* (2023) of director Raja Krishna Menon tells the story of the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War from the perspective of Indian forces led by Captain Balram Singh Mehta (Ishaan Khatter) and Major Ram Mehta (Priyanshu Painyuli). The movie was limited only to the Battle of Garibpur. Captain Mehta shows growth from his rebellious behaviour into becoming a war hero by developing the PT-76 tank into a vital weapon during the Battle of Garibpur. The Mehta brothers' leadership stories add emotional resonance to the film, but the story primarily depicts Indian military leadership as the key factor in liberating Bangladesh while minimising the role of Bangladeshi political and military leaders like Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Tajuddin Ahmed, General MAG Osmani, Ziaur Rahman, and others. The film presents the Mukti Bahini guerrilla fighters as secondary characters who help India achieve its military mission. Major Ram trains Mukti Bahini fighters during his mission, yet his actions lead to their rescue of him from Pakistani detention, although their role remains underdeveloped because the story provides them limited dialogue and background. The movie presents a structural representation that establishes a storyline that shows India takes the leading position over Bangladesh while erasing the local Bangladeshi resistance movement.

The movie *Pippa* also depicts the contributions of three siblings to Bangladesh's Liberation War. However, it only portrays the Battle of Garibpur, which was not the only battle in Bangladesh's war for independence. Additionally, India's Analysis Bureau decoded all kinds of Pakistani information, and the Indian Army took action accordingly. This implies that the mastermind behind the war was the Indian government, and the Indian Army took the courageous actions.

In the film, the conflict takes shape as a dual military confrontation between India and Pakistan instead of a conflict led by Bangladesh for liberation. The Battle of Garibpur stands as an Indian triumph in the film, while its purpose is shown through Pakistani tanks that forced Pakistan to break the border first. The humanitarian basis of Indian military intervention stands legitimate because of the refugee situation where East Pakistani civilians found refuge within Indian borders. The portrayal in the movie shows Bangladeshi civilians as helpless victims who fail to take active roles in their liberation movement. The initial sequence of the film depicts the brutal 1971 Dhaka University massacre before it centres on Indian military achievements while neglecting both Bangladeshi political activism and their display of strength.

Meanwhile, the film does not show crucial aspects of Bangladesh's independence movement, such as the formation of a provisional government by Bangladeshi political leaders, the direct battles between Mukti Bahini (freedom fighters) and the Pakistani army, the formation of sector commanders, the sacrifice of millions of martyrs, or the declaration of Bangladesh's independence. Moreover, Bangladesh's rebellious poet Kazi Nazrul Islam's song "Bidrohi" has been used merely in a dance sequence, undermining its significance.

Although *Pippa* features Bangladeshi characters in its narrative, it does not portray their experiences in-depth. The Mukti Bahini appear in the film without personal stories or reasons why they fight alongside Indian troops. The plotline about Bengali women who faced Pakistani Army sexual abuse introduces this suffering, but its exploration stops at a rescue sequence, which diminishes their experience to serve the narrative. The movie omits important political factors, including the Awami League's election victory and Bengali cultural discrimination, which downplays the conflict into a pure military engagement. The movie revolves around a family—the three siblings—and the victory of a specific military force in a particular area, which does not represent the entire Liberation War of Bangladesh. Some members of the Mukti Bahini are shown, but they appear as side contributors, merely assisting the Indian Army in liberating Bangladesh. The movie presents the war primarily as a direct battle between India and Pakistan, portraying Bangladesh's independence as an achievement granted by India.

Through *Pippa*, the film promotes a prevailing Indian perspective that celebrates Indian sacrifices while removing native leadership from the historical record. The film devotes emotional significance to Indian soldiers who perish but pushes Bangladeshi losses into minor background elements. The film's final part praises India's 13-day triumph and the birth of Bangladesh without showing crucial events in Bangladeshi political history, including the March 26, 1971, declaration of independence. Director Raja Krishna Menon declared that his film centres on India's mission to free itself from occupation while steering clear of excessive nationalist sentiments (The Times of India, Nov 8, 2023). Although the narrative positions India as its central focus, it disregards the voices of Bangladesh while telling the story.

It is rare in history for one country to be the sole reason for another country's victory. The film emphasises Indira Gandhi's conflict with Yahya Khan, India's advanced military strategies, the brilliance of Indian soldiers, and the master plan of Indian secret agencies as the key factors behind Bangladesh's independence.

4.2. Children of War (2014)

The 2014 film *Children of War*, by director Mrityunjay Devvrat, depicts the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War through a story about Pakistani military cruelty and the enduring strength of war survivors. Through multiple stories, the film presents the experiences of Amir (Indraneil Sengupta), who worked with the Mukti Bahini, and Baba (Victor Banerjee), who led refugees across borders to India. The film recognises Mukti Bahini's resistance, yet it mainly presents Indian political leadership as the moral authority. Real footage of Indira Gandhi at the beginning of the film shows her justification for India's military involvement while presenting the conflict from an Indian humanitarian and geopolitical perspective. Although the film shows Mukti Bahini's resistance activities, they appear to be subsidiary to Indian backing, strengthening the impression of Indian control rather than Bangladeshi autonomy.

Through its depiction, the film shows India as a life-saving saviour by presenting its actions of providing refuge for refugees and assisting in the freedom struggle. The film presents scenes of refugees escaping to Indian territory while Baba helps lead

them to safety to illustrate this theme. The film shows how Indian personnel maintained a top-down relationship with the Mukti Bahini through their strategic guidance, which led to major resistance operations. The hierarchical The relationship between Indian agents and the Mukti Bahini restricts the freedom of the resistance group to develop their plans and organise grassroots activities. The film shows Pakistani crimes by showing mass rape camps alongside genocide and intellectual persecution. The movie showcases Bangladeshi suffering through its scenes, but its emphasis on victimhood eclipses Bangladeshi ability to take action. The story of Kausar (Rucha Inamdar) and Rafiq (Riddhi Sen), who escape violence in the film, prioritises their experience of trauma over fighting back because their portrayal reduces Bangladeshis to people who only survive. The film presents Mukti Bahini operations as responses needing Indian direction or assistance.

The movie tries to put Bangladeshi stories at its core while facing challenges with its authentic portrayal. Bangladesh audiences criticised the film because Hindi dialogue and artificial Bangla dubbing harmed the cultural representation of the story. The incorrect representation of Dhaka with hills in the background in the film's scenes created additional distance between the film and Bangladeshi audiences because the terrain is impossible in reality. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's declaration of independence is referenced in the film, yet his leadership remains secondary to the story. The declaration made by the military commander Ziaur Rahman and their role were absent. The story focuses on characters who support India, such as Mujeed, who leads a resistance movement (Farooque Shaikh). The film arranges its scenes to tell a story from an Indian perspective by showing both violent atrocities alongside India's rescue operations to create sympathy for its protective role. The story presents a simple dualistic conflict where Pakistan stands as an evil force against Indian and Bengali characters who embody goodness while dismissing intricate aspects like Bengali collaboration with Pakistan through groups like Razakars.

4.3 Gunday (2014)

Director Ali Abbas Zafar starts *Gunday* (2014) by presenting through voiceover that Bangladesh's independence was established when Pakistan surrendered to India during the India-Pakistan war in December 1971. The brief description of Bangladesh's nine-month fight for liberation against Pakistan has been marginalised to an insignificant detail within India's military triumph in dominant Indian historical accounts. The film ignores Bangladesh's control over its liberation while presenting the country's independence as a consequence of Pakistan's military confrontation with India. The film introduces Bikram (Ranveer Singh) and Bala (Arjun Kapoor) as war orphans, but their backgrounds function solely to establish their criminal activities in Calcutta. An initial montage in the film cuts short the traumatic moments of the Partition and Liberation War before the narrative shifts its focus to show the characters surviving as smugglers. The narrative eliminates East Pakistan's political neglect and the Bengali deaths from genocide alongside pre-1971 cultural struggles.

Historical accuracy takes a back seat in *Gunday* since it operates as a commercial Bollywood film, emphasising

dramatic, romantic, and action sequences. The filmmakers use the war as an ornamental element to tell the story of how two protagonists became criminals (Kosachova, 2020). The film omits both the Mukti Bahini and Bangladeshi fighters while fabricating a fictional tale about Indian coal mafia control. The film ignores major war crimes, including genocide and sexual violence, to present Bikram and Bala's rise to criminal power in Calcutta. The film introduces its central theme through the tagline "The Most Dangerous Men Are The Ones You Love, " emphasising personal rivalries and friendships instead of historical investigation. The commercial approach of this production follows Bollywood's pattern of using war as a nationalistic trope through simplified historical narratives designed for mainstream audiences.

The fictional plot of the film suggested Bangladeshi participation in arms trafficking and criminal activities, which led to protests from Bangladesh against the stereotypical depictions. The Bangladeshi government issued an official protest against the film because it found the distorted content to be "deeply hurtful" and requested complete removal (Press Trust of India, 2014). The film's story follows the propaganda lines used by Pakistan during its war to portray the liberation movement as an Indian plot.

Through the characters' success in Calcutta's coal business, *Gunday* presents an understated message about Indian economic control over post-war Bangladesh. The movie uses Hindi dialogue exclusively and excludes genuine representations of Bengali culture because Bollywood consistently merges South Asian identities into one homogenous group.

4.4. Discussion

Cinema is a very essential tool to shape a nation's collective memory. Cinema encapsulates art, entertainment, technology, industry, and ideology, intertwining these aspects into a complex unity (*Routledge Handbook of Indian Cinemas*, 2013). It mirrors society and plays a crucial role in shaping perceptions and impressions about the social conditions of a society (Gupta & Gupta, 2013). Cinema has evolved from basic high-definition photos into films with dialogue, sound, and updated visual effects due to advancements in science and technology (Novetzke, 2008). It has actually evolved into a global mass medium that has a significant impact on people all over the world. An analysis of *Pippa* (2023), *Children of War* (2014), and *Gunday* (2014) highlights a recurring pattern in Bollywood's portrayal of the Bangladesh Liberation War. These films consistently emphasise Indian military, political, and moral superiority while downplaying the agency and resistance of Bangladeshis. Instead of presenting a balanced historical account, they reinforce a dominant Indian nationalist narrative that positions India as the saviour and strategic architect of the war. This framing shapes a distorted historical memory, serving geopolitical interests by upholding India's hegemonic image in South Asia (Sherfudeen *et al.*, 2024; Danish & Ahmed, 2023).

4.5. Silencing Bangladeshi agency and narrative displacement

Bollywood movies generally portray Bangladeshi freedom fighters through minor supporting roles in the story of

their own liberation. In *Pippa*, the Mukti Bahini appear as subordinated helpers who assist the Indian military forces rather than independent freedom fighters. The film delivers its entire story through the Indian military heroes Major Ram and Captain Balram Mehta. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, together with Tajuddin Ahmed and General MAG Osmani, fails to receive recognition in these works, although their leadership provided the foundation for Bangladesh's liberation movement (Hossain & Hoque, 2024). These efforts attract viewers to the theatres. No viewers would expect the 'other' narratives in a film that they are watching, paying hundreds of rupees for the role of their state in a particular event. To keep the customer happy, the filmmakers are altering historical narratives and presenting their part of the story, framing the event as "what they want to watch." These efforts sometimes distort the historical narratives. *Children of War* shows Pakistani military atrocities as its main focus, yet it does not bring attention to the exceptional resilience and leadership of Bangladeshis. The film displays actual footage of Indira Gandhi to present India as the primary force with political and moral standing while Bangladesh appears subordinate. The film positions India to save others by playing the role of protector while Bangladeshis appear as victims who need help (Biswas, 2023).

The historical event serves only as background in *Gunday* because the war gets reduced to a dramatic setting. At the beginning of the film, the narrator states that Bangladesh achieved liberation through Indian victory over Pakistan, thus eliminating Bangladesh's domestic fight and framing independence as an Indian achievement. The portrayal of Bangladeshi refugees as criminals engaged in coal mafia gangs is a very disturbing narrative that can come out of any movie. In a society that hosts millions of refugees during a war, there is always the potential for increasing hatred and tension about hosting them. These tensions can become violent when the popular movies portray the refugees as active in crimes, and these tensions and hatreds directly influence the historical narratives.

Since the inception of Indian cinema in 1913, it has been instrumental in shaping national identity and promoting specific social norms, becoming a powerful force in crafting a national mythology around heroism, consumerism, leisure, and social interactions (Therwath, 2010). Given how powerful the Indian film industry is in the area, the way an event is portrayed to the general public is influenced by its storytelling techniques. The study of the films' social, cultural, and political ramifications was long marginalised in historical and sociological studies because of the lowbrow, elusive, and generally unrealistic quality of the screenplays. A sense of hegemony over other countries is created for the sake of national unity, and when these films are able to draw in foreign audiences, they rewrite history and suppress other viewpoints.

4.6. Memory, trauma, and cultural appropriation

Media shapes cultural memory through symbolic representation (Assmann, 2011; Erll, 2011). Media narratives play a pivotal role in constructing and reinforcing cultural memory through symbolic representation by serving as both a medium and a mediator of collective memory. On an individual level, media influences personal memories through family interactions

and mass media schemata, while on a collective level, it aids in the construction and circulation of shared past through various forms such as print, radio, television, and the internet (Erll, 2011). Media representation significantly impacts cultural identity and intercultural relations, shaping perceptions and identities globally. It can challenge or reinforce cultural norms and stereotypes, highlighting the need for accurate and inclusive representations to enhance cultural understanding (Wheatley, 2024). Bollywood creates memory tools through war movies by showing only Indian heroism without acknowledging Bangladeshi resistance during the 1971 conflict. Through these cinematic works, society develops its collective awareness, which in turn influences how public memories evolve. In *Pippa*, the choice to feature the Battle of Garibpur while omitting the March 26 Declaration of Independence and other key moments of Bangladeshi resistance, such as the Mujibnagar Government, reflects a deliberate narrative strategy. This mnemonic appropriation involves transforming Kazi Nazrul Islam's revolutionary poem Bidrohi into a dance number that strips away its radical nationalist meanings. *Children of War* presents its Bengali characters as victims of genocide and rape against Indian characters who perform rescue operations instead of showcasing resistance. The movie presents Pakistani violence yet concludes with a portrayal that shows Indian involvement instead of Bangladeshi self-determination. The film *Gunday* reduces war trauma into a foundation for creating the Indian villain characters. It demonstrates Higson's (1989) claim that national cinema prefers spectacle to historical accuracy during times when commercial success becomes crucial. The prioritisation of spectacle over historical accuracy in national cinema significantly impacts its cultural significance by shaping how audiences perceive and engage with historical narratives. Historical films often prioritise emotional engagement and narrative satisfaction over strict adherence to historical facts (Kugler, 2019). There are many examples of distorting historical facts in Indian cinema to gain political momentum, such as Tanhaji. Their main agenda was to glorify the Hindu nationalist icon, vilifying Islamic rulers (Gangopadhyay, 2023). Such cinematic revisions serve broader political agendas, reinforcing dominant nationalist narratives at the expense of public trauma and accurate historical understanding.

4.7. Commercialism, national cinema, and narrative control

The Bollywood industry must be viewed through the lens of national cinema theory, where cultural products serve both economic and ideological functions. Higson (1989) explains that national film industries support prevailing political viewpoints through content that appeals to general audiences. The spectators of Indian cinema are offered ways to think about their nation and national identity through the stories that are shown on screen (Mukherjee *et al.*, 2021). Cinema significantly influences society through international releases, movie distribution, and the idolisation of actors, functioning as a powerful medium for mass communication and entertainment (Gupta & Gupta, 2013). Bollywood movies function as a visual storehouse of India's collective imaginings, acting as guides to India's past, present, and future aspirations (Mukherjee *et al.*,

2021). Indian cinema, particularly Bollywood, has served as a conduit for projecting the nation as a global power while often obscuring the realities of caste, gender, race, and ethnicity, with films frequently showcasing exotic locales and characters leading idealised lives (Menon, 2020). Bollywood movies have the power to shape how people view the world because of the way they are made and how well they reach audiences (Tulla, 2023). Bollywood's influence extends beyond entertainment, functioning as a powerful tool for disseminating cultural values, nationalistic sentiments, and gendered narratives (Manavalli, 2010). The increasing commercialisation of cinema has profoundly impacted the historical narratives depicted on screen, influencing the stories told, the perspectives presented, and the overall representation of the past. War movies within the Bollywood industry focus on promoting national military achievements by silencing alternative perspectives. When these movies have commercial intentions, certainly the movies present something that is to appease or allure the spectators, not for narrating actual historical narratives. With this kind of power to control the public perception, these movies can alter the public understanding of historical information.

In both *Pippa* and *Children of War*, India's intervention is depicted not only as justified but morally necessary due to the refugee crisis and Pakistani atrocities (Biswas, 2023; Hossain, 2024). Through their storylines, these films elevate Indian military intelligence and humanitarian leadership as the sole forces behind Bangladesh's freedom. *Gunday* takes a different path through its commercial focus by reducing the historical liberation movement to a dramatic crime story. Through its inaccurate portrayal, the film causes both historical inaccuracies and harm to diplomatic ties.

4.8. Cross-border narratives and the geopolitics of memory

Movies function as tools for political influence. It serves as a powerful medium for communicating with the masses while remaining a source of entertainment, influencing society through international launches, movie distribution, and the idolisation of actors (Gupta & Gupta, 2013). States select their storytelling methods and visual elements in movies to build soft power and modify how their region perceives them. Bollywood productions present India as both a military partner and an architect of Bangladesh's independence movement. These films present a narrative that demonstrates that Bangladesh gained sovereignty through Indian political and military leadership, especially featuring Indira Gandhi along with RAW (Ranganathan, 2019; Irawanto, 2020). These narrative increases can be called "mnemonic conflict" as it creates opposition between different national memories, which leads to diplomatic and identity-based tensions (Assmann, 2011). This passive depiction of Bangladesh during liberation creates historical suppression, which harms Bangladesh both politically and culturally.

To move forward, there must be space for co-produced narratives and alternative cinematic voices that acknowledge the complexity of the liberation war. Bangladeshi filmmakers, historians, and cultural institutions must be empowered to tell their side of the story. Without such inclusivity, the dominant representations will continue to marginalise the very people whose struggle made independence a reality. These films are not merely entertainment; they are ideological texts that shape how history is understood, remembered, and politicised in South Asia.

5. CONCLUSION

Cinema is a powerful tool for visualising and preserving memory. Bollywood has taken the opportunity to tell its version of the Liberation War of Bangladesh. However, in doing so, it often overlooks the fact that the true stakeholders of this story are the Bangladeshi people. By centring their narrative, Bollywood is essentially creating an alternate universe that reflects their perspective rather than the historical reality experienced by Bangladeshis. They construct this through a number of cinemas and documentaries, for example, *Pippa* (2023), *Children of War* (2014), and *Gunday* (2014), which present India as the war's central actor while diminishing Bangladeshi nationalist participation. Historical revisionism occurs in these films through postcolonial analysis and national cinema studies along with cultural memory frameworks, which elevate India's liberating role while silencing subaltern perspectives. The humanitarian case for India's intervention in *Pippa* and *Children of War* produces passive representations of Bangladeshis who fail to demonstrate their role as agents of liberation. The war serves as background in *Gunday* while the film tells a criminal story that deepens existing harmful stereotypes. Indian soft power expressed through popular media strengthens its regional leadership but simultaneously eliminates Bangladeshi viewpoints in the process. The commercial ambitions of Bollywood combine war subjects with masala entertainment elements in a way that intensifies historical simplifications to attract a wide audience. Researchers need to work together to develop fair representations that show Bangladesh's freedom fight independently or through joint Bangladeshi-Indian filmmaking collaborations and educational programs on media representation. This study reveals the role of these films as ideological tools while they create collective memory, therefore advancing scholarly discussions about South Asian historical representation and subaltern agency and memory politics. The analysis requires a balanced cinematic historiographical method to replace nationalist mythmaking with inclusive historical remembrance of 1971 that respects all involved parties. The limitation of the study are the narrow selection of the film may not fully represent the broader spectrum of Indian cinematic narratives, absence of Bangladeshi cinematic counter-narratives, the research is based on film dialogues and existing literature without incorporating audience reception studies, interviews with filmmakers, or archival materials etc. The future research should compare Indian and Bangladeshi cinematic narratives, investigating how viewers in both Bangladesh and India interpret these films, with the rise of YouTube documentaries and OTT platforms.

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