

***THE ISSUE OF NATIONAL INTEGRATION IN BOLLYWOOD  
WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO LAGAAN AND CHAK DE! INDIA***

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**Abstract:**

India is a country of diverse identity where each individual identifies himself/herself with regard to his/ her class, caste, religion, gender, language, region etc. Sometimes these identities lead to the conflicting situations especially when one is obsessed with any particular identity. This may sometimes lead to the threat to our national integrity. In such a case, maintaining the togetherness becomes a tough task. The contribution of Bollywood in this regard is not encouraging especially in the last few decades. The obsession of Bollywood with hero worship has done the huge damage to our society. Most of the films in the name of national integration create a narrow vision of Hindu-Muslim harmony. Films based on public participation are rare to find. Keeping these facts into consideration, the present paper picks up two classic Bollywood movies of 21<sup>st</sup> century - *Lagaan* and *Chak De! India* which relate the story of public participation.

**Keywords:** National Integration, Nation building process, Patriarchy, Bollywood.

### **Introduction**

The date, 14<sup>th</sup> August 1947, doesn't mark the independence of India and Pakistan alone. There were 565 princely states formerly under the British control, became independent too. These princely states had two options; either to form an independent country of its own or to merge with India or Pakistan. Some got merged with India and others with Pakistan. The process of merging these states with India is what we historically know as national integration of India.

However, the concept of national integration is not restricted to mere political integration of the princely states. It is, in fact, a multi-dimensional term. Before we go into the discussion of its multidimensionality, let's have a look on the concept of nation itself. Is it the geographical boundary that determines a country? If it is so then why do the Indians living in other countries hoist the tricolour on 15<sup>th</sup> August and 26<sup>th</sup> January? What is it that makes such NRIs feel happy and sad depending upon the result India gets in a cricket match? Clearly geographical boundary is not sufficient. Not even the boundaries based on religion or language. The formation of Pakistan happened to be on the ground of religion but even this religious identity got shattered on the ground of language leading to the creation of another country Bangladesh in 1971. Now we wonder what the nation is? It is, in fact, 'to a great extent an imagined community, held together by the collective beliefs, assumptions and imaginations of its members. It is based on certain assumptions which people make about collective whole with which they identify' (NCERT. Political Theory. 100).

The princely states were different from one another in the matter of language, religion and culture. Even now India is such a diverse country where every individual possesses multiple identities in regard of his/her caste, gender, race, religion, language and many more. National integration in such a condition neither was nor is an easy task. To ensure the integrity of a nation in such a condition, it has to develop the feeling of togetherness among the countrymen. But the question is how to develop the feeling of togetherness? "Democratic participation", writes Mirza Asmer Beg and A.R.Kidwai, "is(was) the best way of achieving national integration" (Introduction. Perspectives on National Integration. vii)

The process of nation building doesn't happen overnight. Neither it happens through a single medium. It is, in fact, a continual process which includes several mediums. One of such

mediums is story. Story leaves lifelong impact on someone's life. If religion retains the morality it's through the stories, and if this conventional morality has been challenged later by secular literature, it is also through stories. All in one, story constructs our belief system, and accordingly we construct society. Society, further, creates a state and state constructs a nation. This is how story from an individual to a nation plays its role in the construction of a nation. As long as humanity will remain, the innovative medium of story-telling is bound to evolve. During the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, one of such mediums entered in Indian subcontinent. That was cinema. Soon it got the immense popularity perhaps because of its visual power and from the fact that it, unlike literature, doesn't demand its spectator to be literate.

However, Indian cinema in its infancy which also coincides with Indian freedom struggles, didn't leave much impact on the interest of the nation because of, as Javriml Parakh believes, colonial pressure. However, things started getting changed after the freedom. In the first few decades films were made focusing national integrity but after that interest of filmmakers shifted to the themes like love, revenge, crime and sex, war hysteria, etc. A long history of communal disharmony in India suggests that somewhere around the corner, Indian cinema misses what is expected from it. However, some films like *Bombay (1995)* or *Gadar: Ek Prem Katha (2001)* have been made focusing the communal harmony between Hindu and Muslim but this is the narrow definition of national integration. My present paper is an attempt to escape from this narrowness and to explore other dimensions of national integrity with the help of two classics of 21<sup>st</sup> century; *Lagaan (2001)* and *Chak De! India (2007)*

### **Lagaan**

The narrative of Ashutosh Gowariker's directed film *Lagaan (2001)* revolves around a village named Champaner where local residents are put in an awkward situation where they have no way to escape except to play a cricket match with the Britishers to avoid heavy taxes. The story ends with the Britishers being defeated by the villagers.

The story of Champaner is set in colonial India during 1893. This was the time when taxation system in British India was highly oppressive. British India was divided into many princely states. The relationship among these states was not happened to be peaceful. To ensure security, the Britishers used to give them protection and asked heavy taxes in return. This they used to do to every other princely states. By this way, the grip of British Empire on India became more powerful than ever before. The king of Champaner Raja Puran Singh (Kulbhushan Kharbanda) is also the victim of same trickery. Helplessly he orders the villagers to pay double tax ( Lagaan ) even when he knows that they can't pay, since last year the entire village suffered from drought and this year too situation is worse . The villagers rush to the king to get relief from paying tax. He refuses showing his own helplessness against the will of colonial masters. However, Captain Andrew Russell (Paul Blackthorne),the commanding officer of British cantonment, agrees but on one condition if the villagers defeat them( Britishers ) in a cricket match. The straightforward condition is that if the villagers win the match, they along with other villages of the province will be exempted from paying tax for the next three years and if they don't they'll have to pay triple tax. Trapped in a situation where either they have to pay double tax or to accept the challenge of cricket match, Bhuvan ( Aamir Khan) accepts the challenge . For the villagers like him paying double tax or triple doesn't matter much since in each case they are doomed to suffer. Bhuvan is criticised by his fellow villagers for accepting the challenge since everyone is an alien to cricket. The result for them is destined to lose, hence for them it's nothing more than a “collective suicide “. However, Bhuvan tries to convince them that he sees a hope in the challenge. “*E ummid ko hum sachai me badalna chahte hain*”, ( I want to turn this hope into reality )says Bhuvan to his villagers. But the task for him is not as easy as it appears. He has to assemble the villagers and make them learn this alien game which he himself doesn't know. This is exactly where the process of integration comes into action.

Bhuvan starts learning the game with a boy named Tipu (Amin Gazi). Both think that cricket is similar to Gilli Danda .Later Bagha (Amin Hajee), a mute drummer, and Guran ( Rajesh Vivek), fortune teller join the team. They are helped by Russell's sister Elizabeth( Rachel Shelley) who believes that her brother puts an unfair challenge to them. She gradually falls in love with

Bhuvan but learns that Gauri( Gracy Singh) loves him to which he also reciprocates. The team is further strengthened with the joining of other villagers like Goli (Daya Shankar Pandey), a farmer, Ishwar (Shrivallabh Vyas), a vaidya and Gauri's father, Bhura (Raghubir Yadav), the poultry farmer, Arjan (Akhilendra Mishra), the blacksmith, and Ismail (Raj Zutshi), the potter. Lakha (Yashpal Sharma), the wood cutter falls in an unrequited love for Gauri, hence causing jealousy for Bhuvan .This led him to become a spy for Britishers who order him to join Bhuvan's team and to perform so badly that would lead him (Bhuvan) to defeat. The other two players Deva Singh Sodhi( Pradeep Rawat), a Sikh sepoy and Kachra (Aditya Lakhia), the untouchable also join the team later. All they play and win the game dramatically.

This film is the tribute to the success brought by collective efforts, symbolically the contribution of Indian farmers to freedom struggle. In a time when village was almost displaced by metropolitan city in Bollywood this film again brings the Indian village in the centre. In an agrarian country like India, the issues of farmer can't be ignored for a long time. In such a country, nation building process starts from the strengthening of village itself. *Lagaan* forces us to look it from this angle. The villagers of Champaner, be it farmer, potter, blacksmith, woodcutter, drummer, Sikh, Muslim and even untouchable- all in togetherness change their destiny. The most crucial part in the match has, in fact, been played by the most marginalised section of Indian society. Kachra whose inclusion in team is hugely protested by the villagers takes a hat trick with his spin bowling which leads his team to make a strong comeback. He is the man who being the last batsman holds his wicket safe and allows Bhuvan to score the required runs. Pointing out the role of Kachra, J.Parakh says that the inclusion of Kachra in team is not a charity for him, but Bhuvan believes that he is going to play an important role in team's victory. And that's exactly what he does. The partnership between Bhuvan and Deva for the first wicket and its value in victory shows the harmony between the two religions. Similarly, partnership with Ismail who played with injured leg shows the necessity of Hindu Muslim harmony for the development of our country." *Ismail ka ghayal hona*", writes J. Parakh," *aur uska 'ghayal pair' ke sath khelna Angrezon ki do sabse bade dharmavlabiyon ke beech foot paida karne ki koshishon aur uske bawjood unka milkar ladna atit se adhik bhawishya ka*

*soochak hai.*” (281) ( Ismail’s injury and his commitment of playing with ‘injured leg’ is indicative of Britishers’ attempt to create rift between the two of India’s biggest religions, despite this their fighting together is more a demand of future than of the past ) Ismail’s commitment for the team is a kind of slap on the face of those who often take Muslim’s patriotism for granted.

Certainly, cricket cannot not be just a game for those whose destiny is going to decide by it. This is the instinct that brings all the villagers divided into different professions, section, age to the one platform and encourages them to play together. Time and again Bhuvan warns his fellowmen, “ *Goron ke liye ye sirf khel hai, lekin hamare liye...hamare liye zindagi hai.*” ( For the Whites it’s just a game of entertainment but for us...for us it’s the question of life and death ) The way of celebration after each wicket they take, and every run they score, the intensity of frustration after each catch they drop or the every wicket they lose, clearly indicate that cricket for them is beyond a sport; perhaps the question of life and death.

The film touches upon an important issue which is if handled otherwise, can easily disturb the integrity of nation. This is mob lynching. According to Reuters report presenting data from 2010 to mid 2017,”28 Indians - 24 of them Muslims – were killed and 124 injured “ ( source: Wikipedia) in a cow related violence alone. Such incidents can lead to a communal violence. The reason, however, is not only restricted to cow related violence alone. Superstition, fake nationalism also instigate mob easily. *Lagaan* sets an example the way Bhuvan tackles the issue. When Lakha is caught for his treachery the villagers suddenly turn into an uncontrolled mob. At the last moment he is saved by Bhuvan who forgives him when he ( Lakha ) accepts his sin and asks him a chance to prove his fidelity. Bhuvan allows him to play the match with guilty conscience. This is his punishment and way of salvation too. The point to be noted here is not that Lakha being a guilty must be punished, but that even if anyone is criminal like Lakha, a democratic country like India can't allow mob to murder anyone. Had Lakha been killed by the mob, the villagers would have missed some sensational fielding and who knows it might have led them to defeat.

The film promotes diversity of language. The language of villagers is Awadhi. Deva speaks Punjabi. The entire commentary of the match is run in Hindi. Britishers while talking to themselves speak English. Ram Singh ( Javed Khan) sometimes acts as a translator. The act of translation itself strengthens the integrity of the nations like India where hundreds of languages exist together.

*Lagaan* is not free from limitations. It presents Indian women in their conventional roles such as mother and beloved. They are often seen as emotional supporters and the well-wishers of men. However, in one scene in the song '*Chale Chalo*' many village women are shown helping in making cricket kits. Apart from this they have no direct participation in the central issue of the film. A nation building process cannot be completed if it can't ensure the active participation of half of its population i.e. women. The film is dominated by Hindu faith and customs. Villagers wishing to worship for rain, the picturization of the song '*O Palanhare*', players except Ismail putting red mark on their forehead before going to field as if Kshatriya used to do before going to battlefield, etc are the things that suggest the domination of Hindu atmosphere. In the process of nation building harmony exists when majority and minority have equal opportunity to participate. In this, whatever be the reason, but Hinduism and Patriarchy seem somehow threatening.

### **Chak De! India**

Shimit Amin's directed film *Chak De! India* (2007) is the story of 16 women hockey players and their journey of being a champion team. The story starts in flashback when Kabir Khan (Shahrukh Khan) the then captain of Indian men's national hockey team misses a penalty stroke leading his team to a defeat against Pakistan. In a post match meeting, he is caught by media, shaking hands with Pakistani captain. This arises the controversy and he is suspected of match fixing, consequently earns him the title of 'traitor'. He leaves hockey and home. Seven years later he comes back as a coach of Indian women national hockey team and takes charge of training 16 players and makes a 'team'. His team later becomes champion. Thus, Kabir's honour is restored.

The players whom Kabir is to train to are from different parts of the country. Komal Chautala (Chitrashi Rawat) represents Haryana. Preeti Sabarwal (Sagarika Ghatge), Balbir Kaur (Tanya Abrol), Mary Ralte (Kimi Laldawla), Molly Zimik (Masochon Zimik), Rachna Prasad (Kimberly Miranda), Nethra Reddy (Sandia Furtado), and Nicola Sequeira represent Chandigarh, Punjab, Mizoram, Manipur, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra respectively. Rani Dispotta (Seema Azmi) and Soimoi Kerketa (Nisha Nair) represent Jharkhand. Naturally they have their own regional prejudices. Balbir reacts very strangely the moment she hears the name Jharkhand. She believes that the residents of Jharkhand are 'jungle' who eat snakes and scorpions. She also expects others to learn her own language in order to play with her. Preeti and Bindiya Naik (Shilpa Shukla) suffer from superiority complex. Bindiya being most senior wants to be the captain of the team while Preeti formerly being the captain of Chandigarh wants some special privileges in the national team. The local Delhi boys make embarrassing comment on Mary and Molly whose foreigners like face forces these boys to conclude that they (Mary and Molly) may not understand Hindi. Sukhlal (Javed Khan) can't differentiate between Telugu and Tamil. One after another the film unfolds the regional prejudices existing in the psyche of these characters. Kabir believes that his biggest task is to develop the feelings of togetherness amongst the players. On the very first meeting he strictly warns them that he doesn't care about who comes from where. For him, they all are merely players having little knowledge of hockey, and are going to play for India, not for their respective states. He keeps some arrogant players out of the practice till they shed their arrogance. His tough nature makes all the players go against him. All players agree not to practice under him anymore. Kabir announces his resignation. On the last day he takes the staff and players to a farewell lunch where some rowdy boys pass lewd comments on Mary and Molly. Infuriated Balbir hits them. The fight erupts between the boys and the players. Kabir prevents other staff to intervene as he notices the team spirit for the first time in his players. After the fight is over, he agrees to resume his assignment as a coach on the request of the team.

The film is the fight against one of the biggest threat of national integrity i.e. patriarchy. The hockey association decides to withdraw women's team from participating in championship. They



believe that Indian women are born just “ to cook and clean “, therefore it's not wise to send them to be defeated only. They transfer all the sponsors to men's team. Kabir puts a challenge and proposes a match between men's and women's team. Women's team loses the match but wins the heart of everyone with their fighting spirit. The association has to reverse its decision. Preeti's fiancé who is the Vice Captain of Indian cricket team, encourages her to quit her game as he doesn't consider hockey as a worthy game. Komal's father and Vidya Sharma's( Vidya Malvade) husband too don't want them to continue in this game anymore. In spite of all these hurdles they became champions; not because they won the championship but because they defeated patriarchy. Preeti's rejection to her finance's marriage proposal is, in fact, her rejection to the patriarchal mind-set and the hegemony of cricket as well. The film establishes the firm belief that if given a chance women too can make the nation proud. This is the thing that we miss in *Lagaan*.

This film leaves us with some hard hitting questions. What if Kabir would have failed in his efforts? The thing we need to remember here is that Kabir is the hero of reel life. In reality, it is possible that one may not pay as much price as Kabir paid. In that case does the person deserve to die being traitor in the eyes of his own country? How long will this nation carry on religious prejudices against the Muslims of our own country? How long will we treat match against Pakistan as war against Pakistan? More importantly, what is the role of media in maintaining the integrity of our nation? “If today “writes Mirza Asmer Beg, “ the media here becomes more conscious of its responsibility, instead of being conscious of its power...it would be doing a great service to the cause of national integration in India” .

### **Conclusion**

In India, cinema and sports are the two mediums that provide platform for national integration. While watching cinema in theatre spectators don't care about the actor's caste, religion. Neither do they care about caste, religion of the person sitting with them. So is the case with sports. The two films undertaken for my research purpose is a unique blend of both. Both the films can be divided in two parts; the first part is about the preparation for the match while the second part is

about the performance in the match. The sense of togetherness in both films comes through a challenge. One is arrogantly imposed (*Lagaan*) other is arrogantly accepted ( *Chak De! India*). The winners at both places are initially underestimated but eventually they win because of their efforts as a 'team'.

The process of integration in *Chak de! India* is more powerful than in that of *Lagaan* because it captures the wide canvas of social differences. The players are from different states, each having distinct cultural and linguistic set up. The beauty of this film lies in the way their prejudices evaporate. In *Lagaan* ,as J. Parakh notes, that there is no internal conflict. The only time Bhuvan faces some sort of internal conflict is when an untouchable (Kachra) was to be included in team. Otherwise there is hardly any conflict on the basis of language, caste ,religion or gender. Therefore, we need to look at these two films in a pair, then only we would grasp the wide dimensions of social disparity. These movies talk about the issues to which not a particular class, caste, or religion suffer. So, the battle becomes for everyone, and needs collective efforts as a team. “ *Team banane ke liye*”, as Kabir often says, “ *taakat nahin niyat chahiye*” ( it’s not strength, but spirit that makes a team ) These kind of movies must be promoted since they ensure active participation from everyone. We have floods of movies like ‘*Gadar: Ek Prem Katha*’ or ‘*Indian*’ in which an individual almost single handedly takes out his society- sometimes whole nation- out of trouble. Even films of 1980s and 90s did the same kind of hero worship. Such cinemas can produce only passive society which will always wait a superhero to take it out of trouble, just like in religious tales in which humanity waits a god to be born. Therefore to strengthen the integrity of India, Bollywood must drop the temptation of hero worship and has to produce film which can ensure the maximum public participation.

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