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Sarkari Cinema Today with all its Propaganda

By: Nandini Ramnath

Propaganda films in India which project the viewpoint of the current ruling dispensation are here to stay. In the coming years, they are likely to become even more sophisticated – and less boring.

Not every film viewing experience is escapist or uplifting. Moviegoers occasionally enter theatres with the explicit desire to be edified – tutored even. In India post 2014, many who want to be better informed about the country's past would rather watch a fictional dramatisation of events than read a history book.

This has resulted in a rash of [propaganda films](#) that skilfully exploit this instructional aspect of cinema. Such movies claim to educate viewers about hidden truths, to reveal the “real story” behind past events. They are designed like thrillers, with their protagonists bringing into the light knowledge that has been deliberately kept in the shadows. In Modi's India, they have self-evident titles: *The Kashmir Files*, *Bastar: The Naxal Story*, *The Kerala Story* and the recently released *The Sabarmati Report*.

It is no coincidence that these cinematic exposes are always about decisions made by Congress governments or developments that transpired under that party's watch. These films serve the Bharatiya Janata Party's need to discredit the party that was in power for 54 of the 77 years that have passed since Independence and to assist the Hindutva party in its mission to achieve a “Congress-mukt Bharat”.

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In these films, the heroes suffer terribly for their efforts, as is the case with the hero of *The Sabarmati Report*. Dheeraj Sarna's Hindi movie, which was released days before the Maharashtra state election, stars Vikrant Massey as a truth-seeking cameraman with a television channel that appears to be modelled on NDTV.

The film revolves around the fire on the Sabarmati Express in the Gujarat town of Godhra in 2002 that killed 59 pilgrims returning from Ayodhya. A one-man government-appointed commission had concluded that the blaze was accidental but the Gujarat High Court later ruled that the panel was unconstitutional. In 2008, another commission maintained that the fire had been planned.

In *The Sabarmati Report*, Samar stumbles on a plot to conceal the true identities of the people who set fire to the train. The head of Samar's channel tries to pass off the blaze as the result of an accident, rather than the work of Muslim conspirators. Samar is hounded and sacked. But when one of his former colleagues finds video evidence that supports his assertions, he is vindicated.



It has been well over two decades since Godhra and the subsequent pogrom against Gujarat's Muslims that left more than 1,000 dead. NDTV has changed hands, the chief minister who governed Gujarat at the time is now India's prime minister and the accused in the case have been jailed.

The Sabarmati Report exists only to present the point of view of the victor. It's hardly surprising that the movie was lauded by the BJP leadership, exempted from paying taxes in BJP-ruled states and screened for Modi and his cabinet.

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Most often, message movies can be deadly dull. Propaganda films dial up the dullness. These movies are often described as “hard-hitting”, but Hindi has a better term to describe them: “sarkari cinema”.

They lack conventional pleasing elements, being as anti-entertainment as they are pro-government. They are often preachy and screechy. They are aggressively one-sided. Apart from validating the ideology of their target audience, they have no reason to exist.

Moviegoers looking for a break from the pressures of daily living will find such films to be a righteous slog. In pushing propaganda cinema, the BJP government has attempted to redefine the very meaning of entertainment.

In this new interpretation, boring is good, a badge of honour, a necessary antidote to meaningless Bollywood entertainment. To be boring is to be open-eyed about reality, even when that reality is warped and the eyes are fighting sleep.

Propaganda films in India are here to stay. In the coming years, they are likely to become even more sophisticated – and less boring. With a BJP-led government firmly in control in Maharashtra, the home of Bollywood, and a host of Hindi film luminaries having attended the swearing-in ceremony of Devendra Fadnavis as the state's chief minister earlier this week, Mamata Banerjee's observation comes to mind: “Khela hobe”. The game is on.

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