Journal of Islam, Media and Society
Vol. 1, No. 2, December 2026, pp. 283-317
ISSN (e): 3163-6551
DOI: https://doi.org/10.66277/jims.1.2.238

Proof, Heritage, Silence: Conditions of Muslim Citizenship in Hindi Cinema, 1960–2025

Binal Gadhavi [1]*
[1]Gujarat University, Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India
Email: bgadhavi@gujaratuniversity.ac.in

Corresponding author

Abstract

This article examines how Hindi cinema positions Indian Muslims in relation to the nation. Previous scholarship has tended to analyze Muslim stereotypes separately by genre and period. Using a multiple case study design, this research analyzes seven films from 1960 to 2025 at the scene level through dialogue, *mise-en-scène*, and traces of reception, then interprets them through theories of citizenship, tolerance, and the aesthetics of piety. The results reveal three modalities of conditional acceptance that coexist rather than replace one another. *Garm Hava*, *Fanaa*, and *Mulk* present conditional citizenship that demands proof of loyalty. *Mughal-e-Azam*, *Jodhaa Akbar*, and *Chhaava* shift the Mughal past from a shared heritage to a hostile legacy, with Muslim piety serving as a sign of the enemy. *Gully Boy* offers silent citizenship—acceptance through the language of class, with the condition that Islam remains in the background. In this corpus, what varies is not the presence or absence of conditions, but rather their form. Theoretically, this article offers a typology of conditional belonging that distinguishes procedural, historical, and political conditions, and demonstrates how the aesthetics of piety on screen serve as a medium that naturalizes these conditions for the majority public. This typology can be tested on representations of Muslim minorities in other contexts.

Keywords: *Indian Muslims; Religious Representation; Cultural Citizenship; Tolerance; Aesthetics of Piety.*

Article History:
Received: April 27, 2026
Revised: November 2, 2026
Accepted: November 10, 2026
Published: November 19, 2026

Introduction

Cinema is a crucial discursive arena where religious identities and alterities are publicly constructed. Most audiences experience cultural encounters with minority groups not through direct dialogue but rather through mediated cinematic signifiers—such as visual codification, dramaturgy, and the narratives of the entertainment industry.

Copyright © 2026 The Author(s).
This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

Hjarvard defines this phenomenon as the mediatization of religion, where the media acts as an active agent restructuring the understanding and political position of religion in society.[1] Because Hjarvard's mediatization thesis has been widely criticized as overly media-centric, this article aligns more closely with Birgit Meyer's approach to religious mediation, which reads media as "sensational forms" through which piety is made visible, audible, and palpable to the public.[2] This lens allows prayers, invocations, skullcaps, and hijabs on screen to be read as aesthetics of piety, not mere backdrops. Therefore, mainstream cinema cannot be reduced to a passive mirror of sociological reality; as Kazmi asserts,[3] it articulates the ideological tensions of its time as "politics by other means." This problematic culminates in representations of religious minorities produced under the dominant gaze of the majority, which, as Shaheen demonstrates regarding Arab-Muslim figures in Hollywood,[4] tends to construct the Muslim subject as an anomalous and threatening Other. Thus, the relationship between cinema, religion, and power is not simply a matter of mimetic accuracy but rather an academic question of how mainstream cinematic systems establish the conditions for civic inclusion while simultaneously producing existential alienation for minorities.

This conceptual issue finds its most intense expression in Hindi cinema. Home to one of the world's largest Muslim minorities (14.2 percent of the population according to the 2011 Census[5]), the Bombay film industry has been shaped from its inception by Islamicate culture—through the Urdu language, poetic aesthetics, musical genres, and the contributions of Muslim artists who have shaped its core idiom. However, the same cinema has also become a contested arena where images of Indian Muslims are produced,

[1] Stig Hjarvard, "The Mediatization of Religion: A Theory of the Media as Agents of Religious Change," *Northern Lights: Film and Media Studies Yearbook* 6, no. 1 (June 2008): 9–26, https://doi.org/10.1386/nl.6.1.9_1.

[2] Mia Lövheim dan Gordon Lynch, "The Mediatisation of Religion Debate: An Introduction," *Culture and Religion* 12, no. 2 (2011): 111–17; Birgit Meyer, "From Imagined Communities to Aesthetic Formations: Religious Mediations, Sensational Forms, and Styles of Binding," dalam *Aesthetic Formations: Media, Religion, and the Senses*, ed. Birgit Meyer (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 1–28; David Morgan, *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

[3] Fareed Kazmi, *The Politics of India's Conventional Cinema: Imaging a Universe, Subverting a Multiverse* (New Delhi: Sage, 1999), 14.

[4] Jack G. Shaheen, "Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 588 (2003): 171–93.

[5] Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, *C-1: Population by Religious Community*, Census of India 2011 (New Delhi: Ministry of Home Affairs, 2015).

questioned, and contested.[6] This discursive tension is further exacerbated in the context of India's contemporary political landscape. Jaffrelot reads the consolidation of Hindu nationalism as an articulation of ethnic democracy, an order in which the majority community is unequivocally identified with the nation while the Muslim minority is relegated to second-class citizenship.[7] In this order, popular media plays a central role through its reach into a divided public[8]—a public split socio-linguistically and class-wise, which consumes a single cinematic narrative through multiple articulations of prejudice. Hindi cinema therefore serves as a highly relevant locus of analysis: an industry historically rooted in Muslim culture, operating within a political order that increasingly positions Islam as a threat, and reproducing a system of signifiers whose sociopolitical impact resonates far beyond the cinema screen.

Studies on Muslims in Hindi cinema over the past decade have followed four main trends. The first trend maps stereotypes and Islamophobia, focusing on the construction of Muslim identity through the metonymy of fear, the reproduction of Islamophobic narratives in conflict zones, and the portrayal of Muslim figures predominantly as threats and terrorists.[9] The second trend examines Muslims through genre and cultural frameworks, specifically tracing Islamicate articulations from historical cinema (Muslim Historical) and *tawaif* films to social films (Muslim Social).[10] The third trend centers on contemporary historical films that interpret medieval narratives as ideological instruments of Hindu nationalism, highlighting the erasure of Mughal heritage and the formation of antagonistic collective memory—although some arguments also consider the

---

[6] Mohammad Asim Siddiqui, *Muslim Identity in Hindi Cinema: Poetics and Politics of Genre and Representation* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2025), 1.

[7] Christophe Jaffrelot, *Modi's India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy*, trans. Cynthia Schoch (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), 155.

[8] Arvind Rajagopal, *Politics after Television: Hindu Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Public in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 16.

[9] Sanjeev Kumar H.M., "Metonymies of Fear: Islamophobia and the Making of Muslim Identity in Hindi Cinema," *Society and Culture in South Asia* 2, no. 2 (July 8, 2016): 233–55, https://doi.org/10.1177/2393861716643874; Muhammd Mustafiz, "Fabricating a Spiral of Islamophobia through Kashmir Issue. A Critical Discourse Analysis on Two Bollywood Films," *Observatorio (OBS*)* 18, no. 4 (December 26, 2024), https://doi.org/10.15847/obsOBS18420242377; Mehrajudin Aslam Najar, "Representation of Indian Muslims in Bollywood Cinema: A Scholarly Review," *Journal of Transcultural Communication* 4, no. 1 (June 25, 2024): 71–80, https://doi.org/10.1515/jtc-2024-0010.

[10] Ira Bhaskar and Richard Allen, *Islamicate Cultures of Bombay Cinema* (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2009); Siddiqui, *Muslim Identity in Hindi Cinema: Poetics and Politics of Genre and Representation*.

potential use of history for national integration.[11] The fourth and most recent trend explores representations beyond the figure of the threat, including readings of urban everyday narratives, the commodification of rap culture, counter-narratives of law, and the positioning of minorities within the framework of neoliberal precarity.[12]

These four scholarly trends reveal three major academic gaps. First, previous studies have generally operated fragmentarily within a single register of representation—separating the figures of the suspect Muslim in terrorism films, the Mughal ruler in historical films, and the "ordinary Muslim" in urban narratives—thus failing to map the ideological logic that connects all three. Second, the dominance of synchronic analyses focusing on post-2014 films neglects long-term diachronic comparisons, resulting in classic works often being uncritically perceived as inclusive antitheses to contemporary cinema. Third, the focus of analysis has been more on the content of qualitative stereotypes than on articulating the conditions of inclusion and political acceptance of minorities on screen, and it has rarely linked these to theories of citizenship and tolerance developed outside of film studies. This study addresses these discursive gaps by comparing seven Hindi films across eras (1960–2025) within a single comparative analytical framework: *Garm Hava* (1973), *Fanaa* (2006), and *Mulk* (2018) for the suspect Muslim register; *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960), *Jodhaa Akbar* (2008), and *Chhaava* (2025) for the Mughal past; and *Gully Boy* (2019) for the Muslim register outside of religious boundaries.

Building on this academic gap, the study aims to analyze how Hindi cinema positions Indian Muslims within the construction of nationhood and to elaborate on the implications of these positions for the relationship between film, religion, and society. This

---

[11] Baijayanti Roy, "Visual Grandeur, Imagined Glory: Identity Politics and Hindu Nationalism in Bajirao Mastani and Padmaavat," *Journal of Religion & Film* 22, no. 3 (December 2018), https://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.jrf.22.03.09; Ajay Gehlawat, "Triumph of the Rajput: Sanjay Leela Bhansali and the Fascist Aesthetics of Padmaavat," *Studies in South Asian Film & Media* 9, no. 2 (December 1, 2017): 159–72, https://doi.org/10.1386/safm.9.2.159_1; Kaifia Ancer Laskar and Mohammad Reyaz, "Reel Mughals: Medieval Themed Films as Mediatized Rituals Building Collective Antagonistic Memory," *Journal of Arab & Muslim Media Research*, December 15, 2025, https://doi.org/10.1386/jammr_00119_1.

[12] Aditya Mohanty, "Gully Boy and Its Silent Mutinies," *Economic and Political Weekly* 54, no. 8 (2019); Damini Rajendra Kulkarni, "Appropriation and Articulation: Mapping Movements in *Gully Boy*," *Cinergie – Il Cinema e Le Altre Arti*, no. 17 (2020): 87–96, https://doi.org/10.6092/ISSN.2280-9481/10508; Sarath S Kumar, Sreejith Kadiyakkol, dan Remya R, "Imagined Communities in Bollywood: A Contrapuntal Reading of *The Kashmir Files* and *Mulk*," *Asiatic: IIUM Journal of English Language and Literature* 19, no. 2 (2025): 176–92, https://doi.org/10.31436/asiatic.v19i2.3954; Megha Anwer and Anupama Arora, "Pathaan, Precarity and the Muslim Question in Neoliberal India," *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film* 21, no. 1 (June 1, 2023): 133–39, https://doi.org/10.1386/ncin_00042_1.

objective is articulated through three research questions. First, how does Hindi cinema construct the figure of the contemporary Muslim under suspicion and legitimize mechanisms of proving loyalty in *Garm Hava* (1973), *Fanaa* (2006), and *Mulk* (2018)? Second, how is the Mughal past politicized from *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960) to *Chhaava* (2025), and what role does Islamic religiosity play in constructing markers of historical enmity? Third, how does *Gully Boy* (2019) present the Muslim subject outside of religious boundaries, and what are the political consequences of this neutralization of identity? Through these questions, this study not only uncovers the regime of visual representation but also explores the discursive conditions that determine the inclusion of minority citizenship on Indian cinema screens.

To address these objectives, this study treats film as a discursive medium—that is, as part of a sociopolitical process through which society imagines, negotiates, and circulates images of its religious minorities. The analysis is conducted at the scene level by examining time-stamped dialogue and comparing visual compositions across films. Each sub-discussion is structured around three empirical pieces of evidence drawn sequentially from films within a similar register, allowing each interpretation to be traced back to a specific scene. This evidence is analyzed through four conceptual frameworks: the differentiation between the discourse of Muslimness and substantive Muslimness,[13] the order of ethnic democracy,[14] the dynamics of public divisions,[15] and the conception of mainstream cinema as a political articulation linked to theories of citizenship and tolerance,[16] as outlined in the following section. This analysis is complemented by post-release extra-cinematic traces to articulate its real impact on the public sphere. Through comparisons across registers and over six decades, this article argues that Muslim representation in Hindi cinema is not merely an accumulation of dichotomous stereotypes but rather a configuration of citizenship regimes that determine the terms of inclusion and exclusion of minorities in the public sphere. These three registers are not treated as successive stages of evolution but as modalities of conditional reception that can coexist within the same period. The diachronic dimension of this article is embedded within each register, particularly the register of the Mughal past.

Conceptual Framework: Citizenship, Tolerance, and the Aesthetics of Piety

[13] Hilal Ahmed, *A Brief History of the Present: Muslims in New India* (Gurugram: Viking, 2024), 20.

[14] Jaffrelot, *Modi's India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy*, 155.

[15] Rajagopal, *Politics after Television: Hindu Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Public in India*, 16.

[16] Kazmi, *The Politics of India's Conventional Cinema: Imaging a Universe, Subverting a Multiverse*, 14.

This article distinguishes between two dimensions of belonging commonly referred to in English by the single term "citizenship." Citizenship denotes the legal status and procedural relationship of citizens to the state—such as passports, property rights, and judicial processes—while cultural citizenship refers to cultural membership, specifically the everyday recognition that one truly "belongs" to the nation. This distinction draws on Niraja Gopal Jayal's study, which demonstrates that the history of Indian citizenship since Partition has oscillated between the principle of civil-territorial citizenship and efforts to define citizens based on communal identity.[17] It also builds on Renato Rosaldo's concept of cultural citizenship, which is the right to be different without losing full membership.[18] Within Engin Isin's framework, citizenship is also practiced and claimed through "acts of citizenship."[19] Accordingly, the first register in this article is termed conditional citizenship, as eligibility is tested through state apparatuses and procedures. The second and third registers operate at the level of cultural citizenship—namely, who is recognized as the rightful heir to the nation and in what language a citizen may claim their rights.

This distinction is not merely theoretical. The Citizenship (Amendment) Act of 2019 (CAA) expedited the naturalization of refugees from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan for all religious groups except Muslims for six named communities (Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi, and Christian), thereby excluding Muslims. Along with the proposed National Register of Citizens (NRC), many critics argue that this law explicitly makes religion a criterion in Indian citizenship law.[20] The CAA was passed in December 2019, the same year the film *Gully Boy* was released. Thus, questions about the citizenship requirements of Muslims on screen intersect directly with legal debates about the citizenship requirements of Muslims off screen. These citizenship requirements often operate through the language of tolerance. Ghassan Hage demonstrates that tolerance is not the absence of power but rather the practice of groups positioning themselves as "homeowners" who determine who can stay and under what conditions.[21] Wendy Brown adds that the discourse of

---

[17] Niraja Gopal Jayal, *Citizenship and Its Discontents: An Indian History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 51–81.

[18] Renato Rosaldo, "Cultural Citizenship and Educational Democracy," *Cultural Anthropology* 9, no. 3 (1994): 402.

[19] Engin F. Isin, "Theorizing Acts of Citizenship," dalam *Acts of Citizenship*, ed. Engin F. Isin dan Greg M. Nielsen (London: Zed Books, 2008), 15–43.

[20] The Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019, No. 47 of 2019, 2; About the ethnic democratic framework behind it, see Jaffrelot, *Modi's India*, 155.

[21] Ghassan Hage, *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 78–104.

tolerance manages difference by marking tolerated groups as deviants from the norm.[22] Mahmood Mamdani shows how, after September 11, the distinction between "good Muslims" and "bad Muslims" became a political tool demanding that Muslims prove themselves to be in the "good" camp.[23] Meanwhile, Kenji Yoshino describes the demand for minorities to suppress their identity markers in public spaces—without necessarily erasing them—as a form of covering.[24] The concept of silent citizenship offered by this article engages with the notion of covering but emphasizes its political dimension: what is suppressed is not primarily religious displays but rather the possibility of using religious identity as a basis for demands for justice.

On the medium side, this article treats Islamic signifiers on screen—calls to Allah, prayers, *qawwali*, skullcaps, hijabs—as aesthetics of piety. Following Meyer and Morgan, visually and auditorily mediated piety does not simply represent faith but shapes the audience's perception of which forms of piety are reassuring and which are threatening.[25] To avoid a circular reading, as if every representation were necessarily conditional, this article formulates three indicators of unconditional acceptance used in coding: (1) the Muslim figure's membership in the nation is not portrayed as a narrative problem to be resolved; (2) Islamic identity can serve as the basis for legitimate political demands without being framed as a threat; and (3) the burden of proof lies with the accuser, not the suspect. A scene is categorized as conditional only when at least one of these indicators is explicitly violated in the dialogue, plot, or visual composition; scenes that satisfy all three are recorded as counterexamples.

Method

This qualitative study employs a multiple case study design with both diachronic and synchronic comparative approaches to examine the representation of Indian Muslims in seven Hindi films spanning 1960 to 2025.[26] The material analyzed consists of scenes, serving as units for narrative and visual analysis across three representational registers:

[22] Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 25–47.

[23] Mahmood Mamdani, "Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: A Political Perspective on Culture and Terrorism," *American Anthropologist* 104, no. 3 (2002): 766.

[24] Kenji Yoshino, *Covering: The Hidden Assault on Our Civil Rights* (New York: Random House, 2006), ix.

[25] Meyer, "From Imagined Communities to Aesthetic Formations," 1–28; Morgan, *Visual Piety*, bab 1.

[26] Pamela Baxter and Susan Jack, "Qualitative Case Study Methodology: Study Design and Implementation for Novice Researchers," *The Qualitative Report* 13, no. 4 (2008): 544–59, https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2008.1573.

the suspected Muslim present (*Garm Hava* [1973], *Fanaa* [2006], *Mulk* [2018]); the Mughal past (*Mughal-e-Azam* [1960], *Jodhaa Akbar* [2008], *Chhaava* [2025]); and Muslims outside the religious frame (*Gully Boy* [2019]). The corpus was selected through purposive sampling based on four criteria: the centrality of Muslim characters, their canonical status or public-commercial impact, representation of three political eras (Nehruvian, post-liberalization, and post-2014), and alignment with the three analytical registers. Research data were gathered from three sources: primary audiovisual materials (dialogue, time-stamped audio-lyrics, and visual composition of the *mise-en-scène*); extra-cinematic reception texts (including coverage of the 2025 Nagpur riots following *Chhaava's* release and the reception dynamics of *Gully Boy* after the 2019 Pulwama incident); and secondary literature on sociopolitical contexts and Hindi cinema. Technical limitations of the film copies—such as comparisons with the recolored 2004 version of *Mughal-e-Azam* and variations in copy length—are addressed by anchoring all claims to specific time codes and by independently translating the original dialogue transcriptions. The copies analyzed were digital film releases—sourced from official YouTube channels and streaming platforms—documented along with their specific versions and durations.

The population for this study comprises Hindi-language films produced in Bombay/Mumbai that center a Muslim character or community in their narratives and possess either canonical status (such as awards, restorations, or critical recognition) or documented public-commercial impact. From this population, seven films were selected as the most information-rich cases for each register,[27] rather than as a statistically representative sample. Consequently, the claims of this article apply specifically to the analyzed corpus and are proposed as a typology that can be tested on other films. Several relevant films are treated as comparative cases rather than part of the core corpus: *Sarfarosh* (1999), *Fiza* (2000), *Chak De! India* (2007), and *My Name Is Khan* (2010) for the suspected-Muslim register; *Bajirao Mastani* (2015), *Padmaavat* (2018), and *Tanhaji* (2020) for the historical register (already examined in depth in previous literature); and *Salim Langde Pe Mat Ro* (1989), *Mammo* (1994), and *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (2017) for the ordinary-citizen register. The absence of films from the 1980s and 1990s in the core corpus is an acknowledged limitation, given that this period marked a turning point in the Ram Janmabhoomi mobilization.

[27] Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods*, ed. ke-2 (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1990), 169.

Data collection was conducted through five systematic steps of audiovisual observation: (1) comprehensive mapping of key plots and scenes; (2) compilation of an inventory of scenes, marked by time code and theme; (3) transcription and mapping of dialogue and lyrics according to speaker and context; (4) targeted tracing of the frequency and context of religio-political appeals (e.g., Allah, *jizya, ghazi, Har Har Mahadev*, Mecca/Bhavani references); and (5) extraction of equivalent visual frames (still frames) across films for contact-sheet analysis. Extra-cinematic reception data and secondary literature were gathered through verified document analysis. The entire empirical corpus was then processed through five stages of structured analysis:[28] thematic coding per register; compilation of three linear tripartite sets of evidence (presented through comparative tables, three-panel visuals, and textual descriptions); reflective analysis based on conceptual tools; macro-interpretive analysis; and comparative diachronic analysis to situate the findings in relation to the literature of the past decade.

Methodologically, this research integrates qualitative content analysis, *mise-en-scène* analysis (including composition, lighting, body positioning, and setting),[29] and critical discourse analysis based on Fairclough's three-dimensional model,[30] which links filmic textualization with the sociopolitical dynamics of contemporary India.[31] The trustworthiness of the interpretation is ensured through three triangulation mechanisms:[32] precise anchoring of all data to time markers that can be independently verified (auditability); confrontation and cross-validation between textual-dialogue evidence and *mise-en-scène* visual evidence; and triangulative comparison between on-screen findings and off-screen sociopolitical reception documents. In the case of the color-restored version of *Mughal-e-Azam* (2004), visual analysis is limited to spatiality and frame composition to avoid bias arising from digital colorization.

[28] Hsiu-Fang Hsieh and Sarah E. Shannon, "Three Approaches to Qualitative Content Analysis," *Qualitative Health Research* 15, no. 9 (November 1, 2005): 1277–88, https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732305276687.

[29] David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson, dan Jeff Smith, *Film Art: An Introduction*, ed. ke-12 (New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 2020), bab 4; Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials*, ed. ke-5 (London: Sage, 2022), 117–47.

[30] Norman Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 73.

[31] Lothar Mikos, "Analysis of Film," in *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Analysis*, ed. Uwe Flick (London: Sage, 2014), 409–23.

[32] Yvonna S. Lincoln dan Egon G. Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1985), 290.

Results and Discussion

Indian Muslims Between Archive and Screen: The Socio-Political Context of Representation

Reading the representation of Muslims in Hindi cinema requires an understanding of two intertwined layers of identity: substantive Muslimness, which refers to the empirical experience of Indian Muslims and varies according to caste, class, language, and region; and the discourse of Muslimness, a homogeneous image produced through minority statistics, historical narratives of "Islamic rule," and media accounts of terrorism.[33] Cinema operates precisely at the intersection of these two layers by transforming everyday experience into generalized discourse. To trace these dynamics, this section maps the socio-political context along four main trajectories: the legacy of the 1947 Partition and secularism that constituted Muslims as a suspect minority; the transformation of the public media sphere in the late 1980s that triggered majoritarianism; the consolidation of "ethnic democracy" under the Narendra Modi regime since 2014; and the shift in the position of Bombay cinema from the Islamicate aesthetic tradition toward the construction of Muslims as the Other. These four historical-sociological trajectories form the basic framework for analyzing the seven films discussed in the following sections.

The first historical trajectory that shaped this discourse was the 1947 Partition and the ambivalence of postcolonial secularism. India's independence, accompanied by a mass exodus and the prominence of cultural-religious markers, immediately transformed Muslims into a socially and politically visible minority.[34] Contrary to the conventional narrative of the Nehru era as a "golden age" of secularism, the early Republican period was marked by structural tensions, including the 1948 military action in Hyderabad and the stigmatization of loyalties that produced three forms of Muslim agency: the cautious politics of Congress figures shadowed by Partition guilt; the pragmatism of modernists who focused on socio-economic backwardness; and the orientation of the ulama, who fought for personal legal autonomy.[35] Nevertheless, political stigma remained embedded in everyday public language. Hilal Ahmed notes that the term siyasi (political) used for Muslims is often constructed negatively, portraying them as a group that cannot be trusted

[33] Ahmed, *A Brief History of the Present: Muslims in New India*, 20.

[34] Pratinav Anil, *Another India: The Making of the World's Largest Muslim Minority, 1947–77* (London: Hurst, 2023), 36.

[35] Anil, 43.

and is obsessed with sectarian interests.[36] This historical prejudice and language politics were then articulated into the aesthetic space of Hindi cinema, where *Garm Hava* (1973) emerged as a pioneering work that realistically represented the sense of crisis, alienation, and uncertainty surrounding the position of Muslim citizens after Partition through a portrait of a middle-class family in Agra who chose to remain in India.[37] The film was created by Muslim writers—adapted from a story by Ismat Chughtai with a screenplay by Kaifi Azmi and Shama Zaidi—so that its critique of the burden of proof also constitutes a voice from within a suspected community.[38]

The second historical trajectory was marked by the transformation of the public media sphere in the late 1980s, which laid the cultural foundations for majoritarian nationalism. Arvind Rajagopal shows that the broadcast of the *Ramayan* series on state television Doordarshan (1987–1988)—which coincided with the consolidation of the Ram Janmabhoomi movement for the demolition of the Babri Mosque—created a weekly collective ritual that united audiences across barriers of social inequality.[39] To explain this phenomenon, Rajagopal formulated the concept of the split public,[40] namely the fragmentation of the public sphere in which the English-language press and the Hindi-language press construct political discourse in opposite ways, a strategic gap that the Hindu nationalist movement exploits. This concept is important for reading mainstream Hindi cinema, which operates precisely within these divided publics to reach audiences across class lines. The seepage of this logic onto the big screen was analyzed by Fareed Kazmi through the film *Border* (1997), in which the representation of Muslim characters is positioned subordinately as a party that needs "tolerance" and assistance from majority figures.[41]

The third historical trajectory is marked by the consolidation of "ethnic democracy" under the post-2014 Narendra Modi government, which transformed the position of Muslims from a suspected minority into an institutionally marginalized citizenry. Christophe Jaffrelot interprets this reversal through Sammy Smooha's framework of ethnic democracy, in which ethnic nationalism asserts the superiority of the

[36] Hilal Ahmed, *Siyasi Muslims: A Story of Political Islams in India* (Gurugram: Penguin Viking, 2019), 3.

[37] Siddiqui, *Muslim Identity in Hindi Cinema: Poetics and Politics of Genre and Representation*, 1.

[38] Sathyu, *Garm Hava*, kredit pembuka.

[39] Rajagopal, *Politics after Television: Hindu Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Public in India*, 30.

[40] Rajagopal, 93.

[41] Kazmi, *The Politics of India's Conventional Cinema: Imaging a Universe, Subverting a Multiverse*, 12–13.

majority group while relegating minority groups to second-class citizenship.[42] This shift toward a de facto Hindu Rashtra operates in a capillary fashion through grassroots vigilante campaigns—such as those concerning love jihad, land jihad, and cow protection—supported by the communal bias of mainstream media, which is increasingly losing its independence. This sociological explanation underlies why films such as *Fanaa*, *Mulk*, and *Chhaava* consistently grapple with issues of loyalty, while also emphasizing that the dynamics of Muslimness constitute a critical lens for evaluating the limits of Indian democracy itself.

Bombay cinema operates within this aesthetic space as a political archive that both records and shapes shifts in discourse. Drawing on the work of Marshall Hodgson and Mukul Kesavan,[43] Ira Bhaskar and Richard Allen employ the concept of the Islamicate to outline the socio-cultural complex related to Muslim traditions as represented in the four main genres of Hindi cinema: Muslim historical films, courtesan films, classic Muslim social films, and new-wave Muslim social films—of which *Garm Hava* is a milestone.[44] Classic studies of Hindi film ideology have also demonstrated how mainstream narrative forms link minority figures to the national project.[45] Nevertheless, the Islamicate framework has faced criticism from Anisur Rahman and Mohammad Asim Siddiqui, who highlight a shift in the cinematic archive from the inclusive vision of the *Mughal-e-Azam* era toward a Hindutva construction that systematically positions Muslims as the Other, especially in genres centered on terrorism and the representation of women.[46] The range of works examined in this study, from *Garm Hava* (1973) to *Chhaava* (2025), occupies this cinematic archive as an arena of negotiation between substantive Muslimness as experienced in society and the discourse of Muslimness continually produced by politics and the media.

Conditional Citizenship: The Burden of Proof in *Garm Hava, Fanaa,* and *Mulk*

The term "burden of proof" is borrowed from legal discourse, where the obligation to prove typically rests with the prosecutor. However, in representations of Indian

[42] Jaffrelot, *Modi's India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy*, 155.

[43] Mukul Kesavan, "Urdu, Awadh and the Tawaif: The Islamicate Roots of Hindi Cinema," dalam *Forging Identities: Gender, Communities and the State*, ed. Zoya Hasan (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1994), 244–57.

[44] Bhaskar and Allen, *Islamicate Cultures of Bombay Cinema*, 3.

[45] M. Madhava Prasad, *Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998); Sumita S. Chakravarty, *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema, 1947–1987* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993).

[46] Siddiqui, *Muslim Identity in Hindi Cinema: Poetics and Politics of Genre and Representation*, 12.

Muslims, this logic undergoes a structural reversal: suspicion is inherently attached to identity, such that the suspect is continuously required to prove loyalty, patriotism, and non-threat. The ideological roots of this reversal lie in classical Hindu nationalism, which demands the total assimilation or subordination of citizens.[47] This narrative is reinforced by propaganda discourses concerning "extraterritorial loyalties"[48] and oppositional constructions that portray minority mindsets as problematic.[49] After the September 11 attacks, this dynamic evolved into a demand for proof of non-terrorism, which cinema represents through the binary of "good Muslims" and "bad Muslims."[50] Thus, the "Muslim as suspect" occupies a structural position of conditional citizenship that operates through collective attribution, state institutionalization, and subject internalization.

Collective attribution constitutes the first mechanism underlying this burden of proof in Indian cinematic representations, whereby individual actions are generalized to the entire Muslim community. Consequently, Muslim characters are positioned as subjects worthy of suspicion even before formal accusations arise. In *Garm Hava*, this prejudice manifests when the bank refuses Salim Mirza a loan due to fears that another Muslim businessman's capital will flee to Pakistan[51]—a generalization Salim opposes because it victimizes citizens who choose to stay,[52] a situation exacerbated by the moneylender's refusal to assist fellow Muslims.[53] A similar dynamic emerges in *Fanaa*, where intelligence meetings depict terrorists as anonymous figures integrated into the public.[54] Meanwhile, *Mulk* shows how stigma-inducing television broadcasts immediately render the perpetrator's family objects of suspicion among neighbors,[55] who become reluctant to enroll their children in tutoring sessions with other Muslims,[56] culminating in the prosecutor's accusation that the family "gave birth to terrorists."[57] These three films consistently portray the escalation of accusations from the individual to the collective level.

---

[47] Jaffrelot, *Modi's India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy*, 14.

[48] Siddiqui, *Muslim Identity in Hindi Cinema: Poetics and Politics of Genre and Representation*, 2–3.

[49] Kazmi, *The Politics of India's Conventional Cinema: Imaging a Universe, Subverting a Multiverse*, 13.

[50] Mamdani, "Good Muslim, Bad Muslim," 766.

[51] M.S. Sathyu, *Garm Hava* (India: Film Finance Corporation (FFC), 1973), 0:20:40.

[52] Sathyu, 0:45:12.

[53] Sathyu, 0:23:22.

[54] Kunal Kohli, *Fanaa* (India: Yash Raj Films, 2006), 1:14:20-1:15:26.

[55] Anubhav Sinha, *Mulk* (India: Zee Studios, 2018), 0:45:12.

[56] Sinha, 0:45:15-0:45:24.

[57] Sinha, 1:47:53-1:48:01.

The state apparatus constitutes the second mechanism that institutionalizes the burden of proof, whereby Muslim loyalty is no longer assumed but must be procedurally demonstrated before authorities and courts. In Indian cinema, this institutionalization is evident when Muslim characters confront state authorities, whose locus shifts from the workplace to the security control room and then to the courtroom (see Figure 1).



(a) *Garm Hava* (b) *Fanaa* (c) *Mulk*

Source: Screenshots from the films; used for academic study and criticism purposes.

Figure 1. Institutionalization of the burden of proof: (a) submission of an arrest warrant on charges of espionage in *Garm Hava* (1973); (b) anti-terror officers instruct Zooni by telephone in *Fanaa* (2006); (c) Murad on the witness stand in *Mulk* (2018).

Figure 1 illustrates how the burden of proof is institutionalized and placed upon Muslim figures. In panel (a) from *Garm Hava*, institutionalization takes shape when the police present a warrant for Salim Mirza's arrest on charges of espionage at his workplace,[58] simply because old house plans were sent to Karachi[59]—a stigma of espionage that persists after Independence[60] and is linked to earlier state intervention through refugee property laws (0:17:40) and Kazim's arrest over passports.[61] In panel (b) from *Fanaa*, anti-terror officers use remote communication technology to urge Zooni to take action against her husband,[62] who is accused of being a terrorist—a formal test preceded by an informal one in the form of memorizing the national anthem.[63] In panel (c) from *Mulk*, institutionalization culminates in the courtroom when the prosecutor emphasizes that Murad's law-abiding conduct is insufficient proof of loyalty[64] and presents his beard as a non-patriotic symbol,[65] until the judge determines that the burden of proof is ongoing.[66]

[58] Sathyu, *Garm Hava*, 1:47:05-1:47:12.

[59] Sathyu, 1:47:40.

[60] Sathyu, 2:04:12.

[61] Sathyu, 1:02:22-1:03:28.

[62] Kohli, *Fanaa*, 2:35:12.

[63] Kohli, 1:43:48.

[64] Sinha, *Mulk*, 1:48:13-1:48:28.

[65] Sinha, 1:48:31-1:48:37.

[66] Sinha, 2:04:30-2:04:40.

These three panels mark the articulation of the state as it gradually approaches Muslim subjects in the public, domestic, and legal spheres.

Internalization constitutes the third mechanism of the burden of proof, whereby the discipline of loyalty is enacted by the Muslim subject upon himself through self-monitoring, the limitation of communal relations, and even extreme sacrifice. In *Garm Hava*, this mechanism manifests when Muslim officials refuse to hire Sikander for fear of being accused of sectarianism as "the only Muslim in the department,"[67] and when Salim's friend decides to join the Congress Party because the only remaining options are "going to Pakistan or joining Congress."[68] In *Fanaa*, internalization culminates in extreme sacrifice when Zulfikar prefers that his own offspring die rather than hand over the bomb trigger[69]—a choice that Zooni realizes by shooting her own husband.[70] Meanwhile, in *Mulk*, officer Danish Javed limits the quota of Muslims in his team because he feels his community is defamed "every time,"[71] a stance supported by Chhoti Tabassum's rejection of her son's body through the assertion "He is not my son,"[72] as well as by Murad's refusal to grant Shahid the title of martyr.[73] The three films thus illustrate how Muslim characters prove their loyalty by independently disciplining themselves, their families, and their communities.

This operationalization of the burden of proof emphasizes that cinema does not simply reflect reality but processes social stigma into dramatic conflict that is then circulated back to the public. In Hilal Ahmed's framework, films participate in forming a discourse of Muslimness—a singular image of Muslims shaped by historical narratives and public debates.[74] Yet the processing of this stigma is ambivalent: cinema not only produces stereotypes but can also question them.[75] The three films occupy different positions on this spectrum: *Fanaa* reproduces the stigma in its entirety by demanding that "good" Muslims sacrifice "bad" Muslims, while *Garm Hava* and *Mulk* present the burden of proof as a form of injustice criticized from the victim's perspective. Even so, the criticism in *Garm Hava* and *Mulk* still relies on the same structure of suspicion in order for the argument to remain

[67] Sathyu, *Garm Hava*, 2:03:18-2:03:42.

[68] Sathyu, 0:49:14.

[69] Kohli, *Fanaa*, 2:27:28.

[70] Kohli, 2:40:04-2:42:50.

[71] Sinha, *Mulk*, 1:55:49-1:56:25.

[72] Sinha, 1:26:53-1:26:57.

[73] Sinha, 1:26:53-1:26:57.

[74] Ahmed, *A Brief History of the Present: Muslims in New India*, 20.

[75] Siddiqui, *Muslim Identity in Hindi Cinema: Poetics and Politics of Genre and Representation*, 1.

intelligible to the audience. In short, cinema occupies a dual position: it feeds on society's prejudices while simultaneously serving as a space in which those prejudices can be dismantled.

The two sides of this dual position are rooted in a pattern that has remained unchanged for five decades: the burden of proof is never fully deconstructed but is simply resolved by the suspected party. The accusers—banking institutions, officials, and prosecutors—are never required to substantiate their accusations, as if the virtues of the majority group were taken for granted.[76] Furthermore, the legitimization of loyalty in all three films requires the subordination of Muslim identity to the language of secular nationalism: Salim dissolves into the secular youth movement, Zooni sacrifices her husband for the sake of the state, and Murad's vindication remains dependent on the juridical protection of the Constitution. This pattern confirms Jaffrelot's thesis regarding classical Hindu nationalism, according to which Islam is tolerated only as a private rite while the public sphere demands the surrender of loyalty to the majority culture.[77] Thus, this subchapter finds that in all three films—including even the most critical works—Muslim citizenship appears as "conditional citizenship": citizen status is not treated as inherent but as a test that must be continually renewed before the state. This pattern is also visible in films outside the core corpus. In *Chak De! India* (2007), hockey coach Kabir Khan is branded a traitor after the defeat to Pakistan and has his honor restored only through the national team's victory, while *My Name Is Khan* (2010) makes the sentence "I am not a terrorist" the narrative axis. A scene-level reading of these two films lies beyond the scope of this article.

This construction of conditional citizenship both confirms and transcends the direction of Indian cinema studies over the past decade. Previous studies have charted the reduction of Muslim characters to stereotypes of terrorism and extraterritorial loyalties, including readings of the "good Muslim/bad Muslim" binary in *Fanaa*[78] and the insistence on "Indianness" that persists into contemporary films.[79] A similar pattern appears in studies of Kashmir cinema, where *The Kashmir Files* is identified as serving a majoritarian narrative,[80] while even progressive films such as *Haider* continue to reproduce Orientalist

[76] Kazmi, *The Politics of India's Conventional Cinema: Imaging a Universe, Subverting a Multiverse*, 13.

[77] Jaffrelot, *Modi's India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy*, 14.

[78] Kumar H.M., "Metonymies of Fear: Islamophobia and the Making of Muslim Identity in Hindi Cinema."

[79] Najar, "Representation of Indian Muslims in Bollywood Cinema: A Scholarly Review."

[80] Mustafiz, "Fabricating a Spiral of Islamophobia through Kashmir Issue. A Critical Discourse Analysis on Two Bollywood Films."

tropes.[81] Kumar et al. read *Mulk* as a form of pluralist constitutional counterpoint.[82] While concurring that *Fanaa* reproduces stigma, this research offers two key distinctions. First, the burden of proof is not treated merely as a narrative motif but is decomposed into three structured mechanisms—collective attribution, institutionalization, and internalization—that remain consistent from 1973 to 2018. Second, in contrast to readings that present *Mulk* as a complete form of resistance, this research shows that *Mulk*'s constitutional resolution, like the final march in *Garm Hava*, continues to operate within the logic of suspicion it critiques. Thus, conditional citizenship marks the structural limits of the cinematic imagination of Indian Muslims in the films studied.

Hostile Inheritance: The Politicized Past in *Mughal-e-Azam*, *Jodhaa Akbar*, and *Chhaava*

The representation of Muslims in Indian cinema cannot be separated from the way cinema constructs a "politicized past," wherein medieval historical narratives are reinterpreted to align with contemporary ideological agendas.[83] This framing of the past operates within the historical film genre, which establishes a clear demarcation between the rightful owners of the homeland and foreign invaders. Hindu nationalism has exploited this dichotomy by reducing Muslim rule to a narrative of communal conquest through historiographical revisions[84] and the fabrication of popular myths.[85] The shift from the inclusive classical Muslim historical tradition toward contemporary nationalist cinema has eroded the vision of secular unity, replacing it with a "natives versus immigrants" trope.[86] Within this framework, Mughal figures often serve as surrogates for contemporary Muslim minorities. As demonstrated at the end of this sub-chapter, this assertion is corroborated when the anger directed at Aurangzeb on screen translates into demands concerning his grave off screen.

---

[81] Waseem Ahad, "Old Imaginaries in a New Frame: The Politics of Bollywood's 'Social Problem Films' on Kashmir," *Contemporary South Asia* 30, no. 4 (October 2, 2022): 586–600, https://doi.org/10.1080/09584935.2022.2132217.

[82] Sarath S Kumar, Sreejith Kadiyakkol, and Remya R, "Imagined Communities in Bollywood: A Contrapuntal Reading of The Kashmir Files and Mulk," *Asiatic: IIUM Journal of English Language and Literature* 19, no. 2 (December 10, 2025): 176–92, https://doi.org/10.31436/asiatic.v19i2.3954.

[83] Kazmi, *The Politics of India's Conventional Cinema: Imaging a Universe, Subverting a Multiverse*, 14.

[84] Jaffrelot, *Modi's India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy*, 55–56.

[85] Rajagopal, *Politics after Television: Hindu Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Public in India*, 65.

[86] Bhaskar and Allen, *Islamicate Cultures of Bombay Cinema*, 6–7; Siddiqui, *Muslim Identity in Hindi Cinema: Poetics and Politics of Genre and Representation*, 23–24.

The representation of the Mughals in Hindi cinema underwent a significant transformation across three dimensions: the role of religious appeals within the Mughal camp, the visual portrayal of the ruler's piety, and the Mughals' position in relation to Hindustan. The earliest clear evidence of the politicization of the Mughal past is reflected in the changing narrative function of Islamic religiosity within the Mughal camp—from symbolizing the ruler's benevolence to signifying absolute hostility. This shift is evident in the evolution of the speaker, the content of the appeals, and the narrative contexts associated with the glorification of Allah or references to Islamic institutions across the three films (see Table 1).

Table 1. Mughal Religious Appeals in *Mughal-e-Azam*, *Jodhaa Akbar*, and *Chhaava*

Film Title	Speaker	Invocation	Narrative Context & Discursive Function
Mughal-e-Azam (1960)	Akbar	"O Lord of heaven and earth..." (00:07:02) "Praise be to Allah!" (00:07:55; 00:17:14) "By God, I am a slave to my principles." (03:00:12)	Prayer of surrender, expression of gratitude for the heir to the throne, and the release of Anarkali in the name of imperial justice.
	Anarkali	"In mosques and temples, love is faith..." (02:31:12)	Affirms the sanctity of universal love before the throne.
Jodhaa Akbar (2008)	Jalal	"Divine gesture..." (00:40:25) "God willing, his demands will be met." (00:51:44) Khula rights (01:02:42) Removal of jizya (02:30:49) "Bow your head to every religion." (03:24:09)	Articulation of Islam that combines secular rationality, women's rights, religious freedom, and state inclusivism.
	Orthodox figures	Ghazi (00:12:03) Jizya collection (00:13:45) "Unclean" ceremony (00:42:36) Fort temple protests (01:14:12)	Pressure for prisoner executions, discriminatory taxes, and communal orthodoxy that drive Jalal away from the centre of the throne.
	Sufis & Others	Qawwali of the Sufis (00:53:58) Hamida Banu's prayer of thanksgiving (02:48:02)	Harmony of Sufi spirituality and familial expressions of gratitude.

Chhaava (2025)	Aurangzeb	"Wedges against You..." (00:05:03) "Your world is safe from destruction..." (02:01:06) "Nine years in prayer..." (02:04:47) "Just change your religion!" (02:23:44)	Invocation of existential hostility, legitimisation of invasion, and forced religious conversion under torture.
	Nobility & Troops	"Praise be to Allah!" (00:03:51; 00:06:55; 01:46:26) "God willing!" (01:09:08; 01:28:33) "There is no power except from Allah!" (01:28:11)	Celebrations of enemy deaths, collection of taxes from non-Muslims, and military pursuit of opponents.
	Mirza Akbar	"Praise be to Allah!" (00:52:30)	Expression of relief upon defecting and seeking asylum from Sambhaji.

Table 1 is not a comprehensive frequency count but rather an inventory of the most narratively significant appeals. It reveals a 65-year shift in speaker positioning and the contextualization of religious appeals. In *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960), the appeals center on Akbar's universal spirituality and resignation;[87] dynastic tensions are justified in the name of imperial justice rather than religious dogma. *Jodhaa Akbar* (2008) presents a binary split: Jalal's Islam is framed as secular rationality,[88] women's rights (*khula*),[89] and state inclusivism,[90] while rigid orthodoxy—embodied in titles such as *ghazi* and the practice of *jizya*[91]—is confined to peripheral figures removed from the throne. This division reproduces the broader trope of "acceptable Sufi Islam" versus "threatening orthodox Islam": the *qawwali* in the dargah becomes the nation-friendly face of Islam, while the ghazi and jizya become symbols of Islam that must be excised. In contrast, *Chhaava* (2025) erases such differentiation. Ten of the eleven appeals from the Mughal camp are exclusively attached to Aurangzeb's military aggression, fiscal exploitation, and ultimatums of religious conversion; the sole peaceful appeal comes from the prince who defects to the Maratha side.[92] This asymmetry is reinforced by the binary opposition of the Maratha heroic cry ("*Har Har Mahadev*"). In this way, Muslim piety—originally a marker of the state's

[87] K. Asif, *Mughal-e-Azam* (India: Shapoorji Pallonji, 1960). Timestamp: 00:07:02; 00:07:55; 00:17:14; 03:00:12.

[88] Ashutosh Gowariker, *Jodhaa Akbar* (India: UTV Motion Pictures, 2008), 3:24:09.

[89] Gowariker, 1:02:42.

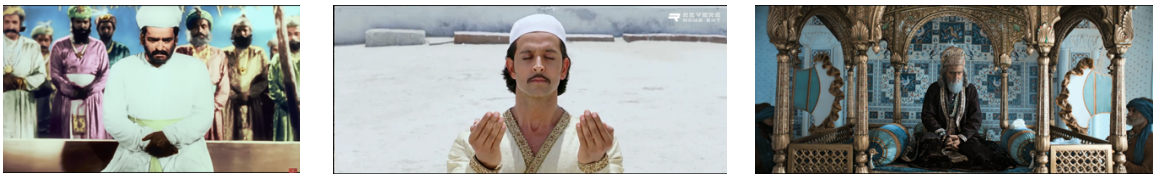
[90] Gowariker, *Jodhaa Akbar*. Timestamp: 02:30:49; 03:24:09.

[91] Gowariker. Timestamp: 00:12:03; 00:13:45.

[92] Laxman Utekar, *Chhaava* (India: Maddock Films, 2025). Timestamp: 00:05:03; 00:52:30; 02:01:06; 02:04:47; 02:23:44 (see Table 1).

ethics of justice and secularism—is transformed into an essential marker of the absolute enemy.

The second piece of evidence is found at the visual level: the framing of the Mughal ruler's body during prayer shifts from humble openness to cold confinement. This change becomes clearly visible when three comparable scenes—Akbar praying before Salim Chishti, Jalal praying at the dargah of Moinuddin Chishti, and Aurangzeb's first prayer uttered from the throne upon receiving news of Shivaji's death (00:05:03)—are placed side by side (Figure 2). These three scenes differ in setting, and that difference is precisely where the significance lies: all three films introduce the ruler's piety through his first prayer, yet only *Chhaava* situates that prayer on a throne rather than in a sacred space.



(a) Akbar in *Mughal-e-Azam* (b) Jalal in *Jodhaa Akbar* (c) Aurangzeb in *Chhaava*

Source: Screenshots from the film; used for academic study and criticism purposes.

Figure 2. Spatiality and Visualization of Mughal Rulers' Piety in Indian Cinema

Panels (2.a) and (2.b) employ a similar visual language, conveying sovereignty precisely through the shedding of imperial attributes. In *Mughal-e-Azam*, Akbar appears frontally at camera eye level, dressed in plain white after crossing the desert barefoot,[93] thereby presenting the emperor as a humble supplicant before God. *Jodhaa Akbar* refines this visualization by framing Jalal kneeling in a white kurta within the light and airy space of the dargah, associating the ruler's piety with light and humility.[94] In contrast, panel (2.c) completely reverses the visual arrangement. Aurangzeb in *Chhaava* appears motionless on a gold-canopied throne, enclosed within a full-height symmetrical frame-within-a-frame and surrounded by cool-toned tiled architecture and jewel-studded robes.[95] The white head covering that, in the 1960 and 2008 films, symbolized the simplicity of prayer now appears as a cap knitted by Aurangzeb amid palace intrigue. While this detail draws on the historiographical tradition of Aurangzeb's habit of knitting caps, the film positions it not as a sign of simplicity but as a cool interlude within the intrigues of power. Thus, the

[93] Asif, *Mughal-e-Azam*, 05:52.

[94] Gowariker, *Jodhaa Akbar*, 37:49.

[95] Utekar, *Chhaava*, 04:02.

aesthetics of piety—in Birgit Meyer's sense, the sensational form that guides the viewer's feelings—transforms from spiritual openness and resignation into visual distance, rigid confinement, and a cold signifier of power.

The third piece of evidence lies in the shifting geopolitical relationship between the Mughals and Hindustan: from being an organic part of the homeland, to accepted immigrants, to being constructed as foreign invaders. *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960) opens with a personified Hindustani voice that crowns Akbar as the savior of the nation beyond religious barriers.[96] *Jodhaa Akbar* (2008) distinguishes the Mughals from earlier historical raiders by emphasizing their choice to make India their home, while simultaneously rebutting the charge of foreignness through the assertion of Jalal's belonging.[97] In contrast, *Chhaava* (2025) reduces the Mughal dynasty from its inception to a ruthless invasion of Indian unity.[98] The discourse of pluralism once attached to the Mughal rulers is now wholly transferred to the Maratha entity as the legitimate owner of Swarajya (the homeland). The peak of this shift is reflected in the final confrontation: Aurangzeb's ultimatum of religious conversion is met by Sambhaji with an offer of political tolerance without any condition of conversion, positioning the Muslim emperor no longer as a protector of diversity but as a recipient of tolerance from the rightful owner of the homeland.

The evolution of these three aspects confirms that what transformed from *Mughal-e-Azam* to *Chhaava* was not historical knowledge itself, but rather the ideological function of the past for its audience. Historical films operate by combining historical authority with emotional language through dialogue, facial expressions, lighting, and sound design. While in 1960 and 2008 this aesthetic supported secular togetherness, in 2025 it is mobilized to construct Islam as a sign of absolute hostility. This shift illustrates the concept of a split public,[99] in which *Chhaava* maintains a verbal claim of tolerance while its visual and auditory systems instill a communal message. The film's reception trajectory shows how these signs travel beyond the screen. After weeks of campaigning by Hindutva groups, including the VHP and Bajrang Dal, demanding the demolition of Aurangzeb's tomb in Khuldabad, a protest in Nagpur on 17 March 2025 culminated in communal clashes that

[96] Asif, *Mughal-e-Azam*.

[97] Gowariker, *Jodhaa Akbar*.

[98] Utekar, *Chhaava*.

[99] Rajagopal, *Politics after Television: Hindu Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Public in India*, 24.

injured dozens of people, including 33 police officers.[100] The following day, addressing the state legislative assembly, Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis stated that he did not blame any film, yet affirmed that *Chhaava* had "presented the true history of Chhatrapati Sambhaji Maharaj" and had "ignited emotions" and anger against Aurangzeb.[101] This episode demonstrates how state authorities helped validate the film's claim to "true history,"[102] thereby enabling animosity toward a seventeenth-century emperor to manifest in concrete contemporary conflict. Ultimately, within an Islamophobic visual-political ecosystem,[103] contemporary historical cinema functions as a discursive framework that channels historical sentiment directly toward minority religious identities in the public sphere.

The ideological continuity underlying this shift reveals that even in the most inclusive works, acceptance of Islam remains contingent on the figure of the "good Muslim," with rigid articulations of Islam isolated and exiled outside Hindustan (to Mecca). *Chhaava* (2025) does not invent a new structure; rather, it removes the figure of the "good Muslim" from the seat of power, allowing the previously marginalized articulation of Islam to occupy the position of absolute ruler. This construction radically alters the position of the tolerator in Hindi cinema: whereas in 1960 and 2008 Muslim rulers were positioned as protectors of the majority, in 2025 the majority entity assumes the role of tolerator and relegates Muslims to the position of those who are tolerated—echoing the logic of ethnic democracy.[104] In Ghassan Hage's terms, the authority of the "homeowner" who grants tolerance has now been fully transferred to the majority.[105] Thus, the principal findings of this sub-chapter confirm the transformation of Hindi cinema's treatment of the Mughal past—from a shared heritage to an "inherited hostility," a hostility transmitted through innate religious identity. When Islam is constructed as the primary signifier of the absolute enemy, every contemporary Muslim is positioned as the collective inheritor of that historical sin. This framing simultaneously legitimizes conditional requirements of Muslim citizenship today by reading history as an inherited historical debt.

---

[100] Scroll Staff, "Nagpur Violence: Film 'Chhaava' Sparked Anger against Aurangzeb, Says Maharashtra CM," *Scroll.in*, 18 Maret 2025, https://scroll.in/latest/1080420/nagpur-violence-film-chhava-sparked-anger-against-aurangzeb-says-maharashtra-cm.

[101] Scroll Staff, "Nagpur Violence."

[102] Rajagopal, 65.

[103] Kazmi, *The Politics of India's Conventional Cinema: Imaging a Universe, Subverting a Multiverse*, 14; Siddiqui, *Muslim Identity in Hindi Cinema: Poetics and Politics of Genre and Representation*, 14.

[104] Jaffrelot, *Modi's India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy*, 155.

[105] Hage, *White Nation*, 78–104.

This finding aligns with a growing body of literature that examines Hindi historical cinema as an instrument for reconstructing the past in the service of contemporary political agendas. Baijayanti Roy[106] and Krupa Shandilya[107] demonstrate how films such as *Bajirao Mastani* and *Padmaavat* frame Muslim rulers as the Other in opposition to Hinduism, while linking medieval narratives to contemporary Islamophobic rhetoric. Ajay Gehlawat explores the visual splendor that glorifies Rajput identity through a fascist aesthetic idiom,[108] and Khan and Lutful[109] situate the phenomenon within the broader consolidation of the Hindu Rashtra project and the marginalization of Muslims from the public sphere. K. A. Laskar and M. Reyaz further argue that historical films function as mediated rituals that engineer antagonistic collective memories[110]—a premise that finds empirical illustration in the communal clashes in Nagpur following the release of *Chhaava*.

Although Kaushik Roy argues that historical films such as *Panipat* still serve the mission of national integration,[111] the findings of this research clarify that such integration is exclusionary, as it requires Muslim minorities to change allegiances in order to gain acceptance. Furthermore, this sub-chapter makes two theoretical contributions that have been overlooked in previous studies. First, through a diachronic comparison of *Mughal-e-Azam*, *Jodhaa Akbar*, and *Chhaava*, it reveals that the inclusivism of classical cinema already presupposed the conditions of the "good Muslim." *Chhaava* is therefore not a rupture but a radicalization—and completion—of a pre-existing discursive structure. Second, whereas earlier research has focused on the characterization of Muslim rulers' cruelty, this sub-chapter demonstrates that the primary markers of the enemy are instead localized in their pious rites, such as appeals to Allah and symbols of worship. It is here that the concept of "inherited hostility" takes shape: what is inherited by today's Muslim community is not

[106] Roy, "Visual Grandeur, Imagined Glory: Identity Politics and Hindu Nationalism in Bajirao Mastani and Padmaavat."

[107] Krupa Shandilya, "The Gaze of the Raping Muslim Man: Love Jihad and Hindu Right-Wing Rhetoric in Sanjay Leela Bhansali's Padmaavat," *Studies in South Asian Film & Media* 9, no. 2 (December 1, 2017): 97–112, https://doi.org/10.1386/safm.9.2.97_1.

[108] Gehlawat, "Triumph of the Rajput: Sanjay Leela Bhansali and the Fascist Aesthetics of Padmaavat."

[109] M. A. Muqtedar Khan and Rifat Binte Lutful, "Emerging Hindu Rashtra and Its Impact on Indian Muslims," *Religions* 12, no. 9 (August 27, 2021): 693, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12090693.

[110] Laskar and Reyaz, "Reel Mughals: Medieval Themed Films as Mediatized Rituals Building Collective Antagonistic Memory."

[111] Kaushik Roy, "Bollywood, Maratha Imperialism and Hindu Nationalism," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 35, no. 3 (April 2, 2024): 507–35, https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2023.2278910.

the sins of past rulers, but the religious identity itself, which has been constructed as a sign of absolute threat.

Silent Citizenship: Muslims as Ordinary Citizens in *Gully Boy*

The phrase "out of the religious frame" critiques the historical tendency in Hindi cinema to define Muslim characters solely by their religious identity rather than by the complexities of their lives. Bhaskar and Allen observe that the Muslim presence on the Bombay screen has consistently been framed by the Islamicate—a historical socio-cultural complex manifested in genres such as the Muslim Historical, the *tawaif* film, and the Muslim Social.[112] This framing operates in two ways: it either glorifies the splendor of the aristocracy or constructs the figure of a suspected enemy. Moving beyond this trap does not mean erasing the Muslim figure, which would lead to invisibility; rather, it means presenting "Muslims as ordinary citizens."[113] Within this framework, religious identity is positioned as an "incidental fact" amid real struggles such as poverty, work, and personal aspirations—an antithesis to the roles of both "suspect" and "heir to the enemy." This section examines whether Hindi cinema allows Muslim characters to become sufficiently ordinary citizens and considers the consequences of such representation. The inquiry is traced through three aspects: Islam as an everyday setting, social class as the primary source of pressure, and Muslim voices that no longer speak in the name of communality.

The first evidence of this transformation lies in the way *Gully Boy* (2019) presents Islamic markers: religious symbols appear within the visual frame without carrying a conflictual narrative burden. This pattern becomes clear when three visual representations—the skullcap in the residential mosque environment, Safeena's hijab during a domestic confrontation, and the hijab within a communal celebration—are placed side by side (Figure 3).



(a) (b) (c)

Source: Screenshots from the film; used for academic study and criticism purposes.

Figure 3. Islamic Signifiers as Everyday Settings in *Gully Boy* (2019)

[112] Bhaskar and Allen, *Islamicate Cultures of Bombay Cinema*, 3.

[113] Siddiqui, *Muslim Identity in Hindi Cinema: Poetics and Politics of Genre and Representation*, 63.

Figure 3 demonstrates aesthetic consistency: Islamic expression is presented naturally as an integral part of urban lived space, rather than as an object of camera experimentation or a source of suspicion. In panel (a), Murad's wearing of the skullcap in the mosque environment is filmed with a cinematographic approach equivalent to that used for other Dharavi street scenes, without any dialogue questioning or justifying it.[114] In panel (b), Safeena's hijab is detached from rigid religious stigma; the confrontation with her mother is triggered purely by academic ambition, as a medical student asserting sovereignty over her own time.[115] Panel (c) confirms this pattern in the closing sequence, where women wearing headscarves join in welcoming Murad's victory; the moment is framed solely as a celebration by working-class citizens, without imposing a communal label.[116] In this way, *Gully Boy* presents Islamic identity as a natural "incidental fact," neither concealing its markers nor transforming them into an existential burden for the characters.

The second piece of evidence concerns the source of the pressure experienced by the Muslim characters in *Gully Boy*: the pressure stems from class and family, rather than religion. This pattern becomes fully apparent when each scene that places Murad, Safeena, or Murad's mother under pressure is organized according to who exerts the pressure, in what form, and on what basis (see Table 2).

Table 2. Sources of Pressure on Muslim Characters in *Gully Boy* (2019)

Character Exerting Pressure	Form of Pressure & Example Quote	Basis of Conflict & Discursive Function
Murad's employer (00:33:20)	Underestimation of academic qualifications: "Everyone is a graduate these days."	Class structure: Economic oppression and blocked social mobility for slum youth.
Employer's daughter (00:51:12)	Social distance while Murad serves as a driver: "You're close, but our worlds are different... Who dominates whom?"	Class structure: The reality of working-class marginality amid urban inequality.
Murad's uncle (01:03:20)	Subordinate job offer: "Keep your head down and work hard like us."	Class structure: Internal discipline of the lower classes that undercuts individual ambition.
Murad's father (00:05:36)	Unilateral polygamy without consent: "The woman put a spell on him."	Family power relations: Patriarchal hegemony and the

[114] Zoya Akhtar, *Gully Boy* (India: Cinestaan AA Distributors, 2019), 00:16:50.

[115] Akhtar, 00:17:35.

[116] Akhtar, 02:27:12.

		marginalisation of the wife's domestic position.
Safeena's parents (00:20:40)	Close surveillance of Safeena's mobility: "Wouldn't you know right away if I was dating?"	Family power relations: Patriarchal control over women's autonomy and freedom.
Murad's mother (to father) (01:10:08)	Challenge to the father's remarriage: "Did you ask before you remarried?"	Family power relations: Domestic resistance to a partner's oppression.
Murad's father (01:40:48)	Physical domestic violence; Murad resists and removes his mother from the house.	Family power relations: Domestic patriarchal aggression and the breaking of the cycle of violence.

Table 2 demonstrates that the narrative tension experienced by the Muslim characters in *Gully Boy* (2019) arises primarily from class structure and patriarchal family power relations, rather than from suspicion directed at their religion. In contrast to nationalist cinema, which places Muslims under the suspicion of state officials or communal prejudice, Murad's oppressors are employers who belittle his social status, an uncle who constrains his ambitions, and the economic gulf that separates him from his employers. The lyrical question "Who dominates whom?" is therefore answered firmly by class inequality.[117] Claims that religion is entirely absent, however, require qualification. Polygamy is not a neutral marker: between 2017 and 2019, polygamy and triple talaq functioned as principal symbols of "Muslim patriarchy" within Hindu nationalist discourse and debates over the Uniform Civil Code, from the Supreme Court's ruling in the Shayara Bano case (2017) to the legislation criminalizing triple talaq in 2019.[118] Interestingly, Naezy, the Kurla rapper whose life also inspired the film, has emphasized that the plot element concerning his father's second marriage is not true.[119] This means that the only family conflict culturally coded as "Muslim" is, in fact, a fictional addition. The film itself does not ground the conflict in religious doctrine, yet audiences encounter it within a discursive climate that has already marked polygamy as a sign of problematic Islam. Thus, the characters' Islam is

[117] Akhtar, *Gully Boy*. Timestamp: 00:33:20; 00:51:12; 01:03:20 (see Table 2).

[118] *Shayara Bano v. Union of India*, (2017) 9 SCC 1; The Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Marriage) Act, 2019, No. 20 of 2019, 3–4.

[119] Marwa Hamad, "Real-Life 'Gully Boy' Naezy Sets the Record Straight," *Gulf News*, 19 Augustus 2019, https://gulfnews.com/entertainment/bollywood/real-life-gully-boy-naezy-sets-the-record-straight-1.65879575.

not explicitly presented as the foundation of their suffering. They are oppressed by poverty, their working-class position, and patriarchal hegemony—a universal existential experience shared by other lower-class citizens in urban India.

The third piece of evidence lies in the articulation of the voices of the Muslim characters themselves. When Murad appears in public spaces, he speaks on behalf of marginalized urban residents rather than as a representative of a Muslim communal entity. The stage identity of "Gully Boy" binds him geographically and socioeconomically to the alleys of Dharavi, not to religious attributes. The song lyrics express structural criticism of class inequality, as in "Doori," which denounces social alienation, and "Azadi," which criticizes the commercialization of education and political exploitation. The latter song requires particularly careful reading. "Azadi" reworks a slogan popularized by JNU student leader Kanhaiya Kumar in 2016—a slogan that, in the Indian public sphere, also resonated with demands for azadi in Kashmir and later became a rallying cry during the anti-CAA protests.[120] Politics is therefore not entirely absent from *Gully Boy*; it is present but transferred from the language of religious communities to the language of class and youth. The collectivity Murad represents is an interfaith urban poor community, and the only religious critique he articulates is directed against the manipulative politicization of religion. When he wins the final stage with the song "*Apna Time Aayega*,"[121] Murad is not burdened with the demand to defend Islam, prove national loyalty, or explain the religious identity of his community. In this way, *Gully Boy* demonstrates that Muslim youth can speak as citizens who articulate social inequality alongside other citizens.

These three pieces of evidence confirm that *Gully Boy* (2019) relocates Islam from a narrative issue to the texture of everyday life through a distinctive cinematic strategy: the combination of urban Muslim social realism with a mainstream genre focused on the social mobility of street artists. The production context further shapes this strategy. Directed by Zoya Akhtar, with lyrics contributed by Javed Akhtar and a story inspired by the lives of Mumbai rappers Naezy and Divine, the film ensures that Murad's religious "silence" cannot be read simply as an imposition by the majority; it is also an aesthetic choice rooted in the city's hip-hop culture.[122] This framework embodies a substantive concept of Muslimness,[123]

---

[120] Web Desk, "Inspired by Kanhaiya, 'Gully Boy'! BJP, Congress Release 'Azadi' Videos," *The Week*, 9 February 2019, https://www.theweek.in/news/india/2019/02/09/inspired-kanhaiya-gully-boy-azadi.html.

[121] Akhtar, 02:22:20.

[122] Bilal Jaleel, "Gully Boy Isn't a Biopic, But Is Inspired by My Story: Naezy," *The Quint*, 18 February 2019, https://www.thequint.com/amp/story/videos/naezy-the-baa-reviews-gully-boy.

[123] Ahmed, *A Brief History of the Present: Muslims in New India*, 20.

in which Islam is presented as a diverse lived experience rather than a homogeneous political discourse. Yet the existence of this "ordinary citizen" operates within a restricted geography: Islamic markers remain dense in the Dharavi settlement but recede when Murad enters the public spaces of employers and the competition stage—reflecting the limited space available for Muslim expression in contemporary India.[124] The film's release in 2019, coinciding with the Pulwama attack (both occurring on 14 February 2019) and the rise of hyper-masculine nationalist cinema such as *Uri*,[125] and appearing only ten months before the passage of the CAA, underscores the fragility of the politics of recognition. In the conditions of a divided public, audience empathy for Murad is readily celebrated because it is directed toward a poor young man pursuing a dream, rather than toward a Muslim political subject demanding citizenship rights.

Behind the liberation offered by *Gully Boy* (2019) operates an implicit and latent condition: Murad can appear as an ordinary citizen only because all articulations of his suffering are fully translated into the language of class. His Islam is never the object of suspicion, yet neither is it permitted to serve as a discursive basis for demanding political justice. The structural reality is that a Muslim in India may experience discrimination precisely because religious identity is excluded from the narrative. This structure echoes the logic of ethnic nationalism, in which Islam is tolerated as a private practice so long as the public sphere remains sterile of its political articulation.[126] Thus, the principal findings of this sub-chapter demonstrate that *Gully Boy* frees its Muslim characters from religious stigma by offering "silent citizenship"—a form of citizenship that is dignified in matters of class, family, and individual mobility, yet demands that Islam remain in the background and silent on political claims. If the first sub-chapter shows citizenship made conditional on proof of loyalty, and the second sub-chapter shows historically inherited hostility, this sub-chapter reveals that the path out of both remains conditional: no longer proof, but silence.

These findings engage with two streams of literature: the first interprets *Gully Boy* as an inclusive exception that enlivens everyday urban spaces and subaltern subversion without provoking communal polarization;[127] the second remains skeptical about the costs

[124] Jaffrelot, *Modi's India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy*, 204–5.

[125] Siddiqui, *Muslim Identity in Hindi Cinema: Poetics and Politics of Genre and Representation*, 31.

[126] Jaffrelot, *Modi's India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy*, 14.

[127] Mohanty, "Gully Boy and Its Silent Mutinies"; Kamayani Sharma, "Sabka Time Aayega: Language and the City in Gully Boy," in *ReFocus: The Films of Zoya Akhtar*, ed. Aakshi Magazine and Amber Shields (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022).

of commodifying rap culture and the negotiation of Muslim acceptance through neoliberal class discourse.[128] Within this context, while films such as *Mulk* advocate for constitutional rights on behalf of the Muslim community,[129] *Gully Boy* instead pursues a strategy of liberation by eliminating religion as a basis for political demands. This sub-chapter makes two theoretical contributions to the debate. First, it demonstrates that the "normality" of Muslim representation follows a clear discursive structure: the complete translation of experiences of oppression into a class idiom. Second, it shows that "silent citizenship" is not a rupture from conditional citizenship but rather its subtlest form—where the conditions of acceptance remain operative, yet are fulfilled through political silence rather than explicit proof of loyalty. Unlike Yoshino's concept of covering, which emphasizes the suppression of visible identity markers, silent citizenship entails a political dampening: Islamic markers may remain visible, but they cannot be invoked as a basis for political demands.[130]

Conclusion

Across the seven films examined, not one presents Muslims on screen without reservation: the characters' Islam is invariably exchanged for proof of loyalty, forgiveness for past transgressions, or political silence. This research finds that these three representations are not separate articulations but modalities of a single logic of conditional acceptance that can coexist within the same period. In the contemporary register (*Garm Hava*, *Fanaa*, *Mulk*), Muslims inhabit conditional citizenship, where suspicion is institutionalized by the state apparatus and internalized by minority subjects until genuine acceptance is secured through a test of loyalty. In the historical register (*Mughal-e-Azam*, *Jodhaa Akbar*, *Chhaava*), the Mughal narrative shifts from a shared secular heritage to a hostile legacy, wherein Islamic piety is constructed as a signifier of the absolute enemy, legitimizing contemporary communal aggression. Meanwhile, *Gully Boy* offers liberation through silent citizenship—a form of acceptance that tolerates Islam as a private matter but requires the translation of all oppression into a neoliberal class idiom, effectively sterilizing it from political demands. Thus, from 1960 to 2025, what varies is not the

[128] Damini Rajendra Kulkarni, "Appropriation and Articulation: Mapping Movements in Gully Boy," *Cinergie – Il Cinema e Le Altre Arti*, no. 17 (July 30, 2020): 87–96, https://doi.org/10.6092/ISSN.2280-9481/10508; Anwer and Arora, "Pathaan, Precarity and the Muslim Question in Neoliberal India."

[129] Sarath S Kumar, Sreejith Kadiyakkol, and Remya R, "Imagined Communities in Bollywood: A Contrapuntal Reading of The Kashmir Files and Mulk."

[130] Yoshino, *Covering*, ix.

existence or absence of conditions for Indian Muslims, but their form: verification, legacy, and silence.

These three stages are not sequential. *Garm Hava* already demanded proof in 1973, while the silent citizenship of *Gully Boy* (2019) actually precedes the hostile legacy depicted in *Chhaava* (2025). The most pronounced diachronic change occurs in the register of the Mughal past, where the ruler's piety shifts from a sign of justice to a sign of hostility. In the relationship between cinema, religion, and power, the Bombay film industry functions as a medium that articulates majority prejudices into a regime of cinematic citizenship regarded as normal and continuously circulated in the public sphere. Theoretically, the typology of proof–legacy–silence offers an analytical tool for reading the conditional citizenship of Muslim minorities beyond India—for example, demands for proof of loyalty in post-9/11 cinema in the United States or the politics of suppressing Islamic markers in Europe. This typology also suggests that the aesthetics of piety on screen constitute a terrain on which the boundaries of citizenship are negotiated.

These findings are made possible by a multiple-case-study design that reads the three registers of representation comparatively and, within each register, diachronically. This design reveals a continuity that eludes single-period studies: the inclusivity of *Mughal-e-Azam* and *Jodhaa Akbar* was already conditional before *Chhaava* abolished it, while the normality of *Gully Boy* harbors similar conditions in their subtlest form. Time-stamped scene coding that combines dialogue, *mise-en-scène*, and public reception data enables re-examination while connecting the film text to the audience's sociopolitical context. Nevertheless, the research is limited by its corpus of seven mainstream Hindi films (excluding regional cinema and digital series), the absence of films from the 1980s–1990s in the core corpus, the concentration of the ordinary-citizen register on a single film, and reception tracking that relies on media reporting rather than audience ethnography. These limitations open clear avenues for future research: studies of audience reception on social media, comparisons with regional cinema and digital platforms, quantitative examination of a broader corpus, and analysis of the work of Muslim filmmakers to test whether these conditions of citizenship remain operative when minorities themselves act as storytellers.

Acknowledgements:
The author would like to express sincere gratitude to all parties who have supported the completion of this study.

Author Contributions:
BG: Conceptualization, data collection, formal analysis, writing—original draft, writing—review and editing.

Funding:
This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Declaration of Generative AI Use:
The author did not use generative AI tools in preparing this manuscript.

Data Availability Statement:
The films analyzed are commercially available; all claims are anchored to time codes given in the notes. The scene inventory and coding sheets are available from the author upon reasonable request.

Disclosure Statement:
The author declares no competing financial, personal, or institutional conflicts of interest that could have influenced the objectivity or findings of this study.

Ethical Approval:
This study analyses commercially released feature films and publicly available news reports and does not involve human participations; formal ethical clearance was therefore not required. Screenshots are reproduced for the purposes of criticism and review, with attribution to the films.

References

Ahad, Waseem. "Old Imaginaries in a New Frame: The Politics of Bollywood's 'Social Problem Films' on Kashmir." *Contemporary South Asia* 30, no. 4 (October 2, 2022): 586–600. https://doi.org/10.1080/09584935.2022.2132217.

Ahmed, Hilal. *A Brief History of the Present: Muslims in New India*. Gurugram: Viking, 2024.

———. *Siyasi Muslims: A Story of Political Islams in India*. Gurugram: Penguin Viking, 2019.

Akhtar, Zoya. *Gully Boy*. India: Cinestaan AA Distributors, 2019.

Anil, Pratinav. *Another India: The Making of the World's Largest Muslim Minority, 1947–77*.

London: Hurst, 2023.

Anwer, Megha, and Anupama Arora. "Pathaan, Precarity and the Muslim Question in Neoliberal India." *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film* 21, no. 1 (June 1, 2023): 133–39. https://doi.org/10.1386/ncin_00042_1.

Asif, K. *Mughal-e-Azam*. India: Shapoorji Pallonji, 1960.

Baxter, Pamela, and Susan Jack. "Qualitative Case Study Methodology: Study Design and Implementation for Novice Researchers." *The Qualitative Report* 13, no. 4 (2008): 544–59. https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2008.1573.

Bhaskar, Ira, and Richard Allen. *Islamicate Cultures of Bombay Cinema*. New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2009.

Bordwell, David, Kristin Thompson, and Jeff Smith. *Film Art: An Introduction*. 12th ed. New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 2020.

Brown, Wendy. *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006.

Chakravarty, Sumita S. *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema, 1947–1987*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993.

Fairclough, Norman. *Discourse and Social Change*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992.

Gehlawat, Ajay. "Triumph of the Rajput: Sanjay Leela Bhansali and the Fascist Aesthetics of Padmaavat." *Studies in South Asian Film & Media* 9, no. 2 (December 1, 2017): 159–72. https://doi.org/10.1386/safm.9.2.159_1.

Gowariker, Ashutosh. *Jodhaa Akbar*. India: UTV Motion Pictures, 2008.

Hage, Ghassan. *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society*. New York: Routledge, 2000.

Hamad, Marwa. "Real-Life 'Gully Boy' Naezy Sets the Record Straight." *Gulf News*, August 19, 2019. https://gulfnews.com/entertainment/bollywood/real-life-gully-boy-naezy-sets-the-record-straight-1.65879575.

Hjarvard, Stig. "The Mediatization of Religion: A Theory of the Media as Agents of Religious Change." *Northern Lights: Film and Media Studies Yearbook* 6, no. 1 (June 2008): 9–26. https://doi.org/10.1386/nl.6.1.9_1.

Hsieh, Hsiu-Fang, and Sarah E. Shannon. "Three Approaches to Qualitative Content Analysis." *Qualitative Health Research* 15, no. 9 (November 1, 2005): 1277–88. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732305276687.

India, Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner. *C-1: Population by Religious Community*. Census of India 2011. New Delhi: Ministry of Home Affairs, 2015.

Isin, Engin F. "Theorizing Acts of Citizenship." In *Acts of Citizenship*, edited by Engin F. Isin

and Greg M. Nielsen, 15–43. London: Zed Books, 2008.

Jaffrelot, Christophe. *Modi's India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy*. Translated by Cynthia Schoch. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021.

Jaleel, Bilal. "Gully Boy Isn't a Biopic, But Is Inspired by My Story: Naezy." *The Quint*, February 18, 2019. https://www.thequint.com/amp/story/videos/naezy-the-baa-reviews-gully-boy.

Jayal, Niraja Gopal. *Citizenship and Its Discontents: An Indian History*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013.

Kazmi, Fareed. *The Politics of India's Conventional Cinema: Imaging a Universe, Subverting a Multiverse*. New Delhi: Sage, 1999.

Kesavan, Mukul. "Urdu, Awadh and the Tawaif: The Islamicate Roots of Hindi Cinema." In *Forging Identities: Gender, Communities and the State*, edited by Zoya Hasan, 244–57. New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1994.

Khan, M. A. Muqtedar, and Rifat Binte Lutful. "Emerging Hindu Rashtra and Its Impact on Indian Muslims." *Religions* 12, no. 9 (August 27, 2021): 693. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12090693.

Kohli, Kunal. *Fanaa*. India: Yash Raj Films, 2006.

Kulkarni, Damini Rajendra. "Appropriation and Articulation: Mapping Movements in Gully Boy." *Cinergie – Il Cinema e Le Altre Arti*, no. 17 (July 30, 2020): 87–96. https://doi.org/10.6092/ISSN.2280-9481/10508.

Kumar H.M., Sanjeev. "Metonymies of Fear: Islamophobia and the Making of Muslim Identity in Hindi Cinema." *Society and Culture in South Asia* 2, no. 2 (2016): 233–55. https://doi.org/10.1177/2393861716643874.

Kumar, Sarath S., Sreejith Kadiyakkol, and Remya R. "Imagined Communities in Bollywood: A Contrapuntal Reading of *The Kashmir Files* and *Mulk*." *Asiatic: IIUM Journal of English Language and Literature* 19, no. 2 (2025): 176–92. https://doi.org/10.31436/asiatic.v19i2.3954.

Laskar, Kaifia Ancer, and Mohammad Reyaz. "Reel Mughals: Medieval Themed Films as Mediatized Rituals Building Collective Antagonistic Memory." *Journal of Arab & Muslim Media Research*, December 15, 2025. https://doi.org/10.1386/jammr_00119_1.

Lincoln, Yvonna S., and Egon G. Guba. *Naturalistic Inquiry*. Beverly Hills: Sage, 1985.

Lövheim, Mia, and Gordon Lynch. "The Mediatisation of Religion Debate: An Introduction." *Culture and Religion* 12, no. 2 (2011): 111–17.

Mamdani, Mahmood. "Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: A Political Perspective on Culture and Terrorism." *American Anthropologist* 104, no. 3 (2002): 766–75.

Meyer, Birgit. "From Imagined Communities to Aesthetic Formations: Religious Mediations, Sensational Forms, and Styles of Binding." In *Aesthetic Formations: Media, Religion, and the Senses*, edited by Birgit Meyer, 1–28. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

Mikos, Lothar. "Analysis of Film." In *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Analysis*, edited by Uwe Flick, 409–23. London: Sage, 2014.

Mohanty, Aditya. "Gully Boy and Its Silent Mutinies." *Economic and Political Weekly* 54, no. 8 (2019).

Morgan, David. *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.

Mustafiz, Muhammd. "Fabricating a Spiral of Islamophobia through Kashmir Issue. A Critical Discourse Analysis on Two Bollywood Films." *Observatorio (OBS*)* 18, no. 4 (December 26, 2024). https://doi.org/10.15847/obsOBS18420242377.

Najar, Mehrajudin Aslam. "Representation of Indian Muslims in Bollywood Cinema: A Scholarly Review." *Journal of Transcultural Communication* 4, no. 1 (June 25, 2024): 71–80. https://doi.org/10.1515/jtc-2024-0010.

Patton, Michael Quinn. *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods*. 2nd ed. Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1990.

Prasad, M. Madhava. *Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Rajagopal, Arvind. *Politics after Television: Hindu Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Public in India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

Rosaldo, Renato. "Cultural Citizenship and Educational Democracy." *Cultural Anthropology* 9, no. 3 (1994): 402–11.

Rose, Gillian. *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials*. 5th ed. London: Sage, 2022.

Roy, Baijayanti. "Visual Grandeur, Imagined Glory: Identity Politics and Hindu Nationalism in *Bajirao Mastani* and *Padmaavat*." *Journal of Religion & Film* 22, no. 3 (2018). https://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.jrf.22.03.09.

Roy, Kaushik. "Bollywood, Maratha Imperialism and Hindu Nationalism." *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 35, no. 3 (April 2, 2024): 507–35. https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2023.2278910.

Sathyu, M.S. *Garm Hava*. India: Film Finance Corporation (FFC), 1973.

Scroll Staff. "Nagpur Violence: Film 'Chhaava' Sparked Anger against Aurangzeb, Says Maharashtra CM." *Scroll.in*, March 18, 2025. https://scroll.in/latest/1080420/nagpur-

violence-film-chhava-sparked-anger-against-aurangzeb-says-maharashtra-cm.

Shaheen, Jack G. "Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 588 (2003): 171–93.

Shandilya, Krupa. "The Gaze of the Raping Muslim Man: Love Jihad and Hindu Right-Wing Rhetoric in Sanjay Leela Bhansali's Padmaavat." *Studies in South Asian Film & Media* 9, no. 2 (December 1, 2017): 97–112. https://doi.org/10.1386/safm.9.2.97_1.

Sharma, Kamayani. "Sabka Time Aayega: Language and the City in Gully Boy." In *ReFocus: The Films of Zoya Akhtar*, edited by Aakshi Magazine and Amber Shields. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022.

Siddiqui, Mohammad Asim. *Muslim Identity in Hindi Cinema: Poetics and Politics of Genre and Representation*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2025.

Sinha, Anubhav. *Mulk*. India: Zee Studios, 2018.

Utekar, Laxman. *Chhaava*. India: Maddock Films, 2025.

Web Desk. "Inspired by Kanhaiya, 'Gully Boy'! BJP, Congress Release 'Azadi' Videos." *The Week*, February 9, 2019. https://www.theweek.in/news/india/2019/02/09/inspired-kanhaiya-gully-boy-azadi.html.

Yoshino, Kenji. *Covering: The Hidden Assault on Our Civil Rights*. New York: Random House, 2006.