

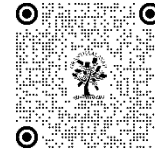
Original Article

NATIONALISM, GOVERNANCE, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE IN BOLLYWOOD: A CRITICAL STUDY OF POLITICAL NARRATIVES IN IMDB-RATED AND HIGHEST-GROSSING FILMS (2005–2025)

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ABSTRACT

Background: Bollywood is an influential medium of political communication that reflects and shapes public understanding of nationalism, governance, democracy, identity, and social justice. **Aim:** This study critically examined political narratives in selected IMDb-rated and highest-grossing Bollywood films released between 2005 and 2025 and assessed their relationship with audience reception and commercial performance. **Methods:** A qualitative-dominant mixed-method design was applied to a purposive sample of 20 Hindi films. Structured content analysis, thematic analysis, and critical discourse analysis were used to examine civic, cultural, military, and majoritarian nationalism; governance, corruption, democracy, and political institutions; and caste, gender, economic inequality, human rights, and activism. IMDb ratings and worldwide box-office collections were analysed descriptively. **Results:** Civic nationalism appeared in 55% of films, followed by cultural nationalism in 40% and military nationalism in 20%. Institutional accountability and state power appeared in 60% each, while bureaucratic failure occurred in 55% and corruption in 40%. Human and minority rights were represented in 90%, social activism in 55%, and gender and economic inequality in 35% each. IMDb ratings and box-office collections showed a weak negative association ($r = -0.35$). **Conclusion:** Bollywood functions as a major cultural arena where political authority, national identity, democratic accountability, and social inequalities are negotiated, although audience approval does not necessarily ensure commercial success.

Keywords: Bollywood, Nationalism, Governance, Social Justice, Political Communication, Audience Reception, Box Office

INTRODUCTION

Bollywood is not just an entertainment industry, but an important cultural institution that disseminates political values, citizenship identities, social disputes, and concepts to a variety of audiences. (2) Hindi films make complex political issues accessible to people through popular narratives, song, symbol, and characters that challenge, reinforce, or negotiate dominant ideologies. Domestic and overseas circulation has grown and Bollywood has gained the ability to mold the image of India, to establish a vision for desirable citizenship, and to shape debates on the nature of Indian national unity, political leadership, development, and collective responsibility. (3) Nationalism in Hindi movies is created around the following elements: Sacrifice for the country, courage of the army, pride in culture, security of the territory, religion, sporting success, loyalty to the country. (4) While some films would speak in terms of inclusive and civic nationalism, others would equate national belonging with majoritarian identity, militarism, gendered responsibility and/or the construction of internal and external enemies. Similarly, in the governance narrative, politicians,

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bureaucrats, police officers, courts and democratic institutions are seen as guardians of public welfare or as instances of corruption, authoritarianism, injustice and institutional failure. (6) Films that have social-justice themes highlight caste discrimination, gender inequality, communal violence, economic exclusion, human rights issues, and the lives of marginalised communities, providing space for alternative narratives and calls to change society. (7) The study of nationalism, gender, religion, caste, and political ideology has been explored in single films or in certain cinematic eras. There is previous scholarship that has focused on individual films or on certain periods of cinema for the study of nationalism, gender, religion, caste, and political ideology. Yet, there has been a lack of focus on the intertwined portrayal of nationalism, governance, and social justice in both critically acclaimed and popular Bollywood movies produced during a long span of time. In addition, studies tend to be disconnected from textual analysis and the notion of audience response as well as commercial success, making it difficult to see whether any political stories become critical, popular with audiences, or hit the big screen. This study attempts to fill this gap by critically examining the Bollywood films that premiered from 2005 to 2025 and were rated by IMDb and were the highest earners during the same time period, which saw political change, the rise of digital media, a growing debate on nationalism, and changes in film production and consumption. The analysis of the themes of the film along with the IMDb ratings and the box office collection gives a multidimensional understanding of the interaction between political narratives and audience reception and commercial visibility. The results can help film scholars, communication researchers, policymakers, educators, and movie makers comprehend the role of popular cinema in shaping political consciousness, democratic values, social identities, and conflicting visions of today's India.

AIM, OBJECTIVES, AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

AIM

To critically examine the representation of nationalism, governance, and social justice in selected IMDb-rated and highest-grossing Bollywood films released between 2005 and 2025 and assess their relationship with audience reception and commercial performance.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- 1) To identify and critically analyse the dominant narratives of nationalism, governance, political power, democracy, corruption, and social justice represented in the selected Bollywood films.
- 2) To examine the relationship between political themes, audience reception measured through IMDb ratings, and commercial performance measured through box-office collections.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- 1) How are nationalism, governance, democracy, political power, corruption, and social justice represented in selected IMDb-rated and highest-grossing Bollywood films released between 2005 and 2025?
- 2) What relationship exists between the political narratives of the selected films, their IMDb ratings, and their box-office performance?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN

The study adopted a qualitative-dominant mixed-method research design combining film content analysis, thematic analysis, critical discourse analysis, and quantitative audience-reception indicators. This design enabled systematic examination of political narratives while allowing comparisons between thematic representation, IMDb ratings, and box-office performance. The study covered Bollywood films released between 2005 and 2025.

SAMPLE SELECTION

A purposive sampling method was used to select 20 Hindi-language Bollywood films representing different release periods, genres, political themes, levels of critical appreciation, and commercial performance. The sample included IMDb-rated films and major box-office successes addressing nationalism, governance, democracy, corruption, caste, gender, economic inequality, human rights, and social activism. Where a film appeared in both categories, it was counted only once to prevent duplication.

INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION CRITERIA

Films were included if they were released between January 2005 and December 2025, primarily produced in Hindi, available through legitimate theatrical or digital sources, and contained identifiable narratives related to nationalism, political institutions,

governance, corruption, democracy, or social justice. Films were excluded if they were documentaries, short films, non-Hindi productions, unavailable for complete viewing, released outside the study period, or lacked substantial political or social content.

SOURCES AND METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

Film-related information was collected from IMDb, Box Office India, Bollywood Hungama, official production sources, scholarly literature, and reputable film databases. The collected variables included title, release year, director, genre, IMDb rating, estimated worldwide box-office collection, and principal political theme. Each film was viewed closely, and relevant scenes, dialogues, characters, symbols, conflicts, institutional portrayals, and narrative outcomes were documented using a structured coding sheet.

FILM CONTENT ANALYSIS

A systematic content-analysis framework was applied to identify both explicit and implicit political representations. The coding categories included civic, cultural, religious, military, and majoritarian nationalism; democratic accountability, political leadership, corruption, bureaucracy, policing, judicial authority, and institutional failure; and caste, gender, economic inequality, minority rights, human rights, and social activism. The frequency and narrative prominence of each category were recorded for comparison across films.

AUDIENCE-RECEPTION ANALYSIS

Audience reception was assessed primarily through IMDb user ratings, while commercial reception was evaluated using reported box-office collections. Ratings and revenue figures were compared across films and political themes to determine whether particular narratives were associated with stronger audience approval or commercial performance. These measures were treated as indicators of reception rather than direct evidence of ideological agreement because ratings and revenue may also be influenced by star power, marketing, distribution, genre, and release conditions.

THEMATIC AND CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns concerning nationhood, patriotism, citizenship, governance, democracy, resistance, inequality, and justice. Critical discourse analysis examined how dialogue, characterization, visual symbolism, narrative conflict, and resolutions constructed political authority, national belonging, marginalized identities, and ideological opposition. Particular attention was given to who was represented as a legitimate citizen, patriot, leader, victim, threat, or agent of social change.

RELIABILITY, VALIDITY, AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

A predefined coding framework and operational definitions were used to maintain analytical consistency. A subset of films was independently recoded, and disagreements were resolved through comparison and refinement of the coding categories. Triangulation across film texts, audience ratings, box-office records, and scholarly interpretations strengthened validity. An audit trail of coding decisions was maintained. As the research used publicly available films and secondary data without involving human participants or collecting personal information, formal informed consent was not required. All films, databases, and scholarly sources were appropriately acknowledged.

RESULTS

PROFILE OF THE SELECTED FILMS

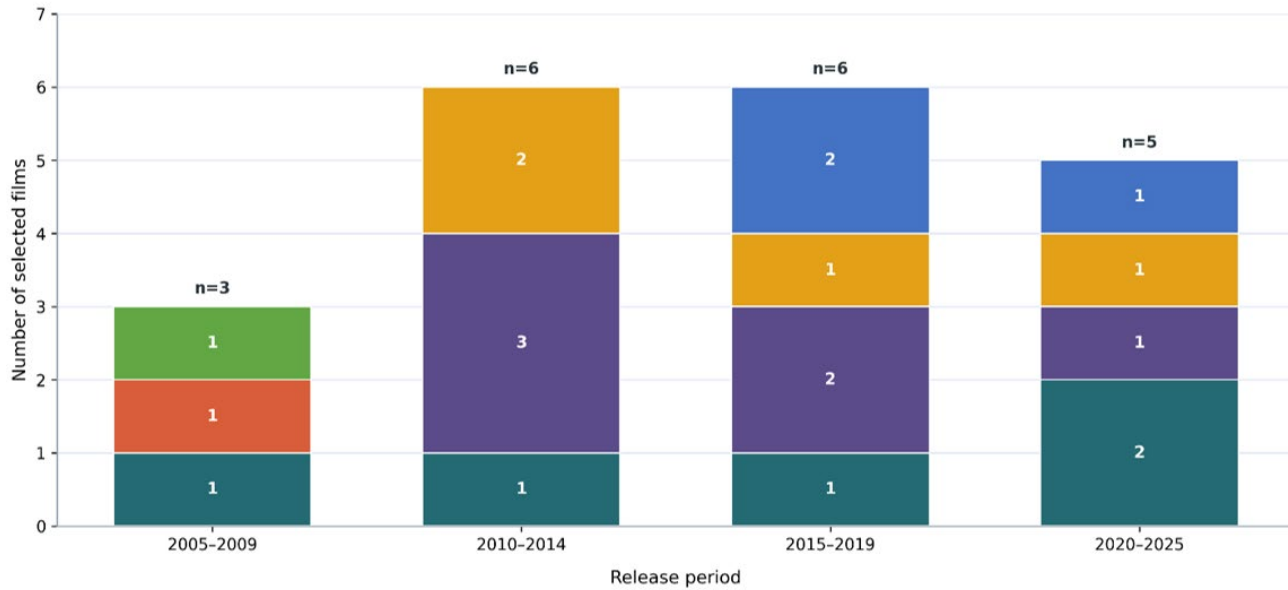
The study analysed 20 Bollywood films released between 2006 and 2025. As presented in [Table 1](#), the sample included drama, political drama, satire, thriller, crime, historical, legal, sports, and war films. Three films belonged to 2005–2009, six each to 2010–2014 and 2015–2019, and five to 2020–2025. Political/crime films formed the largest combined genre category, followed by drama and comedy/satire, as illustrated in [Figure 1](#). IMDb ratings ranged from 6.9 for *Jawan* to 8.7 for *12th Fail*, while worldwide collections ranged from approximately ₹3.6 crore for *Shahid* to ₹1,148.3 crore for *Jawan*. The sample therefore represented both critically appreciated films and large commercial productions. The principal political themes included nationalism, corruption, electoral democracy, state power, caste, gender justice, minority rights, economic inequality, and citizen activism.

Table 1

Table 1 Profile of Selected Films by Year, Genre, IMDb Rating, Box-Office Collection, and Political Theme

Film	Year	Genre	IMDb rating	Worldwide collection (₹ crore)	Principal political theme
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Rang De Basanti	2006	Drama	8.1	97.0	Civic nationalism and anti-corruption activism
Chak De! India	2007	Sports drama	8.1	109.0	Inclusive nationalism, gender and national unity
A Wednesday!	2008	Thriller	8.1	12.0	Terrorism, citizen anger and accountability
Raajneeti	2010	Political drama	7.1	145.5	Electoral power, political dynasty and corruption
Peepli Live	2010	Satire	7.4	46.9	Agrarian distress and governance failure
Shahid	2012	Biographical drama	8.2	3.6	Minority rights, legal justice and state violence
Madras Cafe	2013	Political thriller	7.6	42.7	Insurgency, national security and state power
Haider	2014	Political drama	8.0	79.4	Kashmir conflict, militarization and human rights
PK	2014	Comedy/Satire	8.1	769.9	Religious politics, pluralism and social criticism
Bajrangi Bhaijaan	2015	Drama	8.1	969.0	Humanitarian nationalism and reconciliation
Airlift	2016	Historical drama	7.9	231.6	Diasporic nationalism and state responsibility
Pink	2016	Legal drama	8.1	157.3	Gender justice, consent and legal institutions
Newton	2017	Comedy/Satire	7.6	31.7	Electoral democracy and bureaucracy
Article 15	2019	Crime drama	8.1	93.1	Caste discrimination and constitutional equality
Uri: The Surgical Strike	2019	War drama	8.2	359.7	Military nationalism and national security
The Kashmir Files	2022	Political drama	8.6	340.9	Displacement, majoritarianism and contested memory
Jawan	2023	Action drama	6.9	1,148.3	Corruption, welfare and electoral accountability
12th Fail	2023	Biographical drama	8.7	69.6	Poverty, bureaucracy, merit and public service
Laapataa Ladies	2024	Comedy/Drama	8.4	27.1	Patriarchy, women's agency and rural inequality
Chhaava	2025	Historical drama	7.3	807.9	Historical-cultural nationalism and resistance

Figure 1

Figure 1 Distribution of Selected Films by Release Period and Genre

REPRESENTATION OF NATIONALISM

Nationalism appeared in multiple and sometimes competing forms across the selected films. Table 2 shows that civic nationalism was the most frequent category, appearing in 11 films (55%), followed by cultural nationalism in eight films (40%). Civic narratives emphasized citizenship, accountability, constitutional responsibility, public service, and collective action, particularly in *Rang De Basanti*, *Newton*, *Article 15*, and *Jawan*. Cultural nationalism was expressed through shared traditions, historical memory, religious identity, and national belonging. Military nationalism appeared in four films (20%), most visibly in *Uri: The Surgical Strike*, *Madras Cafe*, *Haider*, and *Chhaava*. Majoritarian nationalism was explicitly coded in one film (5%), while historical resistance and diasporic or humanitarian nationalism each appeared in two films (10%). Figure 2 demonstrates that nationalism in the sample extended beyond warfare and patriotism to include citizenship, pluralism, humanitarian responsibility, and political participation.

Table 2
Table 2 Forms of Nationalism Represented in the Selected Films

Form of nationalism	Number of films	Percentage	Representative films
Civic nationalism	11	55%	<i>Rang De Basanti</i> , <i>Newton</i> , <i>Article 15</i> , <i>Jawan</i>
Cultural nationalism	8	40%	<i>Chak De! India</i> , <i>PK</i> , <i>Haider</i> , <i>Chhaava</i>
Military nationalism	4	20%	<i>Madras Cafe</i> , <i>Haider</i> , <i>Uri</i> , <i>Chhaava</i>
Majoritarian nationalism	1	5%	<i>The Kashmir Files</i>
Anti-colonial/historical nationalism	2	10%	<i>Rang De Basanti</i> , <i>Chhaava</i>
Diasporic/humanitarian nationalism	2	10%	<i>Bajrangi Bhaijaan</i> , <i>Airlift</i>

Percentages exceed 100% because a film could contain more than one nationalist theme.

Figure 2

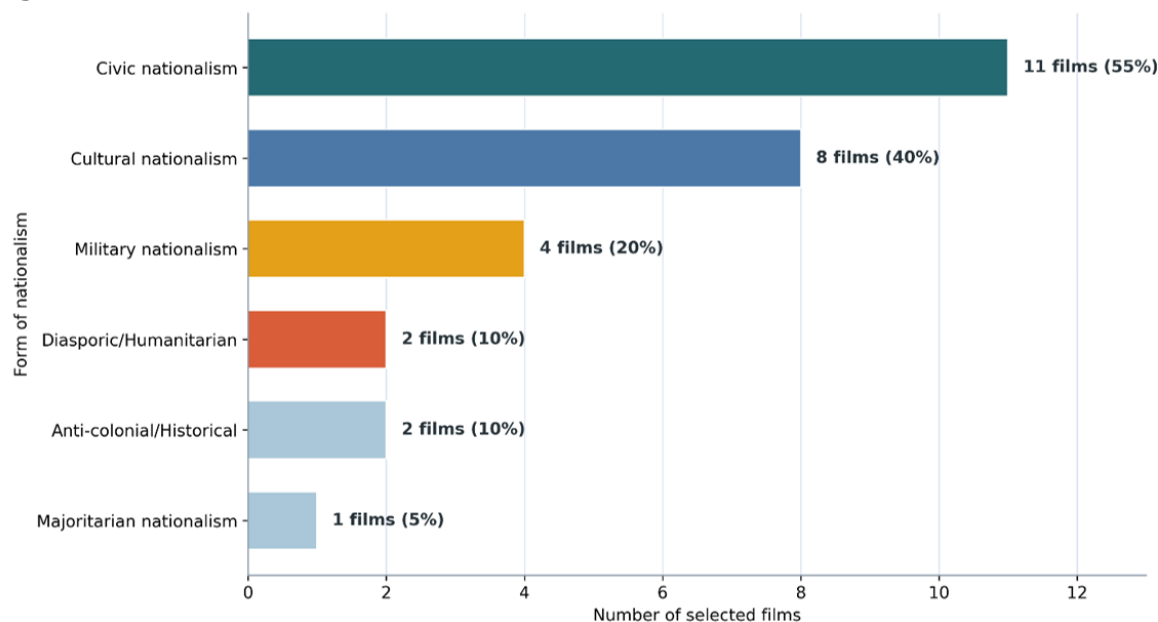


Figure 2 Frequency of Nationalist Themes and Narratives

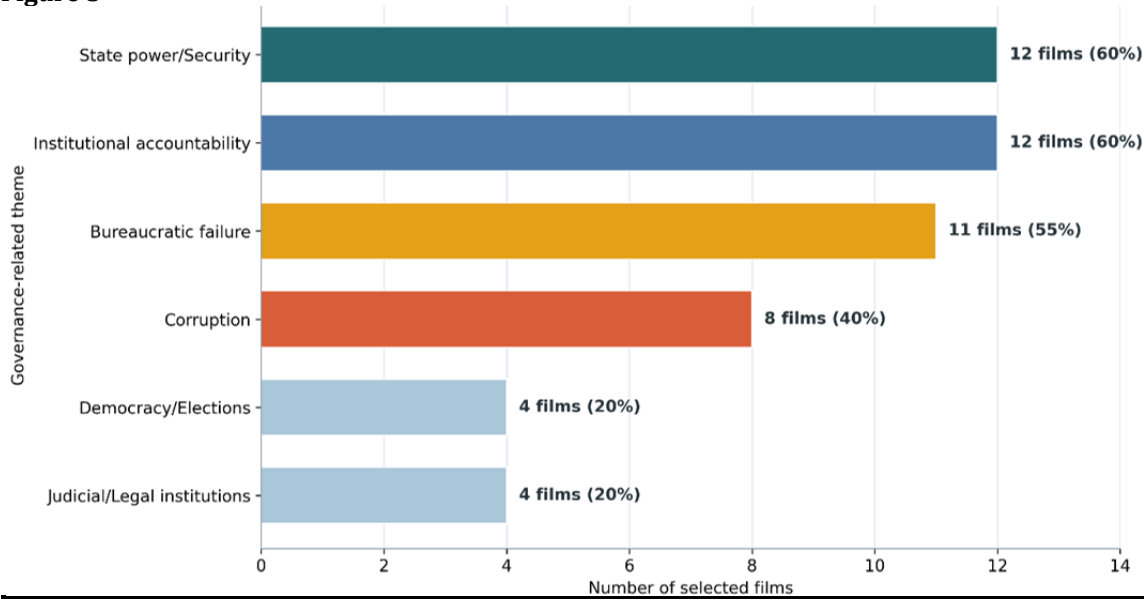
REPRESENTATION OF GOVERNANCE AND POLITICAL POWER

Governance was commonly represented through institutional accountability, state authority, bureaucratic inefficiency, corruption, electoral politics, and legal intervention. Table 3 indicates that institutional accountability and state power or security were each identified in 12 films (60%). Bureaucratic failure appeared in 11 films (55%), demonstrating a recurring concern with administrative neglect, delayed justice, ineffective public services, and institutional indifference. Corruption was represented in eight films (40%), including *Raajneeti*, *Peepli Live*, *PK*, *Newton*, *Article 15*, and *Jawan*. Democracy and elections appeared in four films (20%), while judicial or legal institutions were central to four films (20%), particularly *Shahid*, *Haider*, *Pink*, and *Article 15*. As shown in Figure 3, Bollywood frequently portrayed governance as a conflict between powerful institutions and citizens seeking accountability. Nevertheless, films such as *12th Fail* also presented public institutions as potential instruments of ethical service and reform.

Table 3

Table 3 Representation of Governance, Corruption, Democracy, and Political Institutions			
Governance-related theme	Number of films	Percentage	Representative films
Institutional accountability	12	60%	<i>A Wednesday!</i> , <i>Pink</i> , <i>Article 15</i> , <i>Jawan</i>
State power and security	12	60%	<i>Madras Cafe</i> , <i>Haider</i> , <i>Uri</i> , <i>The Kashmir Files</i>
Bureaucratic failure	11	55%	<i>Peepli Live</i> , <i>Newton</i> , <i>Article 15</i> , <i>12th Fail</i>
Corruption	8	40%	<i>Raajneeti</i> , <i>Rang De Basanti</i> , <i>PK</i> , <i>Jawan</i>
Democracy and elections	4	20%	<i>Raajneeti</i> , <i>Newton</i> , <i>Article 15</i> , <i>Jawan</i>
Judicial and legal institutions	4	20%	<i>Shahid</i> , <i>Haider</i> , <i>Pink</i> , <i>Article 15</i>

Categories were non-mutually exclusive; therefore, percentages do not total 100%.

Figure 3**Figure 3 Major Governance-Related Themes Across the Selected Films**

REPRESENTATION OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

Social justice was strongly embedded in the selected films, although its form and intensity varied. Human and minority rights constituted the most frequent category and were identified in 18 films (90%), reflecting concerns about personal dignity, state violence, religious difference, displacement, legal protection, and citizenship. Social activism appeared in 11 films (55%), particularly where characters challenged corruption, patriarchy, discriminatory institutions, or governmental neglect. Gender and economic inequality were each represented in seven films (35%). Gender justice was especially prominent in *Chak De! India*, *Pink*, and *Laapataa Ladies*, whereas economic inequality appeared in *Peepli Live*, *Newton*, *Jawan*, and *12th Fail*. Caste discrimination was identified in three films (15%), most directly in *Article 15*. Table 4 demonstrates that social justice was generally framed through overlapping identities and institutional inequalities rather than as a single, isolated concern.

Table 4**Table 4 Representation of Caste, Gender, Economic Inequality, Human Rights, and Social Activism**

Social-justice theme	Number of films	Percentage	Representative films
Human and minority rights	18	90%	Shahid, Haider, Pink, The Kashmir Files
Social activism	11	55%	Rang De Basanti, PK, Article 15, Jawan
Gender inequality and justice	7	35%	Chak De! India, Pink, Laapataa Ladies
Economic inequality	7	35%	Peepli Live, Newton, Jawan, 12th Fail
Caste discrimination	3	15%	Newton, Article 15, Jawan

More than one social-justice theme could be coded for the same film.

AUDIENCE RECEPTION AND FILM PERFORMANCE

Audience reception and commercial performance differed substantially across the sample. The mean IMDb rating was 7.93, with values ranging from 6.9 to 8.7, while the mean worldwide collection was approximately ₹277.11 crore. Figure 4 shows that commercially successful films did not necessarily receive the highest audience ratings. *Jawan* recorded the largest worldwide collection at approximately ₹1,148.3 crore but had the lowest IMDb rating in the sample. Conversely, *12th Fail* achieved the highest rating of 8.7 with a comparatively moderate collection of ₹69.6 crore. *Bajrangi Bhaijaan*, *PK*, and *Chhaava* combined strong commercial performance with prominent political or national narratives. The descriptive correlation between IMDb ratings and worldwide collections was weakly negative ($r = -0.35$), indicating that higher ratings were not consistently associated with greater revenue. This relationship should not be interpreted causally because commercial performance is influenced by budget, stars, marketing, distribution, and release conditions.

Figure 4

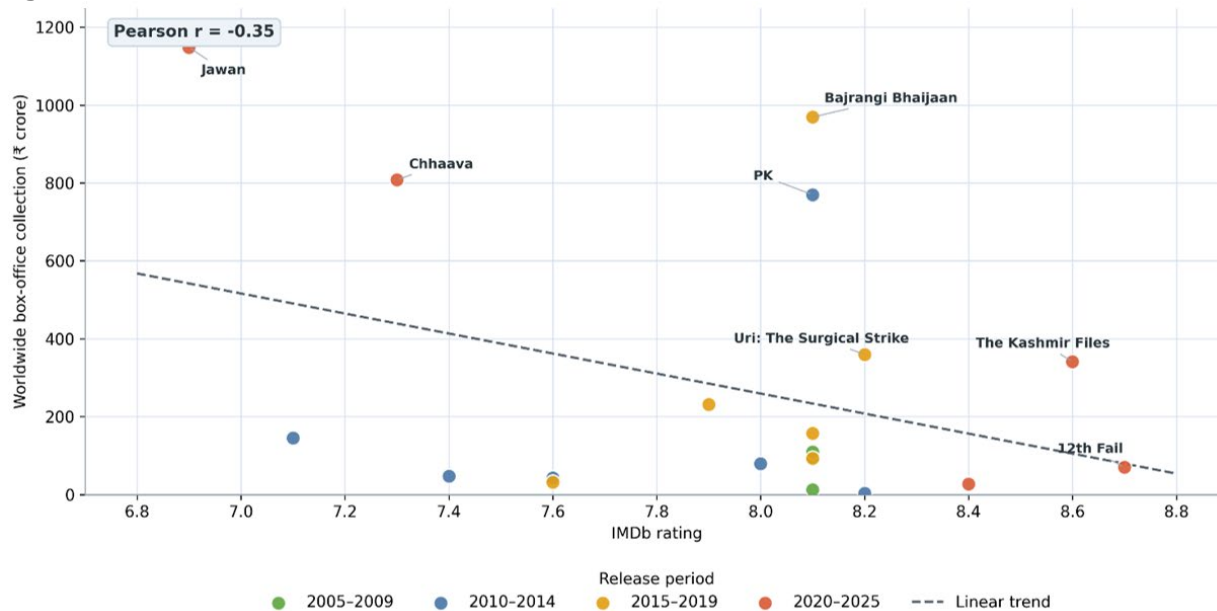


Figure 4 Comparison of IMDb Ratings and Box-Office Collections of the Selected Films

SUMMARY OF MAJOR FINDINGS

The results demonstrate that selected Bollywood films between 2005 and 2025 presented political narratives through interconnected representations of nationhood, institutions, inequality, and public resistance. Civic nationalism was more common than explicitly military or majoritarian nationalism, suggesting that national identity was frequently linked with accountability, public service, pluralism, and citizen participation. Governance narratives were largely critical, with institutional accountability, state power, bureaucratic failure, and corruption recurring across genres and release periods. Human and minority rights formed the most prevalent social-justice category, while gender, economic inequality, caste, and activism provided additional dimensions of political critique. Audience ratings and box-office collections varied considerably, and their weak negative descriptive relationship showed that critical audience approval did not automatically translate into commercial success. Overall, political content appeared in both critically acclaimed films and mass-market productions, demonstrating Bollywood's dual cultural and commercial role.

DISCUSSION

The analysis shows that nationalism in Bollywood is not singular or confined to military patriotism, as the selected films had been framed around the themes of civic responsibility, cultural belonging, historical memory, military sacrifice, humanitarian values, and majoritarian discourse. Such diversity backs Prasad's thesis that popular Hindi cinema is an ideological institution and a means of narratively constructing authority, social order, citizenship and national identity. The most common form was civic nationalism, which correlated with constitutional values, public accountability, collective action, ethical service, and citizens' willingness to challenge institutional injustice. Films like *Rang De Basanti*, *Newton*, *Article 15*, and *Jawan*, however, demonstrated that Bollywood is engaged in larger cultural discourses on democracy and national belonging as a struggle against corruption, discrimination and administrative failure. Through a sense of tradition, religion, collective memory, and resistance, cultural and historical nationalism emerged, while *Bajrangi Bhaijaan* gave a humanitarian interpretation which transcended the boundaries of religion and nation. The *Kashmir Files*, on the other hand, highlighted how cinema can help in building national unity by excluding one community, linking the other to the question of victimhood, polarization, and contested historical memory, especially in the context of *Uri: The Surgical Strike*, *Madras Cafe*, *Haider*, and *Chhaava*. Analysis of the political discourse in Hindi cinema also reveals that the film industry's entertainment narratives can spread ideas and mold the audience's perception of political conflict, political authority, and national identity. (10) As per recent scholarship, current Hindi cinema reflects several and sometimes conflicting ideas of nationalism, such as civic, cultural, religious, military, and majoritarian. (11) Conflicts between citizens and political, administrative, security, judicial, and legal institutions were the main means of governance representation. Institutional accountability, state power, bureaucratic failure, and corruption are common topics of discussion because they are quite prevalent. Bollywood often projects governance as being unequal, inefficient, politically influenced, or apart from the needs of a citizen. *Raajneeti*'s political narrative was more about dynastic power struggles in electoral politics, while *Peepli Live* showed the government's failure to listen to the distress of farmers

and the manipulation of media during elections, and Newton was able to document the democratic process as an ongoing practice in an area characterized by conflict. The post-2000 Hindi film, too, is a critical object of Raghavendra's analysis, which focuses on film texts as significant signifiers of the changes in contemporary politics, society, and institutions. (12) Despite this, the number of chosen movies were able to come up with a solution to their structure, which may have made the participation of many people easier, the changes in institutions simpler and the accountability easier in the long term to achieve democratic changes. Another major theme was social justice and rights of the human beings and of the minorities were more common than rights of caste, gender and economic inequality. The Article 15 directly challenged caste hierarchy and unequal access to justice while Shahid and Haider investigated minority identity, state violence, legal vulnerability and institutional exclusion. In her study of Muslim representation in Bollywood, Khatun shows that the position of minorities is historically formed by shifting national politics, genres and ideology. (13) Gender injustice was especially apparent in *Pink* and *Laapataa Ladies*, where the blame for victimization, the authority of men, limited mobility and the absence of women's agency were tackled. The relative lack of representation of caste implies that mainstream Bollywood has its own selection of caste issues to tackle, and, sometimes, the marginalised is represented in the figure of an outsider hero rather than a collective agency. However, audience response was also highly diverse, with the IMDb scores at the high end suggesting a high level of engagement with political and social stories. Banaji's audience research focus indicates that audiences are not passive recipients of the messages sent in the film, but rather interpret gender, ethnicity, sexuality and political identity as it relates to their social experiences and viewing context. (14) Thus the IMDb ratings cannot be used to measure agreement ideologically, as this is self-selected and can be influenced by coordinated voting, polarization, emotional involvement and shifting public opinion. The low correlation between IMDb ratings and box-office revenues worldwide also demonstrated that better audience ratings did not necessarily lead to higher earnings. While films like *Jawan*, *Bajrangi Bhaijaan*, *PK* and *Chhaava* fussed over with politics, star power, spectacle, emotional narrative, marketing and distribution, highly-rated films like *Shahid*, *Newton* and *Laapataa Ladies* made comparatively modest collections. Thus, the circulation of nationalistic and socially oriented cinema in the commercial market becomes a negotiation between the relevance of the political, the scale of production, the stars, the genre, the promotion, distribution, and audience segmentation. The growing visibility of majoritarian narratives calls for critical engagement as mainstream films can normalize dominant political ideologies, while independent and alternative films can offer pluralistic counter-narratives. In general, this study demonstrates that Bollywood is an informal political communication space in which citizenship, democracy, justice, authority, marginalized identities, and national belonging are constantly negotiated and, ultimately, should be the focus of critical media literacy and larger, multilingual, longitudinal, and audience-based studies.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study reveal that Bollywood movies from 2005 to 2025 served as effective cultural mediums for the propagation of nationalistic, governmental, democratic, and social justice discourses. Civic nationalism was more common than military or majoritarian nationalism, whereas corruption, institutional accountability, state power, bureaucratic failure, human rights, gender inequality, caste, and economic exclusion became political issues. Political narratives could be seen in both well-received and popular films, but box-office collections were not necessarily correlated with IMDb ratings. The study was limited by the purposive sample of 20 Hindi films, secondary data from IMDb and box-office data, subjectivity in thematic coding, and the volatility of ratings on the Internet. Thus, the results of this study cannot be expected to be representative of the Indian film industry and cannot provide causal effects on the audience. Larger multilingual samples, regional and streaming productions, and changes in narrative over time should be explored in future research. To understand the meaning of political messages to various audience segments and the impact of cinema on political awareness, it is recommended to conduct audience surveys, interviews, experimental studies, and assess intercoder reliability.

Declarations

Ethical Approval: Ethical approval was not required because the study analysed publicly available films and secondary data without involving human participants.

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Conflict of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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