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# Nation, family and trauma: techno-nationalism and conflicts of loyalty in the Indian Hindi-language espionage thriller *Mission Majnu*

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## ABSTRACT

The Indian Hindi-language espionage thriller *Mission Majnu* is set in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Its central character is Amandeep Ajitpal Singh, an Indian spy who adopts the guise of Tariq to conduct a covert operation to uncover Pakistan's nuclear weapons programme. The film is shown both as encoding a nationalist message through various plot devices and contributing to audience willingness to absorb this message through its supposed authenticity. On a macro-level, there is an othering of Pakistan alongside a presentation of the selfless patriotism of the brave agents of India's intelligence services. In highlighting the latter, it also presents a celebratory techno-nationalism. Yet in interweaving personal and national stories and traumas the film also presents a reading of how Indian covert operatives navigate their personal and professional lives and their relationship to the state they serve. In examining the tensions between loyalty to family and to nation, the film also centres a *leitmotif* of national belonging as a test, a test that Amandeep sacrificially passes.

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## Introduction

*Mission Majnu* (Bagchi, 2023), an Indian Hindi-language spy thriller directed by Shantanu Bagchi and streaming on Netflix from 20 January 2023, explores Indian espionage on Pakistan's nuclear programme in the 1970s. The film's storyline is credited with being 'inspired by true events'. This does not connote historical accuracy. Nonetheless, there is certainly an authenticity to the immediate historical backdrop to the story presented, with the action in the film commencing immediately after Operation Smiling Buddha, the code name for India's first successful nuclear bomb test at Pokhran in Rajasthan, India, on 18 May 1974. Two years earlier, the effect of its defeat in the 1971 Indo-Pakistan war and the consequent independence of former East Pakistan as the new state of Bangladesh

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had led then Pakistan Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto to initiate his own nuclear weapons project. The film's principal protagonist, Amandeep Ajitpal Singh (played by Sidharth Malhotra), is charged with undertaking a covert investigation of this.

Dramatic tension on a personal as well as national level is provided by the plotment of the story. The tensions between states and nations that are the prime narrative are accompanied by questions of loyalty to family as well. The background framework of the trauma of three wars against Pakistan since the 1940s and the existential threat that its nuclear weapons programme poses, is mirrored by the trauma at the personal level as well that is experienced by the characters in the film. This juxtaposition between layers of identity,<sup>1</sup> involving membership in the family and membership in the nation, is achieved by Amandeep's back-story. This includes him, while undercover as the tailor Tariq in Pakistan earlier in the decade, marrying a blind Pakistani woman, Nasreen Hussain (played by Rashmika Mandanna) in the same month as India's first nuclear test. Birth as the literal root of nationhood is symbolically conveyed by the transnational child they are expecting as the action of the film unfolds, while the ties of family are further complicated by the past in the form of Amandeep's father, who committed suicide when accused of being a traitor. This inheritance is depicted as reinforcing Amandeep's need to prove his loyalty to his nation while also problematizing his loyalty to his family.

### **Nation in action: Indian Hindi spy thriller films**

National identity is a social construct that provides a 'form of collective consciousness which both presupposes a reflexive appropriation of cultural traditions that has been filtered through historiography and spreads only via the channels of modern mass communication' (Steenbeergen, 1994, p. 22). These channels are multifarious, but film is certainly one of the most significant. Its reach can nonetheless be overstated. In 2023 the cinema audience for Hindi-language films in India was estimated at 92.2 m (Ormax, 2024), meaning that only around 6.4 per cent of the population saw a Hindi-language film at least once in a movie theatre in the year *Mission Majnu* was released. However, following production delays, the latter was only released on Netflix, which makes direct comparison with box office takings is difficult. However, by the end of 2023 it was apparently the top Indian content on the platform, with 31.2 m watch-hours logged (Bollywood Hungama, 2023b). This audience size bears comparison with other films seen as encoding vectors of national identity.

As Grossberg (2010, pp. 185–186) notes, culture is responsible for generating, outlining, and safeguarding national identity, emphasising the significance of films as elements in this process. Tropes of nation and identity are necessarily embedded in the world of the film. This can apply to depictions of the quotidian, those everyday experiences that unconsciously express a sense of national identity (Billig, 1995). Audiences can recognise and identify with the familiar, hence the demand that has been expressed for representation of Indianness in Bollywood movies (Rao, 2010). This can apply even to cultural products such as spy thrillers like *Mission Majnu*, which necessarily depict scenarios generally outside the everyday lived experiences of their viewers. This is because, beneath the bangs and bullets, what is meant by the nation is encoded as a meta-narrative as covert as Amandeep's espionage in Pakistan. Therein, tropes of family and loyalty can

provide a means of reading how concepts of nation and identity are operationalised on the grander scale of the state apparatus. They also do so through a compelling audio-visual representation that provides the simulacrum of veracity, reinforced when presented, as in the case of *Mission Majnu*, as being based on true events. As such, they vicariously and vividly seek to transport the viewer into the events and experiences depicted on screen.

Although Rao (2010) clearly shows that Bollywood films impact the sense of Indian identity of their audiences, there remains debate about the extent to which cinema – or any medium – shapes the responses and ideas of its viewers (Hall, 1991). A recent article concluded that ‘a single movie viewing did not have a lasting effect on viewers’ attitudes’ (Kubrak, 2020). It nonetheless concedes that auteurs and states alike seek such an impact. This may be sought and achieved by the repetition of tropes across a multiplicity of movies, which thereby populate the imaginary of a nation. For instance, the replication of running themes and readings of national identity within the spy thriller genre in Bollywood, of which *Mission Majnu* is a part, can endeavour to encode particular readings of nation and identity, as discussed below. As research in Israel indicates, such processes serve to familiarise and internalise a particular imaginary of the nation (Lefkowitz, 2004). Films have thus been used to trace the paths of societal shifts, dominant storylines, and dialogues, while also conducting socio-political and historical cartography and bringing social spheres into the realm of a nation’s history. Kracauer (1947, p. 18) has even claimed that ‘The films of a nation reflect its mentality in a more direct way than other artistic media’. This is a questionable notion in certain territories, such as Central America, with small domestic markets that are deeply penetrated by global capitalism in the form of control of distribution networks, and equally heavily impacted by the need to secure transnational funding even to make films (Vanhaelemeesch, 2021). However, the domestic market strength of Bollywood suggests that Kraucauer’s observation continues to have validity in the Indian setting.

Certainly, the Indian Hindi film sector has self-consciously sought to use its output to shape a particular understanding of India and its history (Dwyer, 2020). In the process, its movies have contributed to constructing public awareness of India’s security concerns and the government’s responses to them. They have also significantly propelled India’s law enforcement and intelligence services to the forefront of public discourse. Consequently, the film industry has contributed significantly to India’s soft power by thus manifesting its ability and willingness to use covert forms of hard power such as espionage that are conventionally understood as requiring enhanced state capabilities and technologies, not least because of their cinematic depiction globally (Higson, 2020).

This is a key distinction between films foregrounding espionage as opposed to other genres, such as war or sport. Both may centre – at least until recently – celebrations of masculinity and daring. Yet, while war and sports movies usually feature heavily publicised feats, the activities of protagonists in spy movies are invariably clandestine. However, spy movies do otherwise share a number of key features with the muscular nationalism trope that has become such a feature of popular war and sports films in India in recent decades (Banerjee, 2016). *Mission Majnu* is no exception, with Amandeep demonstrating strength, martial prowess and ingenuity, while Nasreen’s blindness reinforces her role as the chaste woman counterpoint that is so characteristic of Indian forms of muscular nationalism (Banerjee, 2016).

Nevertheless, there are also some differences which should be highlighted between these movie genres. A major distinction is that many of the sports and war films highlighted in the literature on muscular nationalism in Indian cinema, such as *Mangal Pandey: The Rising* (Mehta, 2005) are set in the colonial past (Banerjee, 2018). A celebration of Indian masculinity and strength in these movies is a riposte to the colonial depiction of effete Indian manhood during the Victorian period (Haq, 2023). The trauma and threats to the imaginary of the nation that they depict are thus often historic. Indian spy movies, in contrast, are like *Mission Majnu* set either in the recent past or the present.

Furthermore, unlike war and sports movies, spy movies necessarily foreground state apparatus more and are thereby less focused on individual acts of masculine toughness. Instead, they draw a close link between state and nation. Indeed, the responsibility of governments to protect their citizens is axiomatic in such movies, even when the competence of intelligence agencies is satirised (for instance, in numerous British spy movies in the 1960s). Coincidentally, that was also the decade in which the spy genre in Hindi language films in India began to emerge (Sharma & Pal, 2023). Concerned with assuring audiences of the competence of an emerging state, rather than assuaging the decline of a post-imperial one, these celebrated rather than satirised India's nascent intelligence agencies. Nevertheless, the portrayal of espionage in Hindi cinema has undergone significant changes throughout time, especially in terms of narrative structure and character portrayal. Contemporary Hindi spy films have shifted to foregrounding action, adventure, and protagonists facing dangers in fulfilling their mission in diverse locations around the globe. These films also explore more complex representations of masculinity and the use of technology and intelligence, as well as intricate plots, conspiracy, and suspense.

This reflected a changing political landscape. As Nath and Doweral (2023) argue, in the 1980s films like Govind Nihalani's *Aakrosh* (1980) or *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaron* (1984) reflected anxieties about political corruption in a decade marked by crises over Khalistan, the Golden Temple siege and Indira Gandhi's subsequent assassination, or the Bofors guns scandal. The growing popularity of the spy movie genre at the start of the twenty-first century instead externalised the existential threats India faced in the context of a global war on terror. In the process, these movies additionally functioned as means of accessing and impacting upon the Indian psyche, not least by frequently invoking themes of patriotism and territorial sovereignty. In the process, they align these themes with the foregrounded state agencies and their fulfilment of their role as protectors of the nation, thus imbuing this genre with a significant ideological dimension (Tyrrell, 1999). Moreover, multinational media outlets and cultural creators exhibit an acceptance of nationalist and strongly masculine representations for consumption in the global marketplace. The representation of leading male performers in Hindi cinema significantly influences the global perception of India among international audiences (Karmakar & Bhattacharya, 2023).

Accordingly, films made in the spy thriller genre habitually depict Indian intelligence agencies such as RAW, which deals with external intelligence, in a positive light. In contrast to the moral ambiguities and bureaucratic pressures of often routine activities presented in other national espionage narratives (Neuse, 1982), the characters representing these Indian agencies are generally shown by Bollywood as intelligent, patriotic, and willing to take risks to protect the nation. This is despite the location of narratives involving espionage within a nebulous space between fact and fiction as a necessary corollary

of the secrecy that in India, as elsewhere, shrouds intelligence and covert operations. The role of espionage operatives continues to be cloaked in myth and lacks a documented history that is officially recognised in India. As one of the few published accounts of RAW points out, 'Despite its importance, the public has little understanding of India's intelligence agencies as scholars and journalists have rarely probed the subject due to legal or political constraints'. In the absence of such reporting, Bollywood necessarily plays a central role in representing the actions of these agencies to the Indian public and embedding their activities in the public imaginary. Nonetheless, until recently it was still the case as far as RAW was concerned that 'Bollywood movies seldom mention the agency by name' (Shaffer, 2015, p. 252).

Even when archival documentation on the activities of espionage agencies does become available, their clandestine nature continues to invest them with intrigue and romance (Hepburn, 2005). This gives such narratives an aura of mystique and excitement, while fictively presenting the audience with the impression of accessing hidden knowledge and power structures. Through the illusion of cinema, viewers are imaginatively transported into a world they are unlikely ever to directly experience. In consequence, public knowledge about the intelligence world and the external states and actors from whom it protects the Indian population is necessarily constructed around representation and tropes conveyed in films. The resulting myths serve the function of reinforcing cultural traditions and strengthening beliefs, thereby conferring a psychological sense of national legitimacy (Deshmukh, 2023, pp. 123–124), in this instance by psychically aligning the viewers with the agents who are depicted as acting on their behalf.

The spy film, as a subgenre of the thriller, possesses a distinctive ability to create suspense and frequently mirrors the zeitgeist and cultures that gave rise to it. The escalated ideological, political, and military tensions between India and Pakistan, coupled with a pervasive feeling of the risk of infiltration and subversion, create a favourable environment for the artistic exploration of the spy film genre in India. These films strongly highlight the underlying beliefs of the ruling parties, portraying what Jason McGrath refers to as an 'ideological fantasy', where the perceived 'other' that poses a threat to the nation's stability is consistently countered and overcome (McGrath, 2008, p. 26; Zhu, 2015).

In addition, the masculinity of protagonists as well as antagonists plays a prominent role in Indian spy films, serving as a platform for ongoing debates about identity and nationhood as well as a means to develop militant and muscular nationalism. With the success of espionage thriller films like *The Hero: Love Story of a Spy* (Sharma, 2003), *Agent Vinod* (Raghavan, 2012), *Madras Cafe* (Sircar, 2013), *Baby* (Pandey, 2015), *Code Name Abdul* (Gunturu, 2017), *Raazi* (Gulzar, 2018), *Romeo Akbar Walter* (Grewal, 2019), and *Bell Bottom* (Tewari, 2021), among others, this subgenre has attracted a dedicated audience. The audience appetite for this genre has grown to such an extent that Yash Raj Films (YRF), an Indian film production and distribution company that has also produced other films in a muscular nationalism mode, was prompted to create the YRF Spy Universe. This is an Indian shared imagined space which is enacted through a series of espionage action-thriller films featuring various fictional RAW agents. *Ek Tha Tiger* (Khan, 2012), starring Salman Khan as a RAW agent, was the first film in this franchise, and this was followed by *Tiger Zinda Hai* (Zafar, 2017), *War* (Anand, 2019), and *Pathaan* (Anand, 2023).

To the spectator, these films often portray muscular nationalism, interpreted as the willingness to employ force for the supposed good of the nation. Hindi film actors such as Sunny Deol, Shah Rukh Khan, Salman Khan, Akshay Kumar have become exemplars of a muscular nationalism trope in a number of their movies. This muscular nationalism is characterized by three key elements: a pre-existing and self-centred view of the nation, a resolute and passionate pursuit of these views, and powerful and assertive methods employed to achieve them. In essence, muscular nationalism focusses on the ideals of military excellence, physical power, moral resilience, and the willingness to engage in combat against those identified as adversaries of the nation. Moreover, a male physique predominantly manifests these values (Banerjee, 2010; Hill & Chakma, 2022, pp. 525–526). This is demonstrated by the fact that, up until now, the YRF Spy Universe series of action-thriller films has exclusively showcased male RAW agents as the primary protagonists (Upadhyaya, 2022). However, in a recent interview with an online portal, Shridhar Raghavan, writer of *Pathaan* (Anand, 2023), discussed the possibility of making a spy film starring female RAW agents (Dey, 2023), in the same way that in the related field of police thrillers, the *Mardaani* franchise has featured an undercover female operative. The overarching theme of these spy films is the tension between India and its neighbouring countries, particularly Pakistan. Their protagonist spies are accordingly portrayed as Indian patriots committed to risking their lives to protect their nation. As Bhowmik (2009, pp. 304–305) notes:

the country was told many times, and in no uncertain terms, that it faced a clear and present danger from Pakistan. The message was clear and simple: while ‘we’ are victorious, ‘they’ are vile; so the glorification of ‘our’ virtue has to be complemented by a denunciation of and hatred for ‘their’ vice.

That is how the RAW agents have been portrayed on screen, with their job ‘shown as a noble, patriotic duty – the end justified the means’ (Lipka-Chudzik, 2011, p. 45). At the same time, the imagined world of these spy movies has adapted to the changing and increasingly globalised nature of the world outside. Thus, in addition to highlighting nationalistic themes, spies are portrayed as cosmopolitan agents who operate in various parts of the world to safeguard India against global threats. Telecommunications necessarily plays a crucial role, both in terms of threat perception, and because the protagonists use various communication devices, such as satellite phones and high-tech computer systems, to gather and share information. Cyber technology, particularly hacking and cryptography, is highlighted in these films as well. This is used to portray the competence of Indian intelligence agencies like RAW and the Intelligence Bureau (IB) in responding to such threats. On one level, this is simply a reflection of the changing nature of the intelligence world, in which electronic intelligence, cyber security and infrastructural and virtual resilience have become increasingly central. For instance, there was a 95 per cent increase in cyber-attacks on Indian institutions in 2023 (Raj, 2023). On another level, this depiction is intended to reassure Indian audiences of the capability of the intelligence agencies to interdict these threats. Not least, it also taps into another dimension of national identity, the ways in which India’s technocultural achievements and corresponding technological triumphalism have been inscribed into an increasingly assertive techno-nationalism since the 1990s. Techno-nationalism has undergone a resurgence in contemporary popular Hindi cinema, manifesting in new ways and

for various agenda-based objectives. The sentiment here exacerbates the process of de-globalisation and decoupling in a multifaceted manner by integrating political and economic factors and establishing a direct connection between technological acumen and India's national security, economic well-being, and social cohesion. Techno-nationalism, in a broader sense as projected in those films, refers to the use of technology to further nationalist objectives, aiming to foster a sense of unity and a more robust national identity (Luo, 2022). This has been marked by forays into the science fiction genre in ways that celebrates Indian technological prowess since the start of the twenty-first century (Alessio & Langer, 2014). These films are thus vectors of national identity in various ways, not least by bringing readings of technology to the service of narrations of the nation (Chopra, 2008).

### **Nuclear doctrine and conflict: understanding the power politics**

*Mission Majnu* (Bagchi, 2023) commences with a different form of modernity and technology, the advent of the nuclear bomb. As Na and Pun (2023) argue, spectacle is a core element in the projection of techno-nationalism conveyed both by the explosion at Pokhran in 1974 and in the representation of Indian technological prowess in this film. The spectacle of nuclear technology not only showed what the nation-state was capable of but also sparked a new arms race to build nuclear bombs, the quintessential symbol of power. The world of the film depicts a situation wherein Pakistan, having lost a war with India for the third time in 1971, desires vengeance at all costs, with only one option left to defeat India: developing a nuclear weapon. Maqsood Khan (played by Shishir Sharma), chief of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) of Pakistan, is portrayed as meeting with Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (played by Rajit Kapoor) and urging him to accelerate Pakistan's nuclear weapons programme. On the recommendation of the prime minister, the Pakistani government employs the nuclear physicist and metallurgical engineer/cum scientist Abdul Qadeer Khan (played by Mir Sarwar) to assist in the development of a nuclear weapon. Khan had in reality spent the 1970s working in the Netherlands for Urenco, an Anglo-Dutch-German consortium that was a world-leader in uranium enrichment technology. He illicitly acquired parts and plans from Urenco for Pakistan's nuclear programme and was later notorious for his role in proliferating the acquisition of nuclear technology and materials (Singh, 2009; Tiwari, 2022). Bhutto's 1976 visit to Khan's team is recreated in the film, which depicts Pakistan's Prime Minister instructing them to maintain confidentiality regarding the mission and stressing the priority Pakistan attached to the development of a nuclear weapon. The potential diplomatic and soft power benefits of doing so did not only impact on Pakistan's relations with India. As Paul Kapur (2009, p. 129) emphasises, the resulting 'nuclear danger draws international attention, potentially securing for Pakistan third-party mediation of its territorial dispute with India and a diplomatic settlement superior to any that Pakistan could achieve on its own'. For Bhutto, its importance was such that significant hardships must be borne to achieve this end (Figure 1). The filmic Prime Minister repeats the words used by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto himself in 1976: 'We will starve and eat grass, but Pakistan will build a nuclear bomb' (Aziz, 2015; Bagchi, 2023). This symbolically signifies the determination of Pakistan to employ all possible measures to build a nuclear weapon and, thereby, the existential threat it poses to the film's Indian audiences. In consequence, nuclear





**Figure 1.** Pakistan's process of strategic planning for developing nuclear weapons as depicted in *Mission Majnu*. (Bagchi, 2023).

weapons serve within the world of the film not only as a means of othering Pakistan and as a symbol of power but also invoke 'the control of man over man' in the inter-state projection of power (Morgenthau, 1960, p. 9). The arguments made by techno-nationalists in Pakistan emphasise the belief that a country's socioeconomic and technological success is influenced by the level of technological advancement. They argue that bolstering high-tech sectors like nuclear power plants and increasing investment in research and development can facilitate establishing dominance over India. Neglecting to do so could render Pakistan susceptible to external pressures and unable to compete in the contemporary global arena.

In the film, the Prime Minister of Pakistan perceives India's recent nuclear test as a potential threat due to concerns over the disputed territory of Kashmir. The apprehension he experiences motivates him to appeal to the international community to enforce sanctions on India and stop its abhorrent nuclear pursuits. There was indeed a hostile international response to the 1974 Indian test by a country which had declined to support the 1968 Non-Proliferation Treaty. However, contrary to the depiction in *Mission Majnu*, a lack of domestic political commitment seems to have been more important in the subsequent pause in India's nuclear testing programme until 1998 (Sarkar, 2022). In contrast, the film depicts the unofficial nuclear programme of Pakistan continuing to develop, as indeed it did. In the film, the provision of 500 million dollars in funding to Pakistan by Colonel Gaddafi of Libya is accompanied by the smuggling of banned nuclear components from the European black market and the acquisition of uranium from Africa for the purpose of developing a nuclear bomb. These activities illustrate the belief of traditional techno-nationalists that the existence and efficacy of national research and development (R&D) endeavours are crucial factors in the general advancement, resilience, and affluence of a nation (Edgerton, 2007). Pakistan's pursuit of its strategic goals is thereby depicted as both ruthless and criminal. These financial and illegal smuggling activities symbolise 'the fetishization of nuclear

weapons and the production of “nuclear desire” that perpetuates the inter-subjective value of nuclear weapons’ (Ritchie, 2019, p. 412).

All this clandestine activity supported Pakistan’s ‘Project 706’, the programme to make a nuclear bomb. The drive to do so is presented as reflecting the privileging of nuclear weapons as a symbol of national and state power and authority. The need to possess these weapons is thus represented as reflecting nuclear weapons as ‘the mature expression of the fetishism of force’, not least because ‘the embodiment of power, and access to power in the form of nuclear weapons determines a state’s opportunities and place in the international order’ (Harrington de Santana, 2009, p. 327). The film’s portrayal of this fetishization of these ultimate weapons is, however, one-sided. Pakistan is portrayed as endeavouring to attain these means of mass destruction, even at the expense of the well-being of the nation, while India – which already possesses them but portrayed that achievement in the 1970s as primarily driven by civilian, nuclear energy and peaceful considerations – is unproblematically encoded as attempting to interdict proliferation (Aasif & Bhandari, 2020, p. 157).

Accordingly, the movie shows India’s intelligence agency identifying a potential threat in Pakistan’s unrelenting pursuit of building a nuclear bomb. It therefore initiates a covert operation to expose Pakistan’s secret plan to attain nuclear parity. As the chief of RAW, R. N. Kao (played by Parmeet Sethi), notes, ‘our RAW agents infiltrated Pakistan from Peshawar to Karachi. They are not asked to use firearms but to find critical information and send it to Delhi. Away from their land, they are the soldiers of the land’ (Bagchi, 2023). Such passages of filmic dialogue encode readings that seek to emphasise the RAW’s defensive intentions. At the same time, their operatives are rhetorically aligned with the nation through the deployment of the freighted term ‘land’ and familiarised to the audience by turning their specialised and covert activities into those of ordinary ‘soldiers of the land’. On a wider spectrum, the film aims to emphasise that while the likelihood of major wars has decreased for most developed countries, in the Asian triangle of China-India-Pakistan, there is a real likelihood of disputes over borders escalating into brief wars and a decrease in the threshold for nuclear warfare. The China-Pakistan alliance, aimed at engaging India in prolonged low-intensity conflicts and promoting widespread terrorist operations, poses significant security risks for India. The escalating numbers of illegal migration from Bangladesh into India, along with the rising insurgency in the northeastern portions of the country, contribute to the intricacy and seriousness of these issues. India’s national security places a high importance on maintaining a technological and military advantage over its smaller neighbouring countries, as well as maintaining a balanced power equation with China and Pakistan (Mallik, 2008, p. 363).

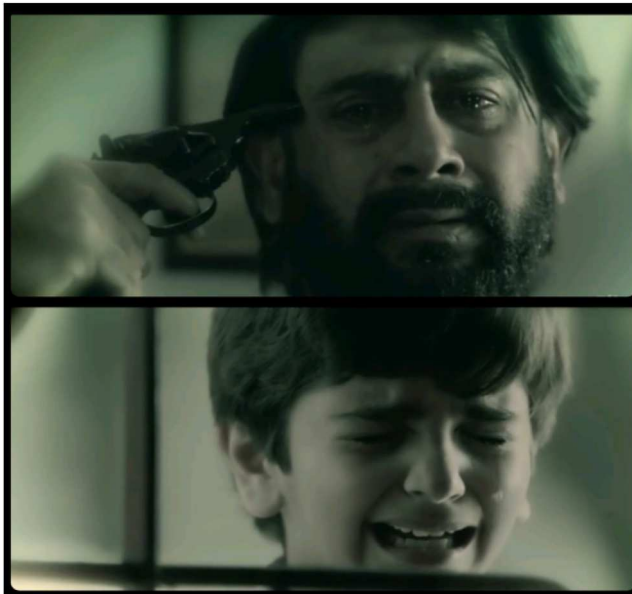
The film shows RAW deploying Amandeep Ajitpal Singh, disguised as Tariq, to Rawalpindi, Pakistan, to find their nuclear facility and neutralise it to protect India’s natural security and integrity, giving the operation codename ‘Mission Majnu’. This kind of national emergency and covert operation highlights the situation wherein ‘if neighboring, hostile, unstable states are armed with nuclear weapons, each will fear attack by the other and where states are bitter enemies one may fear that they will be unable to resist using their nuclear weapons against each other’ (Waltz, 1981, pp. 10–11).

## Trauma, telecommunication and intelligence

As a young child, Amandeep sees his father shoot himself (Figure 2) after being labelled a 'traitor' for selling Indian intelligence reports to Pakistan. This is a traumatic act of witnessing. It thereby realises visually the test of national loyalty that is the *leitmotif* of the film. According to the filmic portrayal of RAW's first chief, R. N. Rao, Amandeep's determination to restore his family's lost reputation makes him the most efficient agent in RAW's history. The resulting trauma reflects, imbricates and contrasts the ties of loyalty to family and nation. In Amandeep's story these are played out through the world of technologically enabled intelligence gathering and dissemination.

Whatever intelligence Amandeep gathers, he conveys through telecommunications to his superior RAW officer, Sharma (Zakir Hussain), who is always seen sitting at an undercover RAW desk in New Delhi, India. Sharma constantly lambasts him in offensive language for his father's actions and reminds him to remain loyal to his mission and nation. In this instance, membership of the nation is not, as Renan (1882/2018) puts it, a daily plebiscite. In the world of this film, national belonging is not a matter of personal volition. Instead, it is a daily test, enacted at an individual level. In this Amandeep stands as representative of the cinema audience's existential fears of those of suspect loyalty and Sharma as a Foucauldian device for policing the emotional and psychological bounds of trustworthiness for the nation.

Sharma's doubt regarding Amandeep's loyalty is driven by pragmatic concerns, which serve as a basis for 'mental and physical action' (Vazard, 2021, p. 6922). Sharma's doubt prompts him to direct Aslam Usmaniya (played by Sharib Hashmi), a field agent of RAW, to monitor Amandeep's actions and potentially eliminate him if his real identity is exposed during the mission. This rogue-agent scenario is a well-worn plot device in



**Figure 2.** During his early childhood, Amandeep was a witness to his father's self-inflicted gunshot. (Bagchi, 2023).

Hollywood spy and policing movies. It is, for instance, a staple feature of the *Mission Impossible* and *Bourne Legacy* franchises. There is therefore nothing surprising in finding that it has been also adopted by Bollywood. In *Mission Majnu* it symbolises how Sharma's anxiety about the depth of Amandeep's loyalty to his nation manifests as an emotional response to epistemic risk. As with anxiety in general, epistemic anxiety tracks 'normic and probabilistic epistemic risk, though its representational content won't be so precise: when one experiences epistemic anxiety, one's cognitive situation is simply represented to one as epistemically risky' (Newton, 2022, p. 324). Sharma's doubt and anxiety are unsettling on an emotional level, but they drive him to be watchful of Amandeep's behaviour because he wants to minimise the relevant epistemic risk that Amandeep might create by compromising his patriotism. In the world of the film, he is a plot device onto whom the audience can vicariously project their own epistemic anxieties.

Amandeep is aware that Sharma's epistemic anxiety is a perception that arises from the possibility of Amandeep believing in his own fallacy as he goes deep undercover. For instance, in establishing his surrogate Muslim identity as Tariq, Amandeep adheres to all the religious responsibilities and duties of a Muslim. In his person he thus embodies a layering of competing and potentially conflicting identities and loyalties. Paramount among these is loyalty to his nation. To acquire information for Sharma, he persuades Momin Khan (played by Manoj Bakshi), an acquaintance, to entrust his store with the manufacturing of Pakistani army uniforms. On the way to delivering the uniforms, Amandeep removes two buttons from the shirt of Brigadier Shafiq Khan (played by Shivraj Walvekar). As expected, the Brigadier asks Momin to send a worker to make the necessary repairs. Consequently, Amandeep gets the opportunity to enter the Brigadier's residence, and



**Figure 3.** Amandeep (as Tariq) seeks to identify the location of Pakistan's nuclear power facility. (Bagchi, 2023).

while he is fixing the buttons he initiates a conversation with him in hope of finding out more about the nuclear power programme (Figure 3). A quotidian act at a personal level is thus symbolically used to elicit information to protect against an existential national threat.

Amandeep seeks to lull the Brigadier into a false sense of security by condemning the policies and political dispositions of India. A man who is so deeply distrusted by his own agency aims to win the Brigadier's trust by rhetorical displays of loyalty, asserting, 'Victory to us! Victory to Pakistan' (Bagchi, 2023). In consequence, the Brigadier lets slip that Pakistan will soon conduct a nuclear test, and in response to Amandeep's enticing and ego-boosting remarks, the Brigadier divulges that the clandestine project is taking place somewhere in Rawalpindi. This entire conversation between Amandeep and the Brigadier demonstrates how 'intelligence is commonly used interchangeably to refer to a variety of disparate functions, including evaluated information, espionage, counterintelligence, and covert political action' (Ransom, 1980, p. 141).

Amandeep shares this information with Sharma. His reward is to be ridiculed for not doing his duty well enough, because RAW wants the exact location of Pakistan's secret mission. Amandeep reads all the newspapers pertaining to the Pakistani government and their political activities, and books on nuclear physics in order to make a list of the names of nuclear scientists who reside abroad. To get to the specific information, however, Amandeep implements unconventional methods. He predicts that a foreign scientist must use a western-style toilet in his residence, and when that scientist is summoned to Pakistan, a western-style toilet must be provided. Inquiring further in the market, he finds that there has been only one recent order for a western toilet, and when he asks the shopkeeper for the location of the house where that purchase order was made, the shopkeeper enthusiastically provides him with the necessary details. Philip P. Purpura notes that spies frequently use specific innovative ideas to obtain information through conversations because information loss commonly occurs at any position from interactions or telephone conversations. In business, a spy posing as an enthusiastic customer obtains information when an outspoken salesperson provides excessive information to impress him (Purpura, 2008). Amandeep sneaks into the house at night and uncovers a Western toilet, confirming his suspicions. Upon further public inquiry, he discovers that one of the scientists on his list, Abdul Qadeer Khan, has been brought to Pakistan to assist in the development of a nuclear bomb.

### **On sacrificiality**

While performing his duties for the nation, he falls in love with Nasreen, gets married, and she is expecting a child while her husband is engaged in these clandestine activities. Nasreen has no idea who her husband is or what he actually does during his long stays outside his home during the day and night, Amandeep meanwhile joins with Raman Singh (played by Kumud Mishra), disguised as Maulvi Saab, a senior field officer, and Aslam Usmaniya to start acquiring evidence of Pakistan's secret location of the nuclear plant. While the newly elected Prime Minister of India, Morarji Desai (played by Avijit Dutt), explicitly instructs RAW to cease its investigation of Pakistan's nuclear plant to prevent another war, the agency decides to continue gathering information. Meanwhile, Amandeep and Aslam have successfully identified the nuclear facility situated in Kahuta, a

small town located one and a half hours from Rawalpindi, and Amandeep has adeptly captured photographs of the facility (Figure 4).

A key plot device in the film seems to have been informed by a series of newspaper reports over the previous decades. These culminated in an article in *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* on 1 January 2022 alleging that attacks on and threats to German and Swiss companies supplying the Pakistani nuclear weapons programme in the early 1980s were carried out by agents of Mossad, the Israeli intelligence agency (Tiwari, 2022). There have also been persistent reports that the Israelis planned a direct attack on Pakistani nuclear weapons facilities. These were lent credence by the attack that the Israelis actually carried out on Iraq's Osirak nuclear facility in 1981 (Shipler, 1981). After all, Pakistan's authorities had been acutely aware of Kahuta's vulnerability to air attack since at least 1979 (Aziz, 2015). By 1982 rumours that India and Israel were planning an attack there, like the one at Osirak, had appeared in the *Washington Post*. A year later Indian military officials travelled to Israel, negotiations which resulted in plans for joint operations against Kahuta. Levy and Clark (2007) report that these were only aborted after the Americans signalled their opposition to such schemes. Pakistan also made known its intentions to launch retaliatory attacks, using newly delivered American F-16s, against India's nuclear facilities in Trombay and strengthened the air defences around Kahuta (Shamim, 2011).

This scenario was subtly altered for the purposes of the film. Instead, *Mission Majnu* posits that the Israelis are planning an attack on Quetta in the mistaken belief that it was the location of Pakistan's nuclear facility. This misleadingly implies the superiority of the Indian intelligence services over those of Israel. In the film, Amandeep is shown as dealing with Mossad's 'mistake'. He contacts Sharma and tells him to stop Israel from attacking Quetta because the nuclear facility is in Kahuta, and if they raid the wrong location, India's secret mission will be exposed. Through Amandeep, the audience



**Figure 4.** Amandeep captures photos of Pakistan's nuclear facility in Kahuta. (Bagchi, 2023).

are also informed that 'a nuclear bomb in an unstable country like Pakistan means destruction for India' (Bagchi, 2023).

When Sharma instructs Amandeep to collect physical evidence in support of his claim Amandeep, despite being aware of the potential danger, assumes responsibility for infiltrating the Kahuta nuclear plant to corroborate Pakistan's covert atomic programme. The personal risk he exposes himself to is presented as driven by his family trauma. When advised by Raman Singh to engage in rational thinking and not feel he has to make amends for his father's mistake, Amandeep confidently asserts: 'We don't keep score with our mothers. So, what would we do with our country?' (Bagchi, 2023). National belonging is thus presented as more than contractual. It instead demands a response. This reflects the *leitmotif* of national belonging as a test that runs throughout the film. This test is particularly experienced by intelligence operatives. The film metaphorically extends this test by implication to ordinary members of its audience. Its centrality as a *leitmotif* is further developed as Amandeep adds that the essence of a nation is intrinsically tied to the characteristics and qualities of its populace. His personal need to be considered worthy of his nation is rhetorically expanded to Indians as a whole via the banal inclusive language that he deploys, language that deliberates includes reference to supposed national moral values. Amandeep declaims 'We are India. We don't feed on hatred, but on love. We won our freedom with love and peace, and I can do anything to protect a country like that' (Bagchi, 2023). This encodes the fundamental tenets of nationalist ideology which assert the division of the world into distinct nations, the exclusive legitimacy of political power derived from the nation, and the duties that peoples owe to that collectivity and the values it supposedly embodies (Triandafyllidou, 1998, p. 593). Accordingly, in this film national identity is not just expressed through the othering of Pakistan and the presentation of that state as an existential threat. Through Amandeep and his enactment of national belonging as a test it also communicates an understanding of national identification as something that is not just given to the nation, but also required by it. Audience reviews suggest that this was a message that some, at least, absorbed: 'Throughout the story, I encountered real love, adoration, prestige, esteem, and sacrifice for the country. That's patriotism' (Hamim, 2023).

Amandeep induces a convenient distraction to accumulate hair samples from the only barbershop in Kahuta so that those samples can be tested in India for the high radiation levels present at a nuclear power plant. He gains access to the Samjhauta Express train by stealing a passport and disguising himself as a Sikh man, then conceals the hair sample in a woman's luggage and contacts Sharma in Delhi with instructions to retrieve the evidence. When this evidence has been collected and proven conclusive, the film presents the Indian government as able to persuade Israel not to attack Quetta. It is important to note that the amount of military-relevant information can be substantial, ranging from data collected by sensors on or near the battlefield to satellite-based systems operating in faraway places. In a strategic framework, India's primary national objective is to use ICT and other relevant technologies to achieve a degree of information advantage that results in decision superiority. In this domain, the United States has already achieved complete dominance, while China is actively pursuing strategic reforms to develop a military force that can successfully engage in and win localized conflicts in the era of information technology. The film emphasises that in India, there is a strong recognition of the important role of information technology in national security, national research and

development, and the process of national unification (Sharma, 2003). *Mission Majnu* underscores India's strategy of leveraging information and communication technology to accomplish these goals. This technological superiority is exemplified in the film when Indian Prime Minister Morarji Desai is shown as notifying India's awareness of Kahuta to the then leader of Pakistan, General Zia-ul Haq (played by Ashwath Bhatt), who had overthrown Bhutto in a 1977 coup and had the ex-Prime Minister executed.

*Mission Majnu* thereby fictively and in several important respects misleadingly presents a narration of the origins of the Indo-Pakistan nuclear cold war that has emerged in recent decades (Basrur, 2008). In the process, the seemingly authoritative visual portrayal in the film lends a superficial and distorting credibility to that narration. The action in the movie and its apparent basis in actual events suggests that it conveys truths about the past. As with news reports of conflict, the simulacrum of representation provided by visual images can add credence to the metanarratives embedded therein (Baudrillard, 1991/1995). This effect is bolstered by the strenuous efforts made in the film to seem historically accurate, in terms of clothing and style, to the period. Consider this *Rotten Tomatoes* review emphasising how the film forges a deep connection the film between its characters and the audience:

What sets *Mission Majnu* apart is its impeccable attention to detail and authenticity. The film expertly captures the political tensions of the era, immersing the audience in a realistic and immersive atmosphere. The period setting, including the costumes, production design, and cinematography, is meticulously crafted adding depth and richness to the narrative. (Britto, 2023)

Yet, as the Pakistani film star Adnan Siddiqui pointed out, this *faux* authenticity in *Mission Majnu* rested upon stereotyping. He commented on Instagram:

How much misrepresentation is too much misrepresentation? Bollywood has the answer. I mean come on ... hire some good researchers to do homework on us. Or allow me to help. Make sure to take notes – no, we don't wear skull caps, surma, tawiz; no, we don't ask janab about their mijaz; no, we don't go around throwing adaab. (cited in Bollywood Hungama, 2023a)

A pastiche of Pakistani clothing and customs is presented which gives a seeming authenticity in small details to the eyes of its Indian audience, thereby obscuring the larger inaccuracies contained in the film's narration of the events depicted.

One such inaccuracy is in the dramatic denouement of the film. This misleadingly suggests that General Zia-ul Haq was compelled to order the closure of the facility at Desai's prompting. In fact, Kahuta continues to play an important role in Pakistan's military research and, far from closing it down, Zia renamed it in honour of Abdul Qadeer Khan. He also deployed its expertise in support of the Chinese nuclear weapons programme (Kan, 2009, pp. 5–6). Acknowledging this would not, however, suit the one-sided depiction of the Indo-Pakistan nuclear cold war contained in the movie. Nor would it allow for a heroic ending for Amandeep's own story and his portrayal of the self-sacrificial actions of RAW agents on which this narrative centres.

Accordingly, the film suggests that Desai's call alerts Zia to the presence of RAW agents in Pakistan, prompting him to order their immediate termination. The film then depicts Pakistan's intelligence services using telecommunications as they compile a directory of potential RAW agents by monitoring every phone call made to India, prohibiting all



calls from Pakistan, and thereby locating and neutralising all RAW agents operating in Pakistan, including Raman Singh and Aslam Usmaniya. The Pakistani army has also tracked down Amandeep and Nasreen as they prepare to leave Pakistan and start afresh in Dubai. In his penultimate display of bravery and patriotism, Amandeep yells the Indian national anthem and manages to keep the armed forces away for long enough so that Nasreen can board the plane. He eventually succumbs to his multiple gunshot wounds. The death of his father, shot by his own hand as an enemy of the state, is thus symbolically juxtaposed with Amandeep's death through the bullets of his enemies. The film thereby ends by depicting Amandeep passing the test of loyalty to nation that has been its *leitmotif*. Furthermore, he does so by demonstrably placing his loyalty to his nation, enacted in the singing of the national anthem, above his family. Nasreen finds out the reality about her husband's identity only when she arrives in Dubai and is received by Rao, who reads her a letter from her husband, who she knew only as Tariq.

Amandeep's life and death is thus used to encode a core reading of the claims upon the individual of nationalism. As expressed by Nielsen and Nottelmann (2022, pp. 81–82), these are that:

in virtue of her national membership a person has duties towards her nation and her co-nationals that extend far beyond what she owes to other individuals and collectives, this is ultimately because she has a duty to help preserve and promote the integrity of her nation and its self-governance.

For Amandeep, his wife is a cover. Despite being played by a celebrated star, Nasreen's character is under-developed and her role in the story limited (Joshi, 2023). Her blindness also figuratively conveys her unawareness – and that of her native Pakistan – concerning Amandeep's mission. Her role in the story nonetheless might have provided an opportunity for Bagchi to explore more irenic messaging around national reconciliation, the management of personal as well as national trauma, or that national identity is at bottom the result of an accident of birth, such as the one that ensures that Amandeep and Nasreen's fatherless child is now both a product of two nations and displaced to the Gulf. The cycle of personal trauma on behalf of the nation that has been passed from father to son through Amandeep's story might thus have been broken. So might the parallel trauma of the schism with Pakistan. There is a hint of this as the film ends with Nasreen crying. However, this is after reading Amandeep's letter, reinforcing the emotional impact of his self-sacrifice. The ending thus re-centres the *leitmotif* of national belonging as a test. This is reinforced when, during its conclusion, the film asserts that 'it is not the wind that holds India's tricolour high, it's the last breath of our martyrs' (Bagchi, 2023).

## Conclusion

*Mission Majnu* is a development of the growing Bollywood spy thriller genre. It reflects the tendency of these films towards an unproblematic depiction of Indian espionage operatives as patriotic, courageous and resourceful. Yet it does so by portraying its protagonist as driven by an intersection of family and national trauma that motivates Amandeep to prove his patriotic loyalty to his colleagues, to his nation and, not least, to himself. This means of establishing an emotional depth of characterisation is a trope that is familiar

from spy and police thrillers elsewhere. In *Mission Majnu* it is related to and develops tropes of nation that are embedded in the Bollywood spy thriller genre. There is the othering of Pakistan, in this instance within a distorting narration of the origins of Indo-Pakistan nuclear tensions. These distortions present Indian success and Pakistani capitulation, a reassuring message for a domestic audience who might be alarmed if the Pakistani threats to bomb Trombay had been reflected in the film. The film thereby establishes a narrative of national success, which is reinforced by the techno-nationalism it repeatedly foregrounds. Within *Mission Majnu* this encoding of national identity operates on a personal as well as a societal level. Through the device of Amandeep, the audience are conveyed into the emotional conflicts of the individual RAW agent. In his case, these conflicts are informed by the parallels between the national trauma of existential threat and the personal trauma of needing to prove that he is not his father. In the film this trauma is presented as a test of national belonging. The film's peroration makes explicit that this is a test that Amandeep triumphantly and sacrificially passes.

### Note

1. On the layering of identities and the relationship between personal and territorially defined identities see Herb and Kaplan (1999).

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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