ABSTRACT

This dissertation seeks to explore the notions of nation and nationalism as they emerge in war narratives, specifically military literature and war films in popular Hindi cinema. Nation being a discursive entity as much as a geopolitical one, it would be interesting to examine how the discourses of military literature and war films construct the subject, namely the "nation".

The Indian nation faces a double-pronged attack, on the one hand, from the forces of liberalization (economic and cultural) and on the other hand, from secessionist forces within the nation. In the face of such an attack, a plethora of discourses engages seriously in constructing an idea of the Indian nation and reinforcing the notion of an Indian identity. The Indian nation may have come into existence as a political entity in August 1947 but the nation as a cultural, social, economic entity is constantly in the making. This gives the title of this study “The ‘Nation’ in War” a dual meaning, one, the nation as a territorial unit under the threat of an external enemy and two, the nation as a discursive terrain, with multiple discourses attempting to gain hegemony.

The Introduction outlines in some detail the conceptual framework within which to locate the main issues to be dealt with in this study. Drawing upon the seminal work of Benedict Anderson and other scholars such as Ranajit Guha, Homi Bhabha, Partha Chatterjee, and Nira Yuval-Davis, I begin my argument with their notion of the nation as a contested category. The obsessive desire to grapple with the idea of an India has persisted in the
national imagination despite the idea of a postnational/ global world gaining currency. Nationalism, generally associated with freedom struggles of colonized countries and hitherto restricted to history textbooks, has been exhumed and brought into focus in so-called globalized, postnational worlds. Precisely at a time when Third World countries have opened their doors/borders/ boundaries/markets for the free flow of capital from First World countries, blurring to an extent, the idea of nation as a distinct territorial/cultural space, the notion of nation wages a battle to survive. Nationalism then may be seen as a dynamic on-going process, in which various discourses compete with each other to give meaning to a well-bounded, even if contested, geographical space, which we call nation.

Chapter I offers an overview of the concepts of nation and nationalism. Nationalism may be studied as a) anti-colonial movement b) sentiment c) narrative and d) a response to the homogenizing tendencies of a global order. In colonized countries, nationalism is predominantly understood as anti-colonialism. It conjures up images of an enslaved past out of which the nation extricated itself by the concerted and dedicated efforts of the people. These efforts written into the narrative of the nation as sacrifice, patriotism, etc., bring to it a strong affective element forging, in the words of Arjun Appadurai, "a community of sentiment". The creation of the Bharatmata as an emblematic figure of the nation encapsulates a range of sentiments, engendered and controlled by the state to a great extent through the deployment of various strategies. The Bharatmata emblem also indicates that the nation is a gendered construct.
The mobilization of sentiment is crucial to the sustenance of the idea of a unified and unitary India. Sentiment is thus nurtured by authoring a progressivist narrative of the nation. It is in this sense that nationalism may be studied as a narrative.

Chapter II analyzes some military memoirs (Lakshmi Sahgal, Lt. Gen. S.K. Sinha) diaries (Amar Singh, Harinder Baweja), war accounts (Brig. J.P. Dalvi, Maj. Gen. Lachhman Singh) and newspaper reportage to examine the truth-claims of these narratives generally considered as the "authentic" or "official" sources for information on military matters. The selection of texts is divided on the basis of the "insider" and "outsider" author. The literature produced by the men in uniform may be characterized as "insider" writing and literature produced on military matters by those not belonging to the armed forces may be characterized as "outsider" writing. The latter (A Soldier's Diary and newspaper reportage) forms part of this chapter for the purpose of comparison and contrast. Interestingly, whatever criticism there is of the state in military literature emanates from "insider" literature. "Outsider" literature, as we will see, indulges in romanticizing the soldier. Both however, uphold the sanctity of the notion of the nation.

In this so-called postnational world, in which nations are conceptualized as abstracted "imagined communities" and nationalism condemned as archaic and disruptive of global unification, the Army persists with a notion of nation concretized in the form of borders, boundaries, maps and fences.
Chapter III examines cinema as one of the many cultural representations from which it may be possible to extract ideas and constructs of nation and nationalism. Cinema, with its abundance of visual and linguistic signifiers, provides a terrain on which we may map out the intersection of the oppositional ideas of nationalism.

Amidst the proliferation of discourses that seek to create and regenerate the idea of India, the discourse of Hindi cinema is quite clearly the most vibrant one. Its significance as a mode of narrating the nation may be gauged by its wide reach, its broad mass base, its capacity to generate debates from the parliament to the street corners, its influence on sartorial choices and an entire range of ancillary entertainers (film glossies, pin-ups, videos, audio cassettes) that it produces. While on the one hand, Hindi cinema brings together a diverse set of people who cut across caste/class/gender/linguistic barriers into the common space of a cinema hall, simultaneously, it is all the while negotiating these very fissures in Indian society. This chapter also attempts to explain the construction of female subjectivity in war films. Patriarchal structures of Indian society have contributed vastly to the marginalization of women in most narratives. War films foreground the macho hero, whose death confers martyrdom on him. The woman, in the role of wife/mother/sister/daughter remains peripheral to the narrative, contributing only to the further romanticization of the hero, at the cost of her own subjectivity. Thus, the Hindi film lends itself (not unproblematically) as a medium to analyze these constructs.
Movies have always been popular as entertainment but they became subjects of serious study only in the nineties in India. The postmodernist dethroning of high culture facilitated the entry of low/popular/mass culture into the corridors of academia. This chapter examines some war films in popular Hindi cinema of the post-Independence period (Haqeeqat, Hindustan Ki Kasam, Border). I also include those films which depict the character of a soldier, even if the film is not a war film in the strict sense of the term (Major Saab, Pukar). Further, the chapter includes non-war, nationalist films to try to tease out the differences, if any, that exist in the idea of the nation between war and non-war films (1942: A Love Story, Hey Ram). Films based on the theme of insurgency (Maachis, Dil Se, Fiza, The Terrorist, Mission Kashmir) attempt to subvert notions of the nation, which a war film constructs so painstakingly. In order that the study remains focused, it would be necessary to limit it to popular Hindi cinema, referring only tangentially to the Hollywood War Film (Apocalypse Now, Full Metal Jacket).

My study of military literature and popular film has led me to offer by way of conclusion that the two discourses complement each other. While the radical impulses of popular film are circumscribed by the state through censorship for instance, military literature, exceptions notwithstanding, plays out a well-defined role as a vehicle of statist discourse. A nation creates stories of heroism that may have a positive impact on the inhabitants. In Indian narratives we do not have a strong anti-war tradition unlike in the Western narratives, with the Holocaust as a defining event in the consciousness. War continues to be cast in the mould of dharmayudh
(righteous war). Such a representation of war provides ample space for the glorification of a strong, centralized nation and the mobilization of the sentiment of nationalism.