**Entertainment or jingoism?**

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Anti-Pakistan propaganda remains a recurrent theme in numerous Bollywood movies. Movies such as ‘Border’, ‘LoC Kargil’, ‘Raazi’, and ‘Uri’ carry an anti-Pakistan perspective as a central theme to the plot.

Such movies with nationalist themes, culminating with a unilateral Indian victory over Pakistan, resonate finely with the Indian audience, with corresponding commercial benefits for film producers.

Based on the Pulwama incident and events thereafter, ‘Fighter’ marks a new addition to the list of anti-Pakistan content. The movie has emerged as the highest-grossing Indian movie of 2024 so far. While the cast deserves due appreciation for their convincing portrayal as fighter pilots, it is the plot that is extremely problematic and undermines the film’s overall credibility.

In the initial scenes, the movie features the Pulwama incident, showing the death scenes of Indian Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) personnel. Factual inaccuracies are apparent from the onset, with the film reporting 70 deaths in contrast to the actual toll of 40. This overreporting of fatalities seems to exaggerate the existing threat and provoke a strong emotional response. Subsequently, Pakistan is accused of sponsoring the attack in collaboration with a terrorist faction. Scenes depicting a key Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM) leader bursting into a senior military leader’s office to discuss future plans further exacerbate these distorted portrayals.

The rest of the film shows Balakot strikes by the Indian Air Force (IAF), portraying massive destruction and killing of approximately 300 terrorists within Pakistani territory – a false claim lacking any evidence in reality. As Indian jets flee the scene, the film shows a two-way locking of air-to-air missiles between the aircraft of the two forces. Additionally, the pilots are portrayed engaging in dramatic conversations with each other – a scenario that is technically implausible due to the use of different radios and frequencies by the respective forces. To project the IAF’s superiority, the Pakistani pilot is seen disengaging his target due to intimidating remarks by the Indian pilot. This scene also perpetuates the traditional Indian stereotype of Pakistanis with kohl-lined eyes and using salutations like ‘Aadab’ and ‘Janab’. Remarkably, this portrayal is extended to fighter pilots during combat scenarios.

Subsequently, a heavily altered version of the events of February 27, 2019 is presented, notably omitting the episode where Wing Commander Abhinandan landed in the Pakistani territory. Instead, two Indian pilots fall inside the Pakistani territory as a result of the aerial encounter with the Pakistan Air Force. Surprisingly, although the pilots in the film are captured by the military, they are shown to be held by JeM fighters at one of their hideouts. Predictably, the incident of India accidentally shooting down its own Mi-17 helicopter is also absent from the narrative.

In another notable departure from the actual events, the narrative progresses to replace Pakistan’s peace gesture of releasing Wing Commander Abhinandan with a dark and cruel episode. Disregarding the agreement to release both pilots by Pakistan, a horrific scene unfolds in the film with one pilot’s brutally murdered body sent back to India. At the same time, the other is denied permission to leave at the last moment – provoking a military response from New Delhi.

In a dramatic turn of events, the movie then ventures into a covert operation. The second pilot is shown as being successfully retrieved in an operation launched by the IAF with ground units crossing the Line of Control (LoC). This entirely fictional and overly dramatized operation even shows the Kotli and Rawalakot airfields and several Pakistani F-16s being destroyed in the process – exaggerating documented events to an overblown level.

The last scenes of the movie deliver exactly what the audience wanted to hear from the start - the IAF pilot hinting towards an ‘Indian Occupied Pakistan’, reinforcing the narrative of nationalism, supremacy and conquest.

Overall, such narration aims to strengthen propaganda against Pakistan for sponsoring terrorism across the border and malign its image. While such content may help reflect the desired narrative through one-sided and inaccurate representation, it inadvertently shows an unprofessional image of its depicted forces. Patriotism in the film reaches an extent that it enters the realm of jingoism.

In this context, the best IAF pilot in the Air Dragon unit named Patty is repeatedly seen demonstrating troubling behaviour and disregard for military discipline. Apart from repeatedly questioning the decisions of his commanding officers, he is seen blatantly ignoring instructions. During the aerial encounter on February 27, he is shown crossing the LoC without official sanction.

Likewise, during the ground operation, he is on the verge of committing a court martial offence by nearly hijacking a fighter aircraft to retrieve his course mate despite being removed from the operation team. In the final aerial showdown, disregarding orders to avoid the F-16, ‘Patty’ deliberately collides with the Pakistani aircraft before ejecting – his way of settling scores with the Pakistani pilot he had earlier engaged. ‘Fighter’ represents another instalment in the continuing series of on-screen propaganda against Pakistan, blending action with patriotism to shape public perception. These fabricated tales of heroism augur well with the Indian audience and are potentially a good tool for garnering votes for ultra-nationalist parties, especially when released near general elections. However, these narratives do not reflect actual battlefield realities.

While Hollywood also has a history of portraying Russian and Chinese characters in a negative light, the impact of such portrayals can be particularly problematic. They not only shape public sentiment but also risk escalating tensions between nations. In regions like South Asia, where geopolitical relationships are already strained, films like these can exacerbate misunderstandings and hinder diplomatic efforts. Nonetheless, it is clear that since such content is widely accepted in India, one will continue to see similar productions in the future, influencing public sentiment.

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