**[Red-light areas](https://www.dawn.com/news/1833791/red-light-areas)**

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NARENDRA Modi and Sanjay Leela Bhansali have something in common: they both view Pakistan through warped lenses. Modi’s perception is of a country overrun by terrorists on the lookout for Indian soft spots to attack. Bhansali uses his camera lens to create spectacular falsities. His latest is an eight-part Netflix series on Lahore’s red-light area Heera Mandi. (It derived its name from Raja Hira Singh, a favourite of Maharaja Ranjit Singh.)

Bhansali — a talented filmmaker, producer, writer, and composer — is the despair of his critics. He challenged them with films such as a saccharine adaptation of Shakespeare’s romance Romeo and Juliet, titled Ramlila. It invoked the ire of some orthodox Ram bhakts. He was forced to change its name, elongating it to Goliyon Ki Raasleela Ram-Leela.

His detractors made him run the gauntlet of the Delhi High Court, and then the Lucknow bench of the Allahabad High Court, which, a week after the film’s release, banned the movie’s showing in Uttar Pradesh. Despite these obstacles, GKRRL became the fifth highest-grossing film of 2013.

Bhansali’s next project Bajirao Mastani (2015) extolled the love between the Maratha hero Peshwa Bajirao I and his second wife Mastani. The descendants of Bajirao and Mastani disowned the film, claiming that “excessive creative liberty by Bhansali caused wrongful portrayal of their ancestors”. The Bombay High Court, when approached for a stay, tactfully refused. Again, Bhansali answered his critics; this film became one of the highest-grossing Indian films of all time.

Bhansali’s latest production is his personal brainchild.

Bhansali’s Padmaavat (2018) pulled out of oblivion the 13th-century Rajput ruler Rawal Ratan Singh of Mewar and the Delhi Sultanate’s ruler Alauddin Khilji. Both vied for the beautiful Rani Padmini (aka Padmaavat). In a fiery finale, Bhansali had Padmini lead a horde of Rajput women, trapped within Chittorgarh fort, to commit a collective jauhar (self-immolation).

Extremists did not wait for Bhansali to finish his film. During its shooting in Jaipur in 2017, stalwarts from the Shri Rajput Karni Sena assaulted Bhansali, his crew and damaged the sets. Later, another group burnt a studio and the period costumes. Bhansali revenged himself when Padmaavat became the highest-grossing film of the year.

Bhansali’s latest production Heeramandi: The Diamond Bazaar is his personal brainchild. He gestated the idea for 14 years, then directed it, co-authored the script, composed its music, and produced it as a mini-series for TV. The story is set in Lahore’s Heera Mandi during the late 1940s. It deals with the travails of the tawaifs (dancing girls), struggling first for social, and then political, acceptance. In a belated burst of patriotism, they march through the streets, their ghungroos (ankle bells) jingling, demanding freedom (azadi) and independence from their erstwhile British clients.

Apparently, Bhansali wanted Pakistani actors to perform in the film. Politics intervened. Not that Pakistani actors could have provided a shield against the first charge hurled by Bhansali’s critics — its lack of historical authenticity. Many Lahoris and those outsiders who love it will not recognise the social topography of Bhansali’s Heeramandi. Even in a pre-1947 era, Lahore was not a poor cousin (as Bhansali would have his audiences believe) of Lucknow’s cloying culture and fawning finesse.

His multilingual cast parrot their Urdu dialogues passably well but ignore the niceties of proper pronunciation. His heroines are gorgeously dressed; his muscular male actors often undressed; and only the lower orders — the maids and a Sikh love-sick swain — speak Punjabi.

His dancers swirl like dizzying dervi­sh­­es, imitating their ol­­der sisters in earlier Muslim social dram­as, particularly Mughal-i-Azam and Pakeezah. His men inexplicably wear furry caps once popularised by the late actor/ chief minister of Tamil Nadu M.G. Ramachandran.

Over the years, Lahore’s Heera Mandi, like its denizens, began to lose its allure. Trade shifted from the old city to newer locations, giving way to Lahore’s Food Street. The kothas that once resonated with the sound of ankle-bells are now pricey restaurants. London’s Soho, after the 1970s, underwent a similar transformation — from steamy fleshpots to steaming cooking pots.

Some may recall that in 1959, the UK promulgated the Street Offences Act. It made loitering and solicitation in a public place an offence. Its aim was to clean British cities of importuning streetwalkers. Comedian Peter Ustinov questioned its utility, suggesting that cleaning the streets was rather like clearing the table after a meal: “One has to put the crockery somewhere.”

Over the years, the crockery from Lahore’s Heera Mandi has moved to richer exurbia. If that Heera Mandi exists at all, it is as a fictional red-light suburb of Bhansali’s technicolour mind.

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