**Problematic framing**

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Mughal-e-azam, set in Emperor Akbar’s court, is revered as one of the best movies to come out of India. Yet, a few weeks ago, the board of Uttar Pradesh ordered the removal of chapters on the Mughals from Indian history books. This seismic shift in Indian narratives and portrayal of Muslims has been taking place since Modi came into power. Its latest victim? The biggest film industry in the world. So how and why did Bollywood become so unrelentingly hateful towards Muslims and Pakistanis?

Let’s start with the biggest hits of 2023. In Pathaan, the highest-grossing Indian movie of all time, the villain is a general from the Pakistan Army. In Farzi, the highest-grossing Indian TV show of all time, the villain is an Indian Muslim, but has a mysterious boss above him who speaks in “Pakistani” Urdu, indicating that even in India’s internal issue of fake currency, there’s a foreign power behind it. This show recently broke the “most-watched” record of Family Man, a show where the villain changes every season, but its first and most critically acclaimed season villainized—you guessed it—Pakistan.

[Major transfers in Railways Department, notification issued](https://www.nation.com.pk/16-May-2023/major-transfers-in-railways-department-notification-issued)

The villainization of Pakistan isn’t new. In the same way that Hollywood changes its villains based on whoever is bothering them at that time (sometimes the Russians, sometimes Arabs), Bollywood has historically shown most villains to be Muslim “terrorists” in all their surma-wearing, janaab-uttering glory.

However, the recent change is how exactly they show who the villain is. Previously, “anti-Pakistan” movies were fewer in number, low in star power, and would often tank at the box office. They would rarely show or take Pakistan’s name. The villain terrorizing the population would often be a rogue ex-soldier, a freedom fighter from a banned terror outfit, or someone loosely linked to Pakistan. What is different now is the rise of direct, blatant, and accusatory narratives with which Bollywood movies are targeting Pakistan. The bad guy is the government, the army, the ISI, and by extension, the people of Pakistan. It is as if Modi’s Hindutva did not just enter politics in 2014 but made a glamorous debut in the Indian film industry.

[PTI leader Shehryar Afridi arrested under MPO](https://www.nation.com.pk/16-May-2023/pti-leader-shehryar-afridi-arrested-under-mpo)

Bollywood can easily be divided into pre-Modi and post-Modi eras. Bollywood after Modi is visibly aggressive and nationalist in its narratives. Actors have stopped commenting on political issues and filmmakers have issued apologies for casting Pakistani actors. Movies have become ultra-nationalist in their tone, storyline, and treatment. Events surrounding the wars of 1965, 1971, and 1999, Pakistan’s nuclear development, and the abrogation of Article 370 are becoming popular topics for scriptwriters. Pick any major blockbuster in the last 6 years, and compare it with blockbusters of the pre-Modi era. The difference in treatment is visible and disturbing.

Why is the hate so bothersome now, some may be wondering? It is hate wrapped inside a box of six-packs and romances. Hate woven into a web of 20-minute action sequences ripped off scene-by-scene of Mission Impossible, a dance number that sent the entire Indian right wing into a frenzy, and dialogues patriotic enough to make you want to sacrifice your own life for your country. Hate doesn’t feel like a bad emotion if you are having a great time watching your favorite actors. It is injected into your veins in the “besharam rang” that Pathaan talks about, slowly spreading into your subconscious. Propaganda is a dish best served in small, dance-filled doses.

[ATC asks Imran Khan to appear before court till 11:00 am](https://www.nation.com.pk/16-May-2023/atc-asks-imran-khan-to-appear-before-court-till-11-00-am)

Why should Pakistan be worried? Two reasons. The first is that this hate is now global. Platforms like Netflix and Amazon Prime have allowed uninterrupted and HD hate available in 190+ countries and counting. Pathan was released in a record-breaking 100 countries, and Farzi became the most-watched Indian Series of all time, with a viewership of 37 million people. Ironically enough, both these productions still remain on the “most-watched” list on Amazon Prime in Pakistan.

The second reason is more nuanced. Bollywood appeases its Muslims through well-planned troupes so well that they don’t seem to mind the hate, much less protest against it. The same goes for Pakistanis. Pakistanis love SRK. So how does Bollywood balance out the hate with love? It’s simple. Give him a Muslim name, more specifically a name pointing towards a certain ethnic group in South Asia. He really is a Muslim after all. Next, make someone like Deepika Padukone a Pakistani ex-ISI agent because representation matters. Finally, make these two characters fall in love. Who doesn’t romanticize a RAW-ISI love story? We all do. Who doesn’t fetishize Pakistani women that have betrayed their own country and will do anything for an Indian man? Indian men do. It’s a perfect storm. Everyone is happy, rejoicing, and dancing in cinemas across the world as the movie tops the charts. Outside the cinemas, however, the reality is grim.

[US fighter jets intercept 6 Russian aircraft near Alaska](https://www.nation.com.pk/16-May-2023/us-fighter-jets-intercept-6-russian-aircraft-near-alaska)

The hate is relentless and increasingly dangerous for Pakistanis. We should be worried because we are being fed the hate-poison too, in such clever ways that the masses often do not see it. The narratives of hate must be stopped. The first step in this case is awareness. It is to know, recognize, and speak out against the villainization of Pakistan wherever it is shown. Second, since India uses Bollywood as its ever-growing soft power, the Pakistani answer should be along the same lines too. Pakistani missions abroad must realize that the global impact of such propaganda is just as damaging, if not more, than the propaganda seen on Indian talk shows and in the political speeches of their right-wing leaders. A well-planned approach is needed at all diplomatic levels to counter the spread of such narratives. Pakistani media, too, needs to do its part in both awareness and counter campaigns. This may seem like a small problem in the larger context of India-Pakistan tensions. But when history books start to erase 500 years of Muslim history in a country of 2 billion people, the possibility of socio-religious harmony and peace in the region starts to disappear.