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The Weaponization of Storytelling in Nuclear South Asia ^[1]

What happens when cinema, once capable of softening borders through shared stories and human connection, begins manufacturing hostility between two nuclear-powered neighbors—India and Pakistan whose histories are already marked by wars, rivalry, partition, and mistrust?

This question occurred to me while watching the recent Bollywood film *Dhurandhar*. Sitting through a more than three-hour-long movie in an age of shrinking attention spans and instant digital consumption was itself an experience. But what lingered afterward was not merely the vague storyline. It was the unsettling realization of how a global cultural industry like Bollywood can transform geopolitical hostility into mainstream entertainment.

What disappointed me most was not the presence of patriotism, but the ease with which political animosity was packaged into spectacle, amplified through slurs, revenge, aggression, and emotionally charged nationalism designed less to provoke reflection than reaction. The film became a reminder of how deeply international relations and regional tensions can shape artistic expression, cultural narratives, and ultimately public perception.

In a region like South Asia, where the ghosts of partition still linger in family memories and the scars of war are carried quietly across generations, cinema has never been “just entertainment.” Films travel far beyond the screen; they seep into drawing rooms, dinner table conversations, wedding songs, and collective imagination. They shape how societies see one another whether through the soft lens of shared humanity or through the hardened prism of suspicion and hostility.

I remember a different cultural landscape growing up in that region. Ordinary people on both sides of the border consumed the same music, laughed at the same jokes, quoted the same verses of Mirza Ghalib, and mourned the same histories. In many homes, Bollywood songs were stitched into the fabric of weddings and family gatherings regardless of nationality. Conversations about actors, cricket rivalries, and old films crossed borders more easily than diplomats ever could. Politics built checkpoints; culture quietly kept opening windows.

There was always an unspoken understanding that despite borders, barbed wires, and battlefield rhetoric, the people themselves were never entirely foreign to one another. And perhaps that is why films like *Dhurandhar* feel so unsettling.

When films rooted in hostility reach worldwide audiences through platforms like Netflix, emotional polarization no longer remains local, it becomes globalized. What was once regional political rhetoric now travels across continents through online streaming, reaching millions who may know little about the historical complexity of South Asia.

The problem with such films is not patriotism itself. Every nation has the right to celebrate its

identity, sacrifices, and resilience. The concern begins when patriotism is transformed into hostility-driven entertainment where aggression becomes heroic, humiliation becomes applause-worthy, and the “other side” is stripped of complexity and humanity.

Cinema is one of the most powerful tools of public influence in the modern world. Bollywood, watched not only in India but across South Asia and the global diaspora, possesses enormous cultural power. With that power comes responsibility. When films repeatedly portray across borders through the lens of extremism, violence, or ridicule, they contribute to a psychological environment where mistrust deepens and empathy declines. This matters because public opinion eventually shapes political realities.

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A generation raised on narratives of permanent hatred becomes less open to dialogue, cultural exchange, or peace-building efforts. Emotional nationalism may create temporary box-office success, but it leaves behind long-term social consequences. The audience leaves the theater carrying more anger than understanding.

Ironically, the people of both countries often share more similarities than differences, language, music, humor, poetry, food, and historical memory. Yet films driven by sensational nationalism erase these shared realities in favor of simplified enemy images designed for emotional impact.

But art should challenge hatred, not industrialize it.

South Asia has already paid a heavy historical price for division and conflict. The role of cinema should not be to deepen emotional borders that politics has already hardened. Great cinema has the ability to humanize rivals, question violence, and create space for reflection. Films that glorify hostility do the opposite: they normalize confrontation as culture.

The tragedy is that audiences on both sides deserve better storytelling stories that acknowledge political realities without turning hatred into spectacle. For countries with nuclear weapons and unresolved histories, public emotions matter. Cinema matters. Words matter! And perhaps the real danger of films like *Dhurander* is not what happens on screen, but what slowly hardens off-screen: the belief that coexistence itself is weakness.

If diplomacy seeks dialogue, what happens when cinema teaches generations to see the neighbor only as an enemy? That question stayed with me long after the movie ended.

Wanting to understand the phenomenon through a broader geopolitical and media lens, I spoke with [Dr. Laeeq Khan](#), a media and computational communication scholar at Ohio

University and the founding director of the Social Media Analytics Research Team (SMART) Lab. Dr. Khan's work focuses on digital media, audience behavior, misinformation, AI-driven communication, and the way online narratives shape public perception across societies.

Given his scholarship on media and data analytics, Dr. Khan viewed films like *Dhurandhar* not simply as entertainment products, but as evidence of a larger cultural shift, a movement away from human storytelling toward emotional amplification, hyper-nationalism, and manufactured animosity. He argues that this film and similar ones from Bollywood belong to a newer genre that trades empathy for adrenaline and turns an entire neighboring nation into a marketable aesthetic.

This is more reflective of a tragedy larger than any single film. According to Dr. Khan, films of this nature do not merely reflect existing tensions; they actively participate in reinforcing them. In an algorithmic age where outrage travels faster than nuance, emotionally charged content becomes commercially valuable. Hyper-nationalist cinema, he suggested, thrives because anger sustains engagement. The louder the hostility, the wider the circulation.

What concerns him most, he explained, is how repeated exposure to these narratives normalizes suspicion. Over time, audiences stop seeing individuals across the border and begin seeing only categories: threats, enemies. That has real consequences for how societies imagine one another.

His observation lingered because it pointed to something larger than one film. It pointed to a cultural shift. Dr. Khan added that there was a time when Bollywood offered something rare in South Asia: a shared emotional space. In the 1970s and 1980s, audiences in Lahore, Karachi, Delhi, and Mumbai watched many of the same films, hummed the same songs, and cried at the same scenes. The stories were human before they became hyper-national. They revolved around love, family, sacrifice, class struggle, heartbreak, and dignity. Borders existed politically, but cinema occasionally allowed ordinary people to imagine one another beyond those borders.

A film like *Dhurandhar*, soaked in slurs and built on flattening an entire neighboring people, represents a very different ambition. According to Dr. Khan, an initial scan of social media discourse surrounding the film reveals not merely polarization, but a deeper transformation in the politics of storytelling itself. Cinema, once capable of imagining connections across borders and humanizing the "other," is increasingly being repurposed into a vehicle for hostility and symbolic aggression. In this framework, storytelling no longer seeks to bridge divides; it weaponizes them. He described this as part of a wider shift in modern media culture, where outrage and emotional provocation increasingly outperform empathy and complexity in the digital attention economy.

He paused, then continued calmly: such films do not attempt to understand the neighboring country; they flatten it. A nation of more than 250 million people becomes reduced to a cinematic mood board of menace, aggression, and suspicion. The audience is not invited to reflect, only to react.

Then came the sentence that lingered long after our conversation ended:

"And that matters because imagination is where diplomacy begins."

Before governments negotiate peace, societies must first possess the emotional capacity to

imagine humanity across borders. Cinema, at its best, once helped create that possibility in South Asia. It allowed audiences separated by politics to still recognize themselves in one another's music, grief, humor, and stories. But when storytelling abandons curiosity for contempt, he added, it quietly closes off that imagination. And once people lose the ability to imagine dignity in the other side, coexistence itself becomes harder.

This reminds us that media narratives are never simply transmitted in one direction. They circulate, are contested, and shape the communal temperature of the societies consuming them. What appears as entertainment on a Friday night can become, by Monday morning, emotional fuel for online hostility, religious polarization, and hardened stereotypes that ultimately diminish everyone's humanity.

Countries can renegotiate trade agreements, visas, and diplomatic protocols. They cannot renegotiate geography. India and Pakistan will remain neighbors, bound not only by borders, but by history, memory, language, and the unresolved emotional residue of partition and conflict.

Toward the end of our conversation, Dr. Khan raised a question that felt less like media criticism and more like a warning for the region's future. "The real issue," he said, "is whether our cultural industries are helping both societies coexist with dignity across their differences or quietly rehearsing the next confrontation."

It was a striking observation because it shifted the conversation away from one film and toward a larger moral responsibility. Cinema does not simply entertain in South Asia; it shapes emotional climates. It teaches audiences whom to fear, whom to trust, and sometimes, whom to hate. And in a region where political tensions already run deep, the stories nations tell about one another matter profoundly.

Watching *Dhurandhar*, I was reminded of what Edward Said warned in *Orientalism*: that powerful cultural narratives often construct the "other" not as fully human, but as a simplified caricature shaped by fear, suspicion, and political imagination. The danger of such storytelling is not only what it says openly, but what it quietly teaches audiences to feel. And perhaps that is the real tragedy. Once culture loses the ability to humanize the neighbor across the border, diplomacy itself begins to lose its language.
