

## War on Reels: A Comparative Study of the 1971 Liberation War in Films from Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan

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### Abstract

This study looks into how recent South Asian films have been cinematically engaging in depictions of the 1971 Liberation War especially in *"Mujib: The Making of a Nation"* (Bangladesh, 2023), *"Khel Khel Mein"* (Pakistan, 2021), and *"Pippa"* (India, 2023). It looks into the narratives, ideological underpinnings, and cinematic techniques of these films through a critical lens to gauge how they help perpetuate certain values in constructing national identities and collective memories in South Asia. This research examines the demarcations of history, locations of sociological discourses, and ideological leanings in each national cinema in its representation of war. This includes both transnational relations and ruptures between the respective filmic narratives. It also analyses how these cinematic languages refigure contemporary political discourses and the geopolitics of South Asia. Our results suggest that these films are effective instruments for contributing to national narratives and shaping regional geopolitical perceptions by frequently distorting historical truths. By utilising distinct cinematic techniques and storytelling, these speak in different versions of history. These films also reinforce distinct national narratives as a central ideal concept, both culturally and politically.

**Keywords:** *Liberation War, Contemporary Film Narratives, Critical Discourse Analysis, National Identities, Ideological Contestations.*

### 1. Introduction

The 1971 Liberation War of Bangladesh is a landmark event in South Asian History, which has pronounced effects on the geopolitical landscape, leaving imprints deeply ingrained in the collective consciousness of three countries: Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan (Chapman, 2018). The nine-month-long war that

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led to the creation of an independent Bangladesh has been written about, debated, and revisited countless times in art. Among various methods of conveying the intricacies of this battle, film has articulated the tale more compellingly than a mere historical recital (Bulbul, 2011; Benegal, 2017; Cilano, 2014).

Given the ability to combine visual storytelling with emotional appeal and historical recreation, films have significantly influenced public perception and memories about a war (Eley, 2001). However, the cinematic re-creations of the war tend to differ significantly, as different nations have varying stakes in the narrative.

Bangladeshi narrative co-opts 1971 as a heroic 'War of Liberation' (Haq, 2022), whereas Indian cinema tends to locate it within its interventionist role in the Pakistan conflict (Bharat & Kumar, 2012). However, Pakistani films that have dealt with the topic have a different interpretation of events altogether (Danish, 2021). More than a simple Cold War story, all sets of narratives depicted in these films represent the complexity and, in many cases, contradictions inherent to historical construction. These divergent narratives not only reflect the different realities of the war, but through this lens, they also help us understand how national identity and collective memory have been constructed in each country to this day (Godfrey & Lilley, 2009).

Through the analysis of three specific contemporary war films (Mujib: *The Making of a Nation* (Bangladesh), *Khel Khel Mein* (Pakistan), and *Pippa* (India)), this article explores how cinema has been mobilized to create, reaffirm, and even critique national perspectives on the 1971 Liberation War. In doing so, the study aims to foreground cinema's function in historical imagination and provide a framework for understanding the persistence of heterogeneous ways by which 1971 is recollected, re-evaluated, and reconceived across South Asia

Taking the case study of three contemporary cinematic productions (Mujib: *The Making of a Nation* (Bangladesh, 2023), *Khel Khel Mein* (Pakistan, 2021), and *Pippa* (India, 2023)), this study seeks to unravel the entangled fabric of narratives around this crucial chapter in regional history. This research seeks to analyze the contrasting depictions of these films and their impact on the construction of neo-national identity and geopolitical discourse through a comparative approach.

## 2. Research Objectives

- i. To understand representations of the 1971 Liberation War in contemporary South Asian war films (Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India).
- ii. To compare and contrast the ideological stances inherent in the language of the three national cinemas, and

iii. To explore how these filmic narratives aid in the creation of national identities and collective memory within nations.

### **3. Literature Review**

Cinema has always been a part of the cultural artefact. Since its inception, it has projected its unique history onto the screen (Andrew, 1985). The study of cinema became essential to reveal the subjective enjoyment of its emotional content and the objective refinement via expressions and experimentation.

Our study attempted to uncover the historical construction of the 1971 Liberation War in contemporary cinema from three separate nationalities. The 1971 Liberation War has been considered a remarkable event in the history of South Asia. It brought India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan into the limelight since they were actively involved in the war. The participant countries view their participation as aligned with their nationalities and ideologies, allowing them to construct their narratives. Additionally, the involvement of India and Pakistan in the conflict has sparked a relevant discussion in the context of their historical relationship. Both India and Pakistan have faced challenges with regionalism and separatism since gaining independence (Ranjan, 2016). In India, this has often led to the reorganisation and redefinition of the states. For Pakistan, it has involved various efforts to redefine or even abolish provinces, culminating in the significant loss of East Pakistan, which became Bangladesh. (Chapman, 2000) The birth of a new nation, ‘Bangladesh’, has been defined and eventually framed through specific ideological contestations by these three different nationalities. (Eley, 2001).

#### ***3.1 ‘1971 Liberation War’ complementing the concept of Nationalism***

The issue of 1971 has been a significant event in South Asian politics. The major actors centering this event were India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. Still, these three countries face a strained relationship due to their separate nationalisms. (Ranjan, 2016) Additionally, the narrations had been uniquely solicited with their own nationalism and relevant sentimentalism. Several collective factors of the 1971 Liberation War have been found that supported their own stunts and justifications for involvement in the incident.

##### ***3.1.1 Highlighting the Nationalism and Facts behind the War***

The Liberation War of 1971 has been narrated differently from three different perspectives of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. From the very beginning, India has been highlighting the incident, naming ‘Indo-Pakistan Third War’ that certainly questions the participation and sacrifices made by Bangladeshis (Vijay Diwas 2022). Thus, India tends to focus on their own heroism and glorious

sacrifices, overshadowing the sacrifices of Bangladeshi Freedom Fighters. (Ranjan, 2016). On the contrary, India justifies its participation in the war by mentioning the refugee issue using a 'humanitarian and justice angle' of nationalism. During nine months of uprising tension, a huge refugee influx of 98,99 299 entered into 825 refugee camps and outside in India (Murshid, 2011). This huge influx created economic and financial pressure amid the great inflation at that time. So, Indira Gandhi no longer viewed this incident as an internal conflict between East Pakistan and West Pakistan. Rather, she stated that,

*Whatever was claimed as an internal problem of Pakistan also became an internal problem of India.* (Meher, 2015)

Therefore, India had no other option but to intervene. But India has always expressed solidarity with Bangladesh and welcomed the exiled government of Bangladesh, which proves that both India and Bangladesh uphold the collective nationalist ideology of the event of 1971.

On the contrary, historical documents provided significant instances to prove that Pakistan considered the incident of 1971 as a mere internal conflict (Murshid, 2011). It has consistently avoided and neglected the history of exploitation and a regime of tyranny led by military forces. Pakistan convinced the international audiences as well as its own population of West Pakistan that the crisis of 1971 was a product of the Indo-Pakistan rivalry. No military repression of the East Pakistanis happened. Pakistan's sense of national unity was based on the India-Pakistan rivalry, which helped to uphold its nationalism.

### **3.1.2. Genocide: Who killed whom?**

Another index to measure the atrocities of war is the intensification of victims. Here, three countries play three distinct roles in framing the victims of the 1971 war. Bangladesh documented that 3 million people were killed during the Pakistani military's atrocities. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman stated this iconic figure of three million during an interview with the British broadcaster, David Frost. This number even surprised some of Mujib's confidantes. They suspected that the country's independence leader had meant to say three 'lakh' (300,000) (Bergman, 2014; Questioning an Iconic Number-The Hindu, 2014). Bangladeshi unarmed civilians were the victims of the massacre. Operation Search Light, led by the West Pakistan Militaries, conducted on 25th March 1971, has made a significant instance of genocide.

But Pakistan has set an opposite narrative regarding victimization. Pakistan has claimed that the number of deaths is only 26000 in East Pakistan. (Schendel, 2009) ((16) A History of Bangladesh (2009) | Willem van Schendel -

Academia.Edu, n.d.) Rather, it was the Urdu spoken Biharis (West Pakistanis residing in East Pakistan) who were stated as the victim of the war and the ones who endured the casualties.

In *The Pakistani Military in Politics: Origin, Evolution and Consequences*, Ahmed (2013) demonstrated a series of facts that have generated scholarly debate. According to his statement, the ambiguity surrounding the pre-scheduled National Assembly session and its subsequent cancellation consistently fueled deep mistrust and triggered violence, culminating in violent assaults by Bengali militants on Bihari Muslims (Urdu-speaking residents of East Pakistan) in Chittagong. It is none rather than the Awami League cadres and the local militants who led the atrocities and conducted these assaults. (Ahmed, 2013). The incident has been documented by Anthony Mascarenhas.

*On the night of March 25—and this I was allowed to report by the Pakistani censor—the Bengali troops and paramilitary units stationed in East Pakistan mutinied and attacked non-Bengalis with atrocious savagery. Thousands of families of unfortunate Muslims, many of them refugees from Bihar, who chose Pakistan at the time of the partition riots in 1947, were mercilessly wiped out. Women were raped, or had their breasts torn out with specially fashioned knives. Children did not escape the horror: the lucky ones were killed with their parents, but many thousands of others must go through what life remains for them with eyes gouged out and limbs roughly amputated. More than 20,000 bodies of non-Bengalis have been found in main towns, such as Chittagong, Khulna, and Jessore. The real toll, I was told everywhere in East Bengal, may have been as high as 100,000; for thousands of non-Bengalis have vanished without a trace. (Mascarenhas, 1971).*

This opposing narrative of victimization has been reflected thoroughly in the media. The cinematic frame has acted as a mirror, reflecting the dominant narrative of these factors. As a result, the concept of ‘Genocide’ regarding the 1971 war remains unresolved, and yet no international recognition has been declared.

### **3.1.3. International Dynamics**

During the war, Indira Gandhi took a bold step to mobilize international opinion and support for the war (Murshid, 2011). However, there had been some international pressure on Pakistan to resolve the issue, legitimizing the elected government. But international superpower chose to remain neutral since they

didn't want to get involved in a new conflict during the Cold War era (Murshid, 2011). The stance gives a glimpse of Indira Gandhi's boldness and decisive power in mitigating the conflict. Also she went on a world tour to mobilize international opinion for East Pakistan, which clearly proved India has prioritized its humanitarian assistance for the justification of participating in the war.

### ***3.2 Role of Media in Portraying the 1971 Narrative***

The media plays a crucial role in ensuring national security in any country (Diri & Ekiye, 2019). Finally, separate narratives of different aspects of the liberation war have been portrayed differently in the cinematic verses.

India has done several studies on the portrayal of the 1971 liberation war in Bollywood movies. Haq (2022) stated that the contemporary cinematic universe has limited representation of the 1947 partition narrative and overrepresentation of the 1971 Liberation War. However, Bangladesh became a victim of both incidents. But the socio-political dynamics of a country are considered hostage to its history. Bangladesh constructed the ideological narrative of 1971 and its glorious contribution to controlling the populist sentiment (Ranjan, 2016b).

Dutta (2022) conducted a study on Bollywood films and its representation of 1971 Liberation War narrative. She got three significant findings as follows:

- Bollywood, as a film industry, has a large fandom among South Asians and the countries of the South Asian diaspora, and it is rapidly gaining international recognition.
- The Bollywood films about Bangladesh's 1971 Liberation War and related events lacked historical context.
- The Bollywood films avoided Bangladesh and its role in the 1971 conflict.

Thus, the literature raises a question about the recognition of Muktis and their tremendous sacrifices.

Studies on Pakistani cinema's representation in 1971 presented a contrasting perspective. (Shaad et al, 2022). In a press conference, a Pakistani spokesperson stated that if Pakistan's media had been as independent in 1971 as it is today, the country might not have collapsed, because as soon as the military operation in East Pakistan began, the media was entirely brought under government control. The media agencies that report news regarding the killing of non-Bengalis at the hands of insurgents are not to be reported in West Pakistan, as it could result in revolt, leading to severe consequences in this part of the country. The media complied with it faithfully.

Another critical analysis of Iqbal & Hussain (2018) stated the following outcome regarding the 1971 war:

*Pakistani media adopted three types of discursive strategies to present the situation in the 1971 India-Pakistan war. Firstly, the media from the initiation of the conflict indoctrinated its audience that Pakistan is winning the battle against a mad enemy having expansionist designs. Secondly, the press in West Pakistan used religion as an ideological tool against the Indian offensive strategy. Thirdly, in the ending days of the war, when Indian victory was imminent, the press in West Pakistan avoided portraying Pakistan as a loser and India as the winner in the conflict. Instead, it preached the patterns of self-control, moderation, and determination in dealing with the new realities and praised the heroic fight of soldiers against evil (Iqbal & Hussain, 2018).*

Bangladesh's Liberation War narrative is a heroic chronicle that proves, after a nine-month struggle and sacrifices, Bangladesh achieved independence. Bangladesh has produced numerous films based on the 1971 narrative. Most films reinforced the dominant narrative of independence, framing it as a triumphant milestone. However, Mookerjee (2011) argued that the movie *Meherjan* offered an alternative nationalist interpretation of 1971, which sparked widespread public outrage. A massive protest was organised to stop the screening of this movie in theatres. Thus, it proves that the film has always been a tool to portray the dominant discourse of history.

It has been observed in the literature review that researchers have viewed cinemas as an extension of their inductive hypothesis, which is that the movie will portray their dominant hypothesis. However, a few studies have been conducted to uncover the actual truth and realities of this war. This research mitigates the gap by addressing the dilemmas constructed through the lens of the text producers, who belong to a particular nationality and thus uphold the ideology of their dominant dogma, which has been injected over time. Through critical discourse analysis, the study clarifies the facts and provides a comparative analysis of the three separate ideological constructions.

#### **4. Conceptual Framework**

The research primarily involves a textual analysis of filmic language, which explores the experiential and expressive value of meaning construction, drawing on a study entitled *The image of Muslims in American Cinema: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Selected Movies* by Taha (2023). A Critical Discourse

Analysis of Selected Movies by Taha (2023). Firstly, through experiential meaning, the study unleashes the meaning of the text producer's message delivered through the film, favoring a particular version of truth. Secondly, through expressive meaning, the analysis reveals how filmmakers embed their attitudes and evaluations within the cinematic narrative.

## 5. Methodology

This study employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) within a qualitative content analysis framework to examine the cinematic portrayals of the 1971 Liberation War in three recent South Asian films: *Mujib: The Making of a Nation* (Bangladesh, 2023), directed by Shyam Benegal; *Khel Khel Mein* (Pakistan, 2021), directed by Nabeel Qureshi; and *Pippa* (India, 2023), directed by Raja Krishna Menon. CDA was selected as the primary analytical approach because it effectively uncovers how power relations, ideological positions, and national narratives are embedded within cinematic texts, allowing us to examine how these films construct specific versions of history that align with their respective national interests. Qualitative content analysis complements CDA by providing a systematic method for identifying patterns in representation across multiple films while remaining sensitive to cultural nuance and contextual meaning—essential considerations when analyzing politically contested historical narratives. These three films were selected through purposive sampling rather than random selection because they represent the most recent significant cinematic engagements with the 1971 war from each country, offering contemporary perspectives that reflect current national ideologies. Additionally, each film has received substantial critical attention and audience engagement in its country of origin, indicating its relevance to ongoing national discourse about this pivotal historical event.

The research is mainly a textual analysis of filmic language, which will discover the experiential and expressive value of meaning construction adapted from a study entitled "The image of Muslims in American Cinema: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Selected Movies" by Taha, (2023). Firstly, through experiential meaning, this study unleashes the meaning of the text producer's message delivered through the film, favoring a particular version of truth. Secondly, through expressive meaning, the study uncovers the text producer's way of judging through the production of his/her texts.

This study uses a methodical checklist approach that is interested in two things: the experiential value and expressive value of meaning within their narratives. The checklist is divided into two levels and several key themes: Historic Identifiers of the War (timeline, prominent political figures, causes, justifications,



and concepts of independence), Socio-Political Identifiers (political power holders and nationalism), Depiction of Liberation Forces, Victims, Enemies/Traitors, and International Support. In each of the themes, this study explicates key textual elements from the films and assesses them according to their experiential value (how the film's ideology is presented as true) and expressive value (how judgments are made through or within the narrative).

To ensure a thorough and accurate study, each film has been viewed in several screenings by at least two researchers who worked independently. Another author ultimately compared the findings, and contradictions were reconciled by discussion. Ultimately, our study was contextualized by the production environment of each film, its reception in its place of origin, and its contributions or alterations to the national narrative about this conflict.

## **6. Critical Analysis of 1971 Liberation War Representations in South Asian Cinema**

This analysis examines three important South Asian films that have addressed the 1971 Liberation War: *Mujib: The Making of a Nation* (Bangladesh, 2023), *Khel Khel Mein* (Pakistan, 2021), and *Pippa* (India, 2023). All of them offer their unique national narratives and contemporary political contexts to exhibit their depictions of history. This critical discourse analysis reveals how these films employ cinematic techniques, narrative styles, and ideological tools within the historical, cultural, and socio-political context, facilitating the formation of a specific sense of national identity and collective memory in South Asia.

### **6.1 Cinematic Temporality and Historic Framing**

*Mujib: The Making of a Nation* (Bangladesh, 2023) with an epic temporality range of its own (1940-1975), director Shyam Benegal focuses on Mujib following a proper biography style. The selective time-framing sheds a luminous light to highlight the temporal range of 35 years, from 1940 to 1975, creating a broad, sweeping narrative that serves to mythologize Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's life and locate the War of 1971 as the zenith of forty years of individual struggle. This temporal framing of the cinema equates the liberation war revolving around the lifelong struggle of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Like many contemporary political cinemas, this epic structure (resonant of biopics like Richard Attenborough's "*Gandhi, 1982*") delivers a single linear narrative of historical inevitability, ignoring all other political complexities. On the other hand, Nabeel Qureshi's film *Khel Khel Mein* adopts a contemporary setting, using the device of modern Pakistani youth exploring the 1971 narrative. The director prudently chooses to frame 1971 through the lens of the present temporal ground. This presents a compelling approach to exploring the liberation war, with

contemporary youth navigating between present and past to unravel the complexities of 1971. This temporal distancing allows for a meta-commentary on historical interpretation, echoing films like *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1981) in its layered approach to history. However, this structure could potentially undermine the significance of a war, as it is viewed as a historical puzzle to be solved by the generation alive today. Thus, it connects the narrative that some historical unresolved truth must be rediscovered to commiserate with the current geopolitical complexities.

*Pippa* by Raja Krishna Menon, on the other hand, homes in tightly on the closing months of 1971, that is between October and December (echoing films like *The Longest Day, 1962*). The director cautiously chooses this selective time period to accolade the Indian Army's active and heroic intrusion in the war of 1971, so that they could bring some particular events into the limelight, like the Battle of Garibpur, which happened at Jessore near the Indian border, and led to the death of Captain Balram Singh, a heroic military officer of India. This particular temporal framing helped to establish the narrative that India was affected due to the aggressive attack of Pakistan. The film is successful in capturing and showcasing an environment of fear, but perhaps focuses too much on non-stop action without adequately showing the larger and complex geopolitical dynamics that unfolded in different temporal regions.

## **6.2 Characterisation and Power Dynamics**

These films employed three different nationalistic approaches to influence the characterization of power dynamics, with Bangladesh centred around the single power beholder, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, portraying him as the supreme leader directing the Liberation War, which led to the birth of a new nation, Bangladesh. On the other hand, India showcased Indira Gandhi as a prudent leader who epitomizes humanity. At the same time, Pakistan is shown questioning the wisdom of established intellectuals at the expense of Bangladesh's protagonism in their history.

In examining characterisation and power dynamics, *Mujib: The Making of a Nation* adopts a "great man" approach by positioning Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as the only embodiment of Bangladesh's independence movement, which is though emotionally compelling but marginalises the broader collective effort and complex political currents to the vision and will of one man—similar to how *JFK* (1991) frames history around a central hero. In contrast, *Khel Khel Mein* downplays Mujib's role altogether, presenting him as a peripheral figure while subtly glorifying the foresight of Pakistani intellectuals—a move that flattens the historical narrative and lacks the layered multiplicity of viewpoints seen in films

like *Rashomon* (1950). Meanwhile, *Pippa* shifts her focus to India's political leadership, primarily Indira Gandhi, casting her in a firm, Margaret Thatcher-like manner, reminiscent of *The Iron Lady* (2011), thereby overshadowing the agency and grassroots resistance of the Bangladeshis themselves.

### **6.3 Narrative Causality and War Justification**

This study examines three movies that centre on history's most contentious and subjective war. Cinema justifies historical events by establishing a suitable narrative that aligns with nationalism, where to some, it is a victory, and to others, it is merely an insurgency. *Mujib: The Making of a Nation* employs storytelling devices reminiscent of '*The Battle of Algiers*' to show the systematic oppression of West Pakistan, particularly through scenes of Operation Searchlight, establishing the narrative that war becomes the only viable path to national emancipation. On the other hand, Pakistan, by the movie *Khel Khel Mein*, put an accusatory figure on India, condemning them as intruders trying to flare up the conflict, and it is their solemn duty to save the nation, engaging in an inevitable war. According to the film, a refugee character from Pakistan who could not go back to his country due to the 1971 war witnessed a mass killing and torture of the Pakistani refugees, mostly known as Bihari people, who blamed India directly and lamented their current situation. *Pippa* constitutes a humanistic narrative of justification, portraying the atrocities and uncontrolled aggression of West Pakistan and its expansionist nature.

### **6.4 Representation of Liberation Forces**

The portrayal of the Liberation Forces is another subjective representation that three countries followed in their heroic representation. Bangladesh represented the 'Mukti Bahini' as the freedom fighters who saved the nation. In contrast, India made Mukti Bahini a mere local supporting group of revolutionists who assisted the Indian army, and Pakistan clearly mentioned that the Mukti Bahini is a separatist insurgent group. India made their narrative of nationalism, showcasing the Indian Army as the mighty saviour to restore peace in East Pakistan. *Mujib: The Making of a Nation* employs cinematic techniques to glorify the Mukti Bahini, drawing inspiration from the words of Sheikh Mujib, and is enhanced by rousing speeches from Mujib and mass crowd scenes. The Mukti Bahini is shown in a positive light, with all possible support provided by Mujib and the masses. On the contrary, *Khel Khel Mein* portrays the Mukti Bahini as being misled by a third party, namely India, creating a complex narrative with immense geopolitical significance. However, there is some danger in this depiction edging into revisionism without the proper historical backup.

*Pippa* portrayed inaccuracy by demoting Mukti Bahini to merely offering 'local support' for Indian military operations from a colonial gaze. The film captured the moment when one of the protagonists, Major Ram Mehta, was assigned an important mission to undertake a covert operation in disguise to gather intelligence. During his mission, a local group of Mukti Bahini assisted him in making the mission successful. This could be done in a fashion comparable to the movie '*Lawrence of Arabia*', where the native forces are viewed through a Western lens of outside interference, possibly falling into more colonial gaze territory.

### **6.5 On Screen of Victimhood and Perpetration**

All three films use a binary method to portray the victim and the perpetrator. In the cinema of India and Pakistan, this study found a collective narration of victimhood portraying the masses of East Pakistan who fought for their equal civil rights. In contrast, in Pakistan, the narration claimed West Pakistanis living in East Pakistan (Bihari) as the only victims of this war. *Mujib: The Making of a Nation* and *Pippa* presumably utilise stark, gritty cinematography to illustrate the awful things done by Pakistani forces, much like movies like *Schindler's List* (1993) or *The Killing Fields* (1984). In the movie *Khel Khel Mein*, it appeals to a common sense of victimhood by playing up the bruised feelings of Bangladeshis and Pakistanis alike (both are victims of Indian conspiracy). This balanced portrayal surely has historical and geopolitical roots embedded in critical discourses.

In representing the theme of perpetration, *Mujib: The Making of a Nation* and *Pippa* employ a strategy of selective framing, foregrounding graphic and visceral imagery that underscores the brutal atrocities committed by the Pakistani military, including mass rapes and the systemic captivity of women for exploitative purposes. In contrast, *Khel Khel Mein* constructs an alternative narrative wherein India is positioned as the principal aggressor—an external interloper whose intervention is depicted as the disruptive force responsible for fracturing the intrinsic unity and fraternity of what is portrayed as a singular national entity.

This subjective interpretation of victimhood and perpetration is still relevant in the present complex geopolitical scenario, where the controversy regarding genocide is still unresolved. Bangladesh asks for international recognition of genocide, claiming 30 million lost souls who were martyred due to the brutal atrocities led by the Pakistani Army in association with Pakistan-backed civilians 'Bihari community'. On the contrary, Pakistan claimed an alternative notion where they state that it is none other than the Bihari community who are the

victims of insurgencies led by Mukti Bahini, who were misled by India in East Pakistan.

### **6.6 Geopolitical Framing and International Dynamics**

*Mujib: The Making of a Nation* and *Pippa* both films focus on how India earned international support, perhaps with high-octane sequences of diplomacy and international bargaining at play. This dramatic interpretation dangerously minimizes the role of global Cold War politics in creating the tangled narrative that played out on the battlefields. On the contrary, *Khel Khel Mein* employs a myopic portrayal of the conflict, glossing over international involvement and placing most of the blame at India's feet, also underscoring a fairly insular view. This approach might be seen as narrow in its narrative lens, but it offers an opportunity to focus on a particular area of regional dynamics.

In film *Pippa*, the declaration of Indira Gandhi in actively involving in the war had a strong impact of establishing the narrative of her dominance of tackling critical international dynamics, showing that despite tremendous international pressure, India chose to participate in the war. Indira Gandhi had performed the sole duty to mediate complex diplomacy by gaining support from Soviet Russia. But this skimming has prudently escaped the cold war politics and complex dynamics of that period.

### **6.7 Cinematic Construction of National Identity**

Indeed, these three films adopted their national identity aligning with their own respective belief and ideology of historical narrative. In a nutshell, Bangladesh established this war as their nine months struggle of independence, India showcased their extreme humanitarian nature of saving the neighbour country and Pakistan established a narrative as 'conspiracy game' where India made them a mere victim of losing an integrated part of their land.

*Mujib: The Making of a Nation* uses powerful symbolic imagery and emotive musical scores to reinforce Bangladesh's identity as rooted in linguistic and cultural rights. This approach, while evocative, risks essentializing complex national identities. On the contrary, *Khel Khel Mein*, by depicting young Pakistanis grappling with their nation's past, the film engages in a meta-commentary on national identity formation. This self-reflexive approach, if executed well, could offer nuances into the ongoing process of national identity construction to date.

*Pippa* showcases India flexing its military muscle and diplomatic weight through grandiose cinematography and inspirational musical scores.

In sum, *Mujib: The Making of a Nation* presents a mythologising narrative of Bangladesh's Liberation War, grandiosely filmised in a biopic structure. *Khel Khel Mein* is a revisionist in a way, while trying to reframe everything through a contemporary lens, but risks oversimplifying history. *Pippa* covers the military action and high-level politics in depth, likely at the expense of a more comprehensive understanding of the root cause of the conflict.

Together, these films serve as a poignant reminder of the enduring power of cinema to shape cultural memory and national identity in South Asia. They expose the ways in which 1971 remains a memory battleground, and how both countries employ cinematic idioms to stitch their versions of history together. The movies, then, are not just a recreation of history, but rather contributors to the actual nation-building and regional geopolitics.

## 7. Discussion

The depiction in recent cinema of the 1971 Liberation War, which has shaped contemporary South Asia from the Indian perspective, constitutes a compelling prism through which to examine the complex questions surrounding historical memory, national identity, and geopolitical narratives in this region. In critical readings of *Mujib: The Making of a Nation* (Bangladesh, 2023), *Khel Khel Mein* (Pakistan, 2021), and *Pippa* (India, 2023) this study explores how different narrative techniques, and the language of cinema are manipulated to create specific historical constructions that fit within their respective national imperatives and envelopes.

A common aspect of the way the 1971 Liberation War is portrayed in these films is that it stems from distinct historical markers, sociopolitical discourses, and ideological positions of each nation it belongs to. Similarly, *Mujib: The Making of a Nation* spans four decades (from 1940 to 1975) to celebrate the political evolution of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's life and analyse statehood as the culmination of a long-battled confrontation. This is an emotionally resonant, if simplistic, account of how vast historical processes can be transformed into a linear narrative leading to the desired outcome. It seems like a grandiose representation of Mujib, depicting him as the unifying face of Bangladesh's fight for independence. While this narrative helps to encourage the role of Mujib and the Awami League as central actors in Bangladeshi nationalism, it also risks surpassing the accomplishments of other important leaders and mass movements.

*Khel Khel Mein*, however, appears to take a fragment of the events out of the marvel playbook by employing a meta-narrative structure, in this case involving contemporary Pakistani youth as a framing device for events that transpired

decades ago in 1971. This technique enables the movie to engage in a kind of revisionist history through the lens of youthful curiosity. The film tries to question the historical narrative by arguing that both Bangladeshi and Pakistani people were victims of Indian machinations. This storytelling approach, which might be more digestible for Pakistani viewers, runs the risk of superficialising deep-rooted historical facts and promoting misinterpretation about how the war originated and unfolded.

On the one hand, *Pippa* has a straightforwardly more militaristic gaze- one that identifies distinct dates and military operations in mapping out an Indian story of righteousness and heroism. The film also reinforces an image of Indian regional hegemony by discussing how India may have been a reluctant, yet imperative, intervener. The narrow focus on the ending stages of the conflict, as victory neared in December 1971, conveniently overlooks the months of Bangladeshi resistance; thereby possibly muddling Bengali agency and struggle.

As all three of the national cinemas grapple with their filmic narratives, they are also part of the ongoing controversy over national identity construction and collective memory in the region. *Mujib: The Making of a Nation* presents a mostly Bangladesh-centric account, suggesting that the birth of a nation was a logical conclusion of an extended ordeal, which highlights the role of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. While this narrative is undoubtedly empowering for a Bangladeshi audience, it also falls short of the crux, which is that independence movements are all but individualistic.

*Khel Khel Mein* appears to be a radical departure from the usual brand of 1971 as presented in Pakistani cinema, where most filmmakers either turned a blind eye to the war or had little regard for it. By generating a joint story of victimhood with Bangladesh, Pakistan accomplishes an important aim, but a wrong one, because while it absolves the Pakistani army from being solely responsible for all 71 events, it also prevents more honest conversations. This reflects a broader tendency in Pakistani discourses to reinterpret 1971, which does not fully accept historical accountability.

The story of *Pippa* is a counter-narrative that sharply differs from the Pakistani and Bangladeshi schools of thought. It covers aspects of the Indian military operations and strategic decisions during the war that might marginalise stories and images of common Bangladeshi freedom fighters, as well as the masses. This story reinforces India's identity as a regional hegemon and a preachy big brother, serving to legitimise the existing power structures in South Asian geopolitics.

The language of these films has played a crucial role in shaping contemporary political discourses and the geopolitics of South Asia. *Mujib: The Making of a*

*Nation* further solidifies Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his party as central forces in the national narrative of Bangladesh. This framing had significant implications for the Sheikh Hasina regime in Bangladeshi politics (until July 2024), where the Liberation War served as a crucial basis for political legitimacy.

*Khel Khel Mein* also nakedly set out to do a spot of cinematic diplomacy, buffing up Pakistan's mirrored self-image at home and abroad. By portraying India as the main antagonist, the movie provides a narrative that taps into or even fuels current frustrations with India from Pakistan, thereby contributing to regional tensions. Trying to shape a common narrative of being victimised with Bangladesh can be counted as a soft power strategy, reducing long-term historical grievances.

*Pippa* reinforces the self-perception of India as a regional despot and spiritual grandmaster. The film might stress the importance of India in Bangladesh's freedom struggle, with a bid to further strengthen regional cooperation between the two countries, while also emerging, all while carefully avoiding the deteriorating ties between India and Pakistan. However, the story of the film could also affect the public perception of India's loss of sovereignty to interfere in affairs of its neighboring countries and therefore provide a reason for possible future interventions, which is critical as it affects the regional power balance.

To sum up, what is portrayed on celluloid in depicting South Asia's 1971 Liberation War is nothing but how film becomes a battleground for hegemonic narratives of history. Traditionally, these films, as a completed totality, construct their war, independent of historical fact, which in turn reflects not only the past but also the present political and social trends specific to where they were made, shaping collective memory, national identity, and geopolitical interactions.

This diverse literature on South Asian cinema's representations of the 1971 Liberation War reveals an interplay that is both complementary to and disputative of our own findings. Dutta and Gupta (2022) critique of how Bollywood simplifies history resonates with our argument about *Pippa* as an example of the culture industry reinscribing regional hegemony. This sharp contrast to the hagiographic *Mujib: The Making of a Nation* further illustrates Bangladeshi cinema's tensions by examining Mohaiemen's "*Meherjan*" in relation to Mookherjee (2011). Ranjan (2016) noted how 1971 narratives are politically manipulated in an uncannily parallel fashion, as this study observes concerning *Mujib*, emphasising the role of cinema in political legitimisation. Together, these different perspectives help to shed light on the continuing balance between long-established national mythologies and newer historical readings in South Asian cinema.



Viewing these films through a theoretical framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) offers a unique window into unpacking the various layers of meaning present in these texts. A movie like *Mujib: The Making of a Nation* is not simply a biopic, but the creation and reproduction of an official discourse that roots Bangladeshi foundational mythmaking, as it legitimates Hasina's repressive power at the time. The revisionist interpretation of *Khel Khel Mein*, similarly, appears to aim to rewrite Pakistan's historical narrative once again, driven by geopolitical interests and discourse building. The regional hegemony articulated through Pippa's enunciative practice is India's own form of historical representation as 'Big Brother' of South Asia. Using CDA, it has been easy to examine how these movies encode specific ideas linguistically, visually, and ostentatiously in order to make them seem like common sense while silencing others.

## 8. Conclusion

The cinematic representations of the 1971 War of Liberation in "*Mujib: The Making of a Nation*", "*Khel Khel Mein*", and "*Pippa*" offer an interesting insight into how collective memory, national identity, and geopolitics intersect in contemporary South Asia. Born of their respective national situations, films like these employ different narrative styles to construct histories, catering to the politics and interests of each nation. In the process, they present a continued conflict over history in the region, with each nation exercising its control through film to provide coherence to its national narrative.

These films are not only entertainment or even a dramatisation of the past, but also a powerful tool for forming a collective memory and discourse that can influence current geopolitical relations in South Asia. Nonetheless, due to the very nature of constructing popular narratives, under which they are supposed to be meaningful and useful for forming a sense of national identity, they can hardly escape oversimplifying events and reproducing certain divisive narratives. Therefore, these films are, in many ways, like two-edged swords that can help maintain a discourse on common historical traumas in some aspects, while hindering it in others.

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