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Historical Distortion and the Propaganda Function of *Dhurandhar* (2025)

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ABSTRACT

The 2025 Bollywood thriller *Dhurandhar* presents mainly three areas of India Pakistan conflict: the 1999 hijacking of Indian Airlines Flight IC-814, the 2008 Mumbai attacks, and the gang wars of Karachi's Lyari district. This paper points out how varied the presentation of these events is from the records and then asks whether the film's departures from the documented record are incidental creative storytelling liberties or a patterned distortion that serves an ideological purpose, connecting with other Indian nationalist films that were flawed factually especially during BJP's second tenure. This paper first establishes a factual baseline from primary sources, including encyclopaedic reference works, a United States Treasury sanctions release, and a Combating Terrorism Center profile, and then measures the film against that baseline. It reads the resulting gaps through the Bollywood propaganda model (Palasseri, 2023) which is based on Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model (Herman and Chomsky, 1988); the dual-Othering framework of nationalist cinema (Khan & Khan, 2026), specifically Hindutva ideologies and anti-Muslim sentiments; and accounts of the saffronization (glorifying Hindu heritage) of the Hindi film industry (Hajee, 2024). The analysis finds that the film consistently collapses distinct Pakistani criminal and militant actors into a single, interconnected enemy, compresses timelines, and misattributes acts of terror with an intention to intensify them which fits the model of what Herman and Chomsky (1988) call the "anti-Other" control mechanism, adapted to the political economy of contemporary Indian cinema. The paper concludes that *Dhurandhar* functions as propaganda for manufacturing a coherent national adversary.

Keywords: Bollywood, propaganda model, Hindu nationalism, Othering, historical distortion, *Dhurandhar*

INTRODUCTION

When *Dhurandhar* opened in Indian theatres on 5th December 2025, it arrived as one of the highest-grossing Hindi films of the year, directed by Aditya Dhar and led by Ranveer Singh, Akshaye Khanna, Sanjay Dutt, Arjun Rampal, and R. Madhavan, gaining a lot of traction and virality on social media as well (Dhar, 2025). Set largely in early 2000s Karachi, it presents itself as a fact inspired account of an Indian intelligence operation against the criminal and militant networks of Pakistan. Within weeks it had generated a political storm on both sides of the border, drawing a court petition in Karachi, muted

dialogue after legal notices, and public criticism from scholars and film critics (Sharma, 2025). Sami Qahar in his article in Dawn News said "At times, the oversights are so obvious that it seems that, midway through the film, they all just stopped caring about details" (Qahar, 2026). Similarly, Nida Kirmani told Al Jazeera "The representation in the film is completely based on fantasy" (Sharma, 2025).

The controversy derives from the fact that the film does not invent its world from nothing but borrows real people with their real names and real atrocities, then rearranges them. A viewer with no prior knowledge would leave the cinema believing a particular version of recent South Asian history. The central question is not whether *Dhurandhar* is accurate, since popular cinema is rarely a documentary, but whether its inaccuracies fall into a pattern, and whether that pattern does ideological work. The research question of this paper is therefore: do the historical distortions in *Dhurandhar* form a consistent pattern, and if so, does that pattern serve a propaganda function? To explore this, the paper also discusses Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model to explain how this movie and Indian nationalist cinema fit into that model.

To answer this research question, the paper proceeds with two analytical approaches. The first is a historical analysis that reconstructs what the documented record actually says about IC-814, the Mumbai attacks, the Lyari gang wars, the Khanani money-laundering network, and the militant Ilyas Kashmiri, and then identifies where the film diverges. The second is a media analysis that interprets those divergences through established theories of nationalist and propagandistic cinema. Together, the two approaches find that the film's distortions from fact are structured, directional, and consistent with a broader turn in the Hindi film industry.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The study rests on three connected existing topics in literature. The first is the propaganda model developed by Herman and Chomsky (1988), which argues that mass media content is filtered before it reaches the public by five structural filters and the content that passes those filters the best, reaches people the most. Palasseri (2023) adapts this model to Indian cinema and proposes a Bollywood propaganda framework built on five filters: concentrated corporate ownership, advertising, sourcing, flak and enforcers, and an "anti-Other" control mechanism. Palasseri (2023) argues that these filters have become more visible during the recent tenure of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), when films increasingly present idealized national figures and antagonize a religious or national adversary (Muslims and Pakistanis in this case) in order to secure market and support from the government. This framework explains why a commercial blockbuster has any incentive to carry a state aligned message without any explicit instruction to do so. More so, Bollywood filmmakers are not just rewarded by echoing the state's ideologies by gaining support from the government, but are also brutally punished for holding slightly differing views from extreme right-wing ideologies (Palasseri, 2023). This is how Bollywood plays the role of a "soft power" playing a central role in shaping national identity, promotes normative behaviour and highlights figures to be idealized and identified with, contributing significantly to India's social engineering (Palasseri, 2023).

The second piece of literature concerns how Hindi cinema constructs Muslims as enemies. Khan and Khan (2026), analysing the films *Garv*, *Dil Se*, and *Fiza*, describe a durable pattern of dual Othering, in which Pakistani Muslims are cast as external threats and Indian Muslims as internal ones. For Khan and Khan (2026), the war and terrorism genres play a major role in manufacturing the boundary between who belongs to the nation and who is an "Other".

The third body of work situates these patterns within an industry-level shift. Hajee (2024) describes a saffronization of Bollywood, in which the Hindu right shapes film content less through direct ownership than through intimidation, selective promotion, and a climate of self-censorship. In his account, films such as *The Kashmir Files* and *The Kerala Story* become profitable templates, and, in his words, "by making Indian-ness synonymous with Hindu-ness, they normalise Islamophobia in public discourse" (Hajee, 2024). Taken together, these three literatures supply a testable expectation. If *Dhurandhar* is a propaganda text in the sense these authors describe, its historical distortions should not be neutral. They should systematically enlarge, unify, and darken the Pakistani and Muslim adversary while flattering the Indian state.

METHODOLOGY

To answer the research question of whether the film's departures from the historical record form a pattern that serves a propaganda function, the paper uses a qualitative, single-case study design (analyzing one example in depth), presenting the actual facts using reliable sources to separate from film's distorted ones with critical discourse analysis on how the intent of this may be to send a political message. The approach has two stages. In the first stage, a factual baseline is assembled from authoritative and, where possible, primary sources rather than from journalistic summaries alone. These include the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* entries on the hijacking of IC-814 and the Mumbai attacks of 2008, a United States Department of the Treasury (2015) sanctions press release naming the Khanani money-laundering organization, and a Combating Terrorism Center at West Point (2011) profile of Ilyas Kashmiri. Indian court records, specifically the Mumbai police charge sheet as reported in the secondary literature, are used to test specific claims about who did and did not participate in the 2008 attacks.

In the second stage, the film's narrative claims, as described in its production materials and in critical coverage (*Dhurandhar*, 2025; Sharma, 2025), are compared point by point against that baseline. Each divergence is then analyzed to show how each one adds to the bigger picture of the adversary: shows them as more dangerous or threatening, smaller/larger, more unified. This allows the study to distinguish a neutral simplification of the plot with no propagandistic intention, which any adaptation makes, from an intentional ideological distortion, which pushes consistently one way. The interpretive lens for the second movement is the combined propaganda and Othering framework set out above.

ANALYSIS PART ONE: THE HISTORICAL RECORD AGAINST THE FILM

This section reconstructs each episode from authoritative and primary sources and sets it against the film's version. Table 1 summarizes the five cases and, in its final column, records the direction in which each distortion pushes. The subsections that follow discuss each case in turn.

Case	Documented record	*Dhurandhar*'s version	Direction of distortion
IC-814 hijacking (1999)	Kathmandu–Delhi flight seized, landed in Taliban-held Kandahar; three militants freed; lone victim killed by a Harkat-ul-Mujahideen hijacker; Jaish-e-Mohammed did not yet exist (founded 2000)	Compresses the hijacking party and attributes the violence to Jaish-e-Mohammed	Back-dates a notorious group onto a 1999 event
Mumbai attacks (2008)	Ten Lashkar-e-Taiba attackers, ~166 killed; "Major Iqbal" named as ISI handler; charge sheet lists no role for Rehman Dakait	Threads the Lyari underworld and Rehman Dakait into the 26/11 operation	Invents a link to Lyari underworld absent from the investigative record
Rehman Dakait / Lyari (2000s)	Sardar Abdul Rehman Baloch; founded the People's Aman Committee (2008); allied with PPP figures; trafficked real illegal arms; killed in a 2009 police encounter	Recast as a maker of counterfeit arms, tied to Ilyas Kashmiri, 26/11, and a "Baloch" armed force	Promotes a local racketeer into a transnational terror node; conflates Lyari crime with the separate Baloch insurgency
Khanani network	Money-laundering group designated by the U.S. Treasury (2015); links to Taliban, LeT, Dawood Ibrahim, al-Qaeda, JeM; Altaf jailed in the U.S.	Portrays the brothers as launderers (broadly accurate) but ties them to a fake-Indian-currency scheme	The currency claim is absent from the Treasury designation
Ilyas Kashmiri	Ex-SSG commando; led al-Qaeda-linked Brigade 313; had broken with the ISI (detained more than once); killed by a U.S. drone strike (2011); "Major Iqbal" was a separate handler	Fuses Kashmiri and the "Major Iqbal" handler into one serving ISI officer and mastermind	Erases documented ISI–Kashmiri friction; consolidates two figures into a single state-directed enemy

Table 1: The documented record versus *Dhurandhar*'s version across five cases

Note. Documented record compiled from Encyclopaedia Britannica (n.d.-a, n.d.-b), U.S. Department of the Treasury (2015), Nye (2010), and Sharma (2025). Film details from Dhar (2025) and Qahar (2026).

IC-814 and the invented attribution

The documented hijacking is well established (Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.-a). As Table 1 records, India freed three militants, Masood Azhar among them, and the single passenger killed, Rupin Katyal,

was stabbed by a member of Harkat-ul-Mujahideen. The critical detail is chronological: Jaish-e-Mohammed did not yet exist. Azhar founded it only after his release, in 2000.

By reworking this episode, *Dhurandhar* points it in a different direction, showing a much smaller group, and attributing the violence to Jaish-e-Mohammed, an organization that had not been formed at the time. By back-dating a notorious group onto a 1999 event, the film builds a tidy line of causation from the hijacking to later terrorism, a line the historical record does not draw.

The Mumbai attacks and a phantom arms supplier

Ten Lashkar-e-Taiba attackers killed roughly 166 people over four days in November 2008 (Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.-b). David Headley's testimony introduced the ISI handler known as "Major Iqbal," the real basis for one of the film's characters. The extensive Mumbai police charge sheet, however, does not name the Karachi gangster Rehman Dakait as a participant or arms supplier. The film's decision to weave the Lyari underworld into the machinery of 26/11 therefore invents a connection for which the investigative record provides no support.

Lyari, Rehman Dakait, and the manufacture of scale

The figure the film calls Rehman Dakait was a real man, Sardar Abdul Rehman Baloch, who founded the People's Aman Committee in 2008 and operated in alliance with elements of the Pakistan Peoples Party, a relationship later described in investigative reporting and in the judicial confession of his successor Uzair Baloch (Sharma, 2025). He was killed in a police encounter in August 2009. The film even preserves a recognizable version of the politician Nabil Gabol in its character Jameel Jamali, a resemblance Gabol himself acknowledged.

Around this factual core the film adds inventions that all inflate the adversary. Rehman Baloch was an illegal arms trafficker who dealt in real weapons, yet the film reimagines him as a manufacturer of counterfeit arms tied into a transnational conspiracy. It links him to the militant Ilyas Kashmiri and to the Mumbai attacks, connections that have no public evidentiary basis. It associates him with a "Baloch" armed force, conflating ordinary Lyari gang criminality with the entirely separate Baloch nationalist insurgency. As the sociologist Nida Kirmani observed, the film's Karachi "is completely based on fantasy" and its method is to take "cherry-picked historical figures" and bend them into "this very Indian nationalistic narrative" (Sharma, 2025). The effect is to promote a local racketeer into a node of global terrorism.

The Khanani network and the currency claim

The Khanani money-laundering organization itself was quite real and significant. The United States Department of the Treasury (2015) designated it as a transnational criminal organization on 12 November 2015, describing a network that laundered illicit funds for organized crime, drug traffickers, and designated terrorist groups, with reported links to the Taliban, Lashkar-e-Taiba, Dawood Ibrahim, al-Qaeda, and Jaish-e-Mohammed. Altaf Khanani was arrested in 2015, pleaded guilty in 2017, and

served a United States prison sentence, while his brother Javed died in Karachi in December 2016. About this organization, the film is broadly accurate except for the deviation in tying the brothers to a scheme to flood India with counterfeit currency, a claim that appears in Indian intelligence commentary but not in the Treasury designation itself. Here the distortion is smaller, which will add to our analysis, because it shows the film exaggerating most where the documented record lacks the most.

Ilyas Kashmiri and the collapsed identity

Ilyas Kashmiri was a former Special Service Group commando who eventually commanded the al-Qaeda-linked Brigade 313 before being killed in a United States drone strike in June 2011 (Nye, 2010). It is important to note that his relationship with the Pakistani state had broken down years before his death. He was detained more than once and had become an independent militant rather than a serving officer. On the other hand, "Major Iqbal" of Headley's testimony was a separate ISI handler, not Kashmiri.

Dhurandhar fuses these two distinct figures into a single character, presenting a serving ISI officer who is also a battle-hardened militant mastermind. In doing so the film hides the recorded conflict between Kashmiri and the Pakistani state, which would have complicated the film's main idea of having a unified, state-directed enemy.

ANALYSIS PART TWO: READING THE DISTORTIONS AS PROPAGANDA

Analyzed side by side, the divergences share a theme: enlarging an adversary, unifying previously separate actors, or advancing the timeline of a militant group to blame them for earlier events. The film compresses a hijacking and misattributes it to a group that did not exist. It makes a local gangster be involved in an international terror plot. It turns a racketeer into a weapons conspirator, and it dissolves a defected militant back into the state that had actually turned against him.

This is precisely the behaviour the anti-Other filter from Palasseri (2023) predicts. In Palasseri's (2023) adaptation of Herman and Chomsky (1988), the fifth filter functions by "antagonising minorities" and consolidating an external threat so that audience attention is directed away from domestic concerns and toward an imagined adversary. The film's structural conditions fit the other filters as well. It was produced under concentrated corporate ownership by a major studio, and its sourcing draws heavily on state aligned intelligence narratives, including the real intercepted communications of the Mumbai attackers, which makes fiction seem more like a documentary. The flak filter is visible in the film's reception, where, as the Film Critics Guild noted, reviewers who criticized the film faced coordinated online harassment (Sharma, 2025).

These distortions also map cleanly onto the dual-Othering model of Khan and Khan (2026). The Pakistani figures, from Kashmiri to the Khananis to Rehman Baloch, are constructed as the external Other, a monolithic and interconnected threat emerging from across the border. This is the cinematic production of Anderson's (1983) imagined community by negation, defining the Indian nation through the enemy it is

set against. According to insight from Hall (1980), meaning is encoded through cultural codes and the choices that the film makes consistently encode an image of Pakistan as a single hostile adversary.

A detailed Dawn review catalogued the film's factual slippages, reading them as a "comedy of errors" produced by indifference to detail (Qahar, 2026). Al Jazeera's reporting placed the film within an emerging trend of Hindi cinema that reduces Muslims across the border to terrorists in step with government messaging, quoting the critic Mayank Shekhar's observation that the film "has been performed, written, directed by those who haven't ever stepped foot in Karachi" (Sharma, 2025). Both accounts describe, from different vantage points, the same machinery that Hajee (2024) identifies at the industry level, in which making Indian-ness synonymous with Hindu-ness normalizes the villainizing of the Muslim Other.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

By merging Kashmiri with a separate ISI handler, by wiring a Karachi racketeer into 26/11, and by back-dating a terrorist organization, the film produces the thought of a single coherent enemy. As a result the audience holds the entire adversary in a single thought, and according to the propaganda and Othering frameworks discussed above, the film succeeds in carrying out an ideological task.

We also notice a pattern of well documented events getting the least embellishments but the stories of more underground figures being overly exaggerated which shows the movie has distorted those facts more which are harder to verify. The bigger distortions also play a bigger role in making the narrative more cohesive. Again, these analyses point to the fact that the distortions are not random errors in research, but appear intentional.

The evidence collected answers the research question of this paper: the historical liberties in *Dhurandhar* form a pattern, and that pattern is ideological. Across five distinct cases, the film's departures from the authoritative record move consistently in the direction of a larger, more unified, and more menacing Pakistani adversary, which found a lot of success in an industry that has started rewarding such propaganda more.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has some limitations. First, it is a single-case study, so its findings describe one film and cannot on their own show how widespread this pattern is across Indian cinema. Second, the film's narrative claims were taken partly from production materials and critical coverage, and the Mumbai police charge sheet was only accessed as reported in the secondary literature, so some details may have been missed or shaped by other writers' readings. Third, the analysis reads an ideological function from the pattern of distortions, but it cannot directly prove the intentions of the filmmakers, which would require production records or interviews that were not available for this study. Finally, the sources used were in English, and Hindi and Urdu reviews and commentary may offer perspectives this paper does not cover.

Future work could be done with audience research to measure whether the manufactured coherence described here actually reshapes viewers' beliefs about the region. A comparative study of *Dhurandhar* alongside other recent nationalist films could also test whether the same pattern of distortion appears across the industry.

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