

Spectacular India: Gujarat as a Microcosm of National Identity in Bhansali's *Ram-Leela* and *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam*

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Introduction

The term 'Bollywood' was coined in the 1970s as a playful blend of 'Bombay' (now Mumbai) and 'Hollywood,' signifying the Hindi-language film industry based in Mumbai. While often conflated with Indian cinema as a whole, Bollywood represents only a subset of the nation's vast cinematic landscape, which includes regional industries such as Tamil, Telugu, Bengali, and Marathi cinema. Bollywood is distinct for its grand narratives, melodrama, and elaborate song-and-dance sequences, designed to appeal to a pan-Indian and global audience. As Ashish Rajadhyaksha notes, the term reflects "the shift of Indian cinema from national identity to global branding," underscoring Bollywood's role in both preserving cultural specificity and catering to cosmopolitan tastes (Rajadhyaksha and Willemsen 17). Furthermore, the distinction between Bollywood and Hindi cinema lies in their approach; while Bollywood epitomizes commercial, star-driven entertainment, Hindi cinema also encompasses art-house and parallel films that focus on realism and experimental narratives. Tejaswini Ganti observes that Bollywood films often "navigate the tension between tradition and modernity while aiming for global appeal," a hallmark of the industry's ability to bridge local and universal sensibilities (Ganti 45).

Bollywood's cultural dominance has led to the phenomenon termed the 'Bollywoodization' of culture, where regional traditions are romanticized and universalized through cinematic representation. This phenomenon is particularly evident in Sanjay Leela Bhansali's films, including *Goliyon*

Ki Raasleela: Ram-Leela and *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam*, which blend hyperreal aesthetics with regional ethos to create a homogenized yet idealized vision of Indian culture. By drawing on Gujarat's cultural landscape, Bhansali's works exemplify Bollywood's dual role as both a cultural unifier within India and a global storyteller, reshaping traditions into a spectacle that resonates across national and international boundaries.

Bombay film industry's aesthetic appeal lies in its ability to create a sense of spectacle that captivates audiences through its visual grandeur, melodrama, and larger-than-life narratives. Neelam Sidhar Wright, in her book *Bollywood and Postmodernism: Popular Indian Cinema in the 21st Century*, argues that Bollywood employs postmodern techniques, blending the traditional with the contemporary to construct an exaggerated and hyperreal cinematic experience. According to Wright, the spectacle in Bollywood is "not merely a decorative excess but a deliberate strategy to intensify emotional engagement and cultural resonance" (Wright 84). This deliberate use of spectacle is evident in Sanjay Leela Bhansali's films, where intricate costume designs, vibrant color palettes, and choreographed musical sequences are central to storytelling. In *Goliyon Ki Raasleela: Ram-Leela*, for instance, Bhansali transforms the Gujarati cultural landscape into a hyperreal realm of visual and emotional opulence, ensuring that even the regional specificity of the narrative attains universal appeal.

The hyperreality of postmodernism seamlessly intertwines traditional Indian aesthetics with contemporary cinematic techniques, often interpreted through what is termed "Eurocentric hermeneutics." This perspective highlights the tension between employing postmodern devices and interpreting them through Western theoretical paradigms. The vibrant and exaggerated colors characteristic of traditional Indian art forms, such as the Rajasthani and Pahari schools of painting, parallel the hyperreal visual elements present in Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Goliyon Ki Raasleela: Ram-Leela* and *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam*. These films, celebrated for their opulent storytelling, showcase Bhansali's hyperaesthetic style, which transforms regional traditions into visual

spectacles. Ajay Gehlawat, in his book *Reforming Bollywood: Theories of Popular Hindi Cinema*, critiques these portrayals by asserting that “indigenous frames of reference can also be a trap in Eurocentric hermeneutics” (Gehlawat 63). This notion resonates with Jean-François Lyotard’s exploration in *The Postmodern Condition*, where he argues that grand narratives are deconstructed in favor of sensory and visual representations, emphasizing a shift from intellectualized interpretation to hyperreal imagery (Lyotard 82).

Furthermore, Scott Lash, in *Global Culture Industry*, extends Jean Baudrillard’s concept of hyperrealism, contending that the “figural” in cinema displaces traditional meaning with a focus on emotional and visual appeal (Lash 45). Bhansali’s films, through their intricate use of hyperreal visuals and emotionally charged performances, exemplify this shift, transforming Indian cultural narratives into universally resonant cinematic experiences. Moreover, Indira Nath Chaudhary, in her work *Postmodernism: A Search for Roots*, argues that Indian cinematic postmodernism should be analyzed through indigenous realities, rather than solely through globalized frameworks. She highlights how postmodern aesthetics adapt uniquely within the Indian context by incorporating elements of mythology, religion, and cultural traditions. Bhansali achieves this in *Goliyon Ki Raasleela: Ram-Leela* by reimagining Gujarati traditions, juxtaposing hyperreal visuals with local cultural ethos, thereby creating a narrative that appeals to both traditional and modern sensibilities. Similarly, in *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam*, the romanticized portrayal of the Karwa Chauth ritual reflects the fusion of regional specificity with universal emotional resonance, making it a prime example of the ‘Bollywoodization’ of culture. By presenting Indian traditions as visually spectacular and emotionally potent, Bhansali constructs a hyperreal version of Indian identity, blending sensory aesthetics with cultural authenticity in a way that resonates globally.

Hyperreality Unveiled: The Spectacle of *Goliyon Ki Raasleela: Ramleela*

Sanjay Leela Bhansali transforms Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, a cornerstone of Western literature, into a distinctly Indian narrative by

infusing it with cultural and religious symbolism. The film's title itself—*Raasleela* and *Ram-Leela*—merges the divine Raas Leela of Lord Krishna with the epic Ram Leela, creating a cultural synthesis that reinterprets Shakespeare's tragedy through an Indian lens. Central to the narrative is the enmity between the Rajadi and Sanera clans, whose deep-seated feud forms the backdrop for the passionate romance between Ram (Ranveer Singh) and Leela (Deepika Padukone). Their love, an act of defiance, transcends the barriers of tradition and familial hostility, echoing the archetype of forbidden love.

This hyperreal world, as theorized by Jean Baudrillard, collapses the boundary between reality and representation. Jean Baudrillard observes, "The real is no longer what it used to be; it has been replaced by the hyperreal" (Baudrillard 2), where exaggerated representations become more "real" than reality itself. Bhansali uses the trap of romance, which compliments the heightened emotional performances and transforms the tragic love story into a hyperreal spectacle that blurs the lines between real and unreal. Javed Akhtar, reflecting on Bollywood's use of romance, notes, "We pass our time in making romantic films and creating romantic images. That's why both the hero and the villain at the moment are hiding behind the love story" (Akhtar, 91). Akhtar further observes, "At the moment, society is at a crossroads, so we are really confused about our socio-political value systems" (Akhtar, 91). These insights resonate deeply with *Ram-Leela*, where romance serves as an escape from the reality and if the audience is not aware about their reality, then the hyperreal world of Bhansali dominates and appeals to them. Love becomes a common ground, a unifying thread that resonates across India's diverse audiences. Bhansali uses Gujarat's cultural symbols, such as its landscapes, costumes, and customs, to lend authenticity to the setting, while simultaneously transforming the story into a pan-Indian cinematic experience.

The romance in *Ram-Leela* is elevated through powerful, poetic dialogues that resonate deeply with audiences across India. Lines such as "Jung aur pyaarmein sab kuch jayazhai" (Everything is fair in love and war), "Mohabbat har jung jeet saktihai" (Love can win any battle),

and “Iss zindagi mein pyaar sirf ek baar hota hai” (You fall in love only once in life) reflect Bollywood’s timeless romantic tropes. By glossing over harsh realities such as societal divisions, generational feuds, and political chaos, these romantic declarations create a shared emotional ground for viewers. No matter the region, language, or background, the idea of eternal and triumphant love is a universal aspiration one that Bollywood has long used to unite diverse audiences. In making cinema pan-Indian and catering to larger audience, Sanjay Leela Bhansali’s cinema, exemplifies the “regime of signification” as discussed by Neelam Sidhar Wright, who notes that it “privileges the sensory and the visual over the intellectual or narrative coherence, creating a hyperreal experience” (Wright 47). This approach is evident in the depiction of the Rabari community, portrayed in the film as Rajari, living in grand palaces, and living a glamorous and opulent life, which contrasts sharply with their real-life existence. Raj Kishor Mahato describes the Rabari as “a nomadic pastoral community indigenous to north-west India, particularly modern-day Gujarat. Traditionally, the Rabari kept camels but in recent times they maintain flocks of sheep and goats as well.” Such visual excesses in *Ram-Leela* break the met narrative of authenticity, substituting it with mini-narratives that prioritize aesthetics over realism.

Ramleela challenges the homogenization of Indian textile traditions or the meta-narratives of regional culture. Jean-François Lyotard’s idea of the meta-narrative refers to overarching, universal stories or ideologies that societies accept as absolute truths, often ignoring local diversities and particularities. As Lyotard states, “The grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation” (*The Postmodern Condition* xxiv). In the context of traditional Indian dress, as a meta-narrative, often frames specific regional attire—such as Gujarat’s lehenga choli or Rajasthan’s ghagra—as definitive representations of cultural identity. Sanjay Leela Bhansali disrupts this meta-narrative in *Ram-Leela* by designing Deepika Padukone’s costumes as a pan-Indian tapestry, blending elements from multiple

regional styles. While the primary framework of her attire draws from Gujarat, it incorporates embroidery from Rajasthan, Mughal-inspired opulence, South Indian jewellery aesthetics, and subtle nods to Bengali draping styles. For instance, the use of Bandhani reflects its deep cultural significance: “Bandhani patterns, often in red, yellow, and white, symbolize auspiciousness and fertility, making them an essential part of Gujarati and Rajasthani bridal attire” (Crill and Murphy 46). Similarly, the inclusion of Banarasi brocade evokes a regal aesthetic, which “reflects a confluence of Mughal design sensibilities and Indian weaving traditions” (Karolia 112). This deliberate fusion resists a singular regional narrative and instead celebrates India’s pluralistic cultural identity, creating a new visual language that transcends localized traditions. Bhansali’s approach not only deconstructs traditional dress codes but also offers a cinematic spectacle that embraces the diversity of Indian aesthetics, thereby challenging the notion of a singular “authentic” representation of cultural attire.

A Sense of Figural in *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam*

The story follows Nandini (Aishwarya Rai), a spirited young woman from a traditional Gujarati family, who falls in love with Sameer (Salman Khan), a carefree music student staying with her family. When their romance is discovered, Sameer is banished. Nandini is later married to Vanraj (Ajay Devgn), a kind man who, upon learning of her love for Sameer, selflessly takes her to Italy to reunite with him. During the journey, Nandini realizes Vanraj’s unconditional love and sacrifices and ultimately chooses to stay with him. The film blends themes of love, duty, and emotional growth, enhanced by its vibrant Gujarati setting, stunning visuals, and a memorable soundtrack.

In *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam*, the ‘sense of the figural’ and over-aestheticism are prominently visible in key moments, such as Sameer’s first meeting with Nandini. Rather than portraying their infatuation through direct gestures or dialogues, the scene employs the symbolic imagery of a glass light chandelier to heighten the visual and emotional impact. This use of hyperreal elements aligns with Jean Baudrillard’s idea of

hyperrealism—where reality is glossed over by stylized representations—and Scott Lash’s reflections in *Global Culture Industry* (2007), where he emphasizes the aestheticization of culture: ‘The aestheticization of culture today . . . creates a spectacle of experience that both absorbs and replaces reality’ (Lash 45). The grandeur of the visuals and opulent design help transform an otherwise improbable situation—Sameer, an Italian man, traveling to Gujarat to learn music and falling in love—into an acceptable narrative for a pan-Indian audience. The film’s visual splendor distracts from the absurdity of the plot, making the story universally appealing and grounded in a shared aesthetic experience rather than raw realism.

In the context of Indian cinema, Bhansali uses cultural symbols like the Mangal sutra and Karwa Chauth to create a narrative that resonates with a pan-Indian audience, blending traditional practices with a glamorous, cinematic appeal. The concept of the Mangal sutra, although not widely popular in North India, becomes a central symbol in the film, particularly through its representation in a Gujarati setting. Usha Balakrishnan, in her book *Indian Jewelry: A Cultural History*, discusses the significance of the “sacred thread,” noting, “The Mangal sutra, although it was traditionally more prominent in South India, symbolizes the sanctity of marriage and marital responsibility” (Balakrishnan 132). Bhansali enhances this symbol, glamorizing it and making it a universal cultural icon. Key moments, such as Nandini’s rejection of her marriage to Vanraj, are underscored by the Mangal sutra, symbolizing marital ties and societal expectations. At the film’s climax, Vanraj’s act of wearing the Mangal sutra marks a significant emotional transformation, representing his acceptance of Nandini’s decision. Similarly, Bhansali brings a new level of glamour to the Karwa Chauth festival, a tradition observed across India, by incorporating the image of Nandini looking through the *chalni* (sieve), a cinematic reinterpretation of the ritual. These elements, set against the backdrop of Gujarati culture, not only enhance the visual appeal but also elevate regional customs, allowing them to be embraced as part of a broader, pan-Indian cultural narrative.

In her work *Masala Bollywood: How the Indian Film Industry Reflects India's National and Cultural Identity*, Rachel Dwyer defines the "masala film" as a genre that blends various narrative elements, such as romance, drama, action, and music, into one cinematic experience. This blending of genres reflects the complex and diverse nature of Indian society, catering to a wide range of tastes and emotions. Dwyer writes, "Masala films are a combination of all the popular elements of Indian cinema that appeal to a wide audience" (Dwyer 6). Sanjay Leela Bhansali, in *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam*, employs the masala formula to craft a narrative that resonates with India's broad audience, balancing artistic expression with commercial appeal. Bhansali's approach to storytelling and costume design reflects the pressure of maintaining this formula while also expressing his own vision. As Bhansali explains in an interview with Nasreen Munni Kabir, "If I have to pack in everything in a single film and have to keep them happy, it means I have to use less of my own instincts and brains" (Kabir 115). This tension between artistic instincts and the demands of mass appeal is evident in the film's portrayal of Nandini and Sameer, whose costumes blend traditional and modern elements to create a pan-Indian identity. Nandini's wardrobe combines regional Gujarati attire with elements of Punjabi culture, while Sameer's Western-style clothing is complemented by his flute, symbolizing the fusion of foreign and Indian influences. Bhansali's use of such cultural elements is a deliberate attempt to create a film that appeals to a broad audience, embodying the masala film's characteristic blend of regional traditions and universal themes. The setting in Gujarat, though rich in local color, serves as a microcosm for the entire nation, reinforcing Bhansali's vision of a unified India through the lens of diverse cultural representations.

Bhansali's use of spectacle is not merely ornamental but serves as a narrative device that blurs the lines between realism and hyperreality, compelling viewers to engage with Indian traditions in new and profound ways. The fusion of postmodern techniques with indigenous ethos illustrates his mastery in creating films that are as much about emotional resonance as they are about visual grandeur. By employing cultural

signifiers such as 'Bandhani', 'Karwa Chauth', and the 'mangalsutra', he imbues his characters with layers of meaning that appeal to both traditional sensibilities and contemporary aesthetics.

Conclusion

Ultimately, Bhansali's Gujarat is not just a location; it is a symbolic entity that bridges the local and the universal. It embodies the aspirations of a nation that seeks to preserve its roots while embracing a globalized identity. Through his storytelling, Bhansali invites his audience to explore the beauty of India's cultural plurality, reimagined through the lens of Bollywood's hyperrealism, leaving a lasting impression of India as a nation of shared emotions, diverse traditions, and timeless love stories.

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