

5th Chidananda Dasgupta Memorial Competition for Film Criticism 2024 :

Certificate of Merit

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***Article 370: In the Service of 'The Image'***



Leni Riefenstahl, a German actress and documentary filmmaker, was best known as Hitler's propagandist. She has created high-art documentaries such as *Triumph of the Will* (1935) and *Olympia* (1938) in favour of his fascist regime. Despite defending herself as "just an artist," she uses cinematic techniques to propagate "the image of Fuhrer" and contribute to Germany's fascist state.

Even today, her groundbreaking cinematic approaches are studied at prestigious film schools, and her works have had a significant impact on subsequent generations of filmmakers. There has always been debate over whether her outstanding achievements could be separated from her pre-war political beliefs.

Yami Gautam recently starred in '*Article 370*', a Bollywood propaganda film produced by her husband Aditya Dhar and Jiyo Studios. Article 370 cleverly glorifies India's ruling *Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)* in order to gain political traction during the 2024 Indian general elections. It enforces and champions the Prime Minister's decision to repeal Article 370 of the Indian Constitution in Kashmir. A special status was given to Kashmir on 17th November 1952 under Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, granting it the right to a separate constitution, a state flag, and internal legislative autonomy. On October 31, 2019, India's Prime Minister abruptly abolished Article 370. The *BJP* leaders not only attended this film screening

in various states and actively campaigned for it during the elections, but it also became tax-free in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, two BJP-ruled states.

I begin my essay with Leni Riefenstahl because, in 1997, at the age of 95, Riefenstahl was summoned by a German court in relation to accusations that Romani extras used in her film *Tiefland* (1954) were sourced from Nazi concentration camps and later perished in the camps. Survivors and their families alleged that Riefenstahl knowingly exploited these individuals and ignored their fate after the filming. Leni's story and her intent to use cinema for 'image building' can tell us a lot about this new wave of propaganda movies in Hindi mainstream cinema.

Article 370 is an action-packed thriller film in which special agent Zooni Haksar (played by Yami Gautam) is tasked with a covert mission to stop violence in Kashmir's conflict-ridden region. The film does not hold back from openly celebrating Narendra Modi's decision to deprive Kashmir of its statehood; it mocked Kashmiri leaders' house arrests and erased Kashmiris' perspectives. This film is similar to other propaganda films produced by same Yami Gautam and Aditya Dhar, such as *Uri: The Surgical Strike* (2019). In the character of Zooni, Yami acts like a mouthpiece in this film, reading scripted lines, approved by the Prime Minister's Office.

The film is so childish that viewers couldn't help but laugh at the crude depiction of the 'unnamed' prime minister (Arun Govil, who is known for playing Rama in *Ramayanaya*), who resembles the image of the current PM (also a way to resemble PM Modi with the image of RAMA?) and home

minister Madhav Patel (played by Kiran Karmarkar), who unknowingly parodied the present home minister.

Most Right-wing sympathizers praise this propaganda, claiming that it is a well-made action film, but they fail to accept how meticulously the dialogues in this film were written to persuade the audience's opinion on 'Article 370'. The screenwriter of this film communicates in such a manner that it appears that the home ministry has approved, this script, employing their jargon and playing the victim card.

In one scene, PMO Joint Secretary Rajeshwari Swaminathan (played by Priyamani) says, "*Even if Article 370 abrogation fails, it will be a problem for India.*" This line gives the impression that the establishment is trying to conceal the fact that they made a mistake in making this decision. In contrast to their chest thumping image that they project.

Despite the film's setting in Kashmir, it hardly portrays any Kashmiri characters and instead focuses on the actors' mediocre performances. The majority of the Kashmiri characters in this story are either villains or supporters of the Indian government.

In Riefenstahl's documentaries, her "stylistic ideal" was unique. On the one hand, she employed editing cuts to place the audience in the position of the 'ideal spectator'. On the other hand, she "heroize" the film's main subject. In "Triumph of the Will," this "subject" was none other than Adolph Hitler. Similarly, in 'Article 370,' the character of the Indian Prime Minister is portrayed as highly intelligent and empathetic, whereas Zooni's character is portrayed as a victim of injustices in Kashmir

as a result of the implementation of Article 370 and why the abolition of such an article is justified. When the viewer sympathizes with Zooni's character, they perceive themselves as ideal.

The producers and directors of this film took extreme care not to depict any genuine Kashmiris, fearing that even a portrait of one would reveal the establishment's propaganda. In one scene in this film shows a Kashmiri character telling a separatist leader, "*ab humein jo bhi chahiye Delhi se mangege.. tumse nahi mangeinge.*" As if the character is establishing the Delhi federal government as the godfather of Kashmir, and they must now submit to them. Within the layers of its dialogues, this film quickly attempts to reduce states and their autonomous characters, cultures, and governance in order to advocate for a federalist structure, which the BJP party and its mother organisation *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS) has desired for the past several decades. The most popular way to accomplish this is to demonstrate how incapable states are. This film uses images of Kashmir and its inhabitants, who are suffering as a result of several historical injustices, to "heroize" the decision to repeal Article 370.

It is not uncommon for Bollywood mainstream films to abandon authentic character representation in favour of more stereotypical portrayal.

Yami Gautam not only supports *Article 370* film and the *Uri: the surgical strike*, but she also actively promoted *The Kashmir Files*, another propaganda film written and directed by Vivek Agnihotri, released in 2022. We wonder if she is aware of her coalition with the BJP government and its totalitarian impact.

While any film's legitimacy as propaganda can be questioned, the involvement of a single political party in its promotion raises concerns among spectators. There has always been a trend of propaganda films that sympathize with the establishments rather than the pain and misery of ordinary people; such compliance with the establishments usually allows the producers to gain free publicity, national level support, and more revenue generation.

As Leni's low-angle shots enhanced Hitler's image, Article 370's cinematography enhanced Yami's allure while also drawing urban viewers into a feminist role model, transforming her character into a tool in the hands of the 'federal' state.

During the filming of Hitler, Leni positioned the camera so that it appeared to be inside Hitler's head, as if he emerged from the clouds to the Nuremberg rallies. This image-making technique became known as "seeing through the Fuhrer's eye: the same buildings, the same foggy aura of a new dawn." Seeing the rally through the eyes of their hero allowed the audience to form a closer and more intimate bond with Hitler.

'Article 370' suspends the visual and psychological aspects of art to serve its carefully orchestrated narrative and myth of 'a strong prime minister'. It does use some facts, but it then manipulates them to further its ideological aim. It is critical to discuss and comprehend how Bollywood has used its images to target marginalized and vulnerable community groups, particularly in Kashmir, Punjab, and the East Indian states.

Article 370 is a well-made, engaging film, but it provides no insight into Kashmiris' lives and circumstances; it simply uses their

complex situation to serve an 'Image' at the centre of government. Finally, this film promotes a political party's campaign by appealing to viewers' emotions in the hopes of winning another term in office.

How layered and deeper propaganda can be? Leni Riefenstahl's *Olympia* is a prime example, concealing New German nationalism beneath the shimmering bodies of Olympic athletes. "*Olympia*" celebrated a collective spirit in which there appeared to be no subordination, a spirit of happy harmony between the German people and the Fuhrer.

Leni eventually submits to four denazification proceedings, which ultimately declare her a Nazi sympathizer. In her testimony to the tribunal, she stated, "They have taken all of my belongings, my equipment, my cameras, my films, my house,

everything. My friends turned on me, and they murdered me." (1)

The question is: How much longer can a country allow itself to be manipulated by propaganda images before it acknowledges the damage it has done? Will our nation ever reach a point where we can disprove these manufactured images that promote cultural segregation and misinformation? Susan Sontag wrote about Leni Riefenstahl's film: "*In Triumph of the Will*, the document (the image) is more than just a record of reality; 'reality' has been created to serve the image."

(2)

A leader who uses any and all means to justify decisions that lead to social imbalances and disharmony is the one who benefits from such propaganda films. The question is: for how long?

## References:

- 1) The Guardian. (2021, December 9). Burying Leni Riefenstahl: Nina Gladitz's lifelong crusade against Hitler's filmmaker. <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2021/dec/09/burying-leni-riefenstahl-nina-gladitz-lifelong-crusade-hitler-film-maker>
- 2) Sontag, Susan. "Fascinating Fascism." Under the Sign of Saturn, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980, pp. 73-105.

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