

## CHAPTER – III

### A STUDY OF *LAGAAN*: *ONCE UPON A TIME IN INDIA*

Movies affect our consciousness and one become passive and unresponsive while consuming the movies. They impact our mind, shape us, and make our opinion, identity, and create our desires subtly or impliedly. As the director of *Lagaan* states: “Movies must entertain, but also must leave something behind with the audience” (Ashutosh Gowariker *Live Journal*). The movies tell us and inform us in a subtle but powerful way - who and what we are; what we really want; what is right and what is wrong and what we should aspire to be?

There is no single movie without a message. It is impossible to watch a movie without being affected by these messages. On a surface level, “*Lagaan* is a movie about the tenacity of the human spirit, realizing impossible dreams. *Lagaan* is an anti-colonial narrative, a tale of collective movement, and the victory of the underdog” (LiveJournal *Lagaan*).

According to Farred, “*Lagaan* is posited simultaneously as a critique of the anticolonial past and the postcolonial present. Through the 19th century event of the cricket match between the British cantonment and Champaner’s villagers” (94)

*Lagaan* is a period movie. The story of *Lagaan* is set during the colonized India of the 1890s. Britishers used to take taxes from local kings and rulers and in exchange of protection from another ruler or king. They had settled this deal with each king to maintain their exploitation. In this deal, the kings had to give half of the tax to the Britishers and a half they kept for themselves to sustain their luxurious life. Both

Britishers and local rulers had no problem with this type of system. Both were enjoying this deal but only the poor peasants were suffering the burden of this deal. For crop production, they had to depend on seasonal rain. If there was no rain, then there would be no crop. There might have been the chances of drought due to scarcity of water. If this type of situation arose, then in order to pay the taxes, they had to sell their home and land.

The movie *Lagaan* is set in this background. The movie represents India of 1893 in the kingdom of Champaner. Raja Puran Singh is the king of the Champaner. The peasants have paid half taxes last year due to inadequate rain. This year too, there is not a single drop of rain. Consequently, there is no crop. Thus, the people of the Champaner are not in a condition to pay the full taxes to the Britishers. They believe that they have not prayed in a specific temple, which lies in a different kingdom. Raja Puran Singh has a hostile relationship with that ruler. He wants Andrew Russell to meditate on this matter, but Andrew Russell puts one condition to Raja Puran Singh that if he can eat meat which is lying in front of him, then only he can help Raja Puran Singh. As told in the movie that Raja Puran Singh is vegetarian. He refuses to eat meat. Then, it makes Andrew Russell angry and he says that the people of Champaner have to pay double Lagaan (tax). He states the reason for this being that last year they had paid half tax. Now, they have to pay their rest and same year tax as well, even though the King had already informed Russell of the inability of the peasants to pay the taxes. Raja Puran Singh is also an arrogant person. He does not pay much attention to his people. He sends his men in the kingdom to announce the double 'Lagaan', which they had to pay immediately. So instead of relief, the suffering of peasants is further increased. The burden of taxation has no effects on Raja Puran Singh. The people of Champaner go to

meet Raja Puran Singh, where they find that the Raja is busy watching a cricket match with Britisher. There Andrew Russell encounters Bhuvan. Thinking about the previous matter, Captain Russell gambles with the peasants of Champaner to enter into a bet, according to which if the peasants manage win a game of cricket against Britishers' team, then the tax will be waived off for three years, not only for the village, but also for the entire province but if they lose, they will have to pay triple tax (*Lagaan*). With courage and conviction, the spirited young farmer, Bhuvan persuades his villagers into accepting the bet. He also makes a team and tries to learn a game they have never heard of or seen before. He accepts the challenge thrown down by Russell. The decision of accepting the challenge by Bhuvan is not welcomed by the villagers at all. They request Andrew Russell to reconsider this issue, but he clearly says no to it. Bhuvan tries to convince his people. He says that they have no choice, except to accept this challenge. In the village, no one comes with Bhuvan except Gauri. Then, the farmers of other villages come to beat Bhuvan for his deed. Bhuvan is saved by the village's chief, who convinces Bhuvan to seek pardon from Andrew Russell. Raja displays the inability to convey this message to Andrew Russell. Then, Bhuvan comes to the village and starts making a cricket team. He is joined one by one, except for Lakha. Lakha likes Gauri, but Gauri does not reflect the same feelings as Lakha has for her. She has already reserved her feelings for Bhuvan. Lakha wants to possess Gauri by hook and cook. After that, to learn the game of cricket, Bhuvan with his fellows, goes to watch the game. They watch it secretly. Elizabeth spots them while watching secretly. She talks to them through a translator. She falls in love with Bhuvan at the first sight. She believes that the game should be fair, so she promises to help them in learning cricket. When she comes to train them, Lakha learns of her love for Bhuvan, and he directly goes to Andrew Russell to report it. Then Lakha is instructed to be a part of Bhuvan's

team and help the Britishers in winning the cricket match. However, this secret is revealed by Elizabeth to the villagers. By observing the truth, they run after Lakha to kill him. Lakha runs into the temple to save himself from the mob. In that situation Bhuvan saves Lakha from the mob, after which Lakha promises to help them secretly. Bhuvan gives one chance to Lakha to prove his loyalty to his people. Next day, Lakha proves his loyalty by taking numerous catches during fielding. Finally with the help of Lakha, Buwan is able to win the match. At the end of the match, clouds appear in the sky, and it begins to rain. It seems that rain is welcoming their victory over the Britishers. Thus, Bhuvan is able to save tax for three years. A few months later, Britishers removed the cantonment in that area. After losing the match, Andrew Russell is transferred to South Africa and he has to pay the rest of the tax by himself. When Elizabeth realizes the fact that Bhuvan loves Gauri and vice-versa, she initially feels upset but says nothing. She goes back to London, where she never marries anyone throughout her life. This movie ends with a happy conclusion.

In the movie, there are many subplots, which run simultaneously. There are two love triangles in the movie. The one has Gauri in the centre with Bhuvan and Lakha, both being fond of Gauri but she loves Bhuvan, not Lakha. On the other hand, there is Bhuvan in the centre, and both Gauri and Elizabeth love Bhuvan but he loves Gauri and not Elizabeth, even though he has some hidden feelings for her. This love triangle reminds us of the story of Radha and Krishna, where Krishna loved Radha but married Rukmani. In this movie, Elizabeth symbolizes Radha, and as Radha could not marry Krishna, Elizabeth could not marry Bhuvan. Bhuvan symbolizes Krishna, who marries Gauri just as Krishna married Rukmani. Only the fundamental difference is that, Radha marries another person but, in the movie, Elizabeth remains celibate throughout her

life. There is a song in the movie which tries to depict the story of Radha and Krishna. In *Lagaan*, Gauri plays the part of Radha and Bhuvan the role of Krishna in the song and dance "*Radha Kaise Na Jale*"(01:32:08s) (Why Radha shouldn't be jealous?). However, Elizabeth seems to embody the character of Radha by loving Bhuvan (Krishna) and never marrying, while Gauri, like Queen Rukmini, is expected to marry Bhuvan (Krishna).

*Lagaan* is set in the late nineteenth century when Indian cricket was born and its first achievements were recorded. The first Test (International match) between India and England was played in 1932 at Lords, the game's spiritual home. Ashis Nandy, a cultural theorist, writes, "Cricket is an Indian game accidentally discovered by the English". Cricket is the most popular sport in India. (*A Tao of Cricket*) Historically, it was a sport reserved for the upper caste. Before the introduction of the one-day format, a match would take a full six days to complete (rest day included). Spectators must have five whole work days as holiday if they want to watch a test match.

The final 80 minutes of an approximately 4-hour movie are devoted to a cricket match between the villagers of Champaner and the British cantonment but this movie has something else beyond a cricket game. Farred says "*Lagaan* dramatizes the historic role cricket plays in developing and expressing a subaltern Indian consciousness" (97). James also argued that, "cricket is the primary vehicle for Black Caribbean resistance to White colonial rule". "They", the brilliant Trinidadian all-rounder Learie Constantine reminded his friend James, "are no better than we" (James 112). Farred says that, "Cricket was the cultural and political language of democracy transcribed onto the ovals of England, the Raj, and the Caribbean" (94). A Victorian poet, Andrew Lang, remarks, "Cricket is a very humanizing game. It appeals to the emotions of local

patriotism and pride. It is eminently unselfish; the love of it never leaves us and binds all brethren together, whatever their politics and rank may be” (Daft 13-14).

The theme of nationalism is predominantly depicted in the movie through images and dialogues. In the movie, we see a local rural cricket team, which qualified as a national team because it has some characteristics of a national team, just like our modern national cricket team. In the national cricket team, players come from many places and with cultural diversity. For instance, they may belong to different states, religions, languages, cultures, castes, and creeds but they come together for some sort of common goal. The moviemaker has ensured sufficient diversity in the team, with Bhuvan, the upper caste Hindu, Deva, the Sikh, Ishmail, the Muslim potter and Kachra, the untouchable. Sengupta describes this in his words as:

The moviemaker creates an environment of nationalism even under circumstances where there is no conceptual understanding of the ideal. Therefore, *Lagaan* is more a metaphor for organization and strengthening from within at a moment of crisis than attack or resistance directed at a colonial adversary. The characterization, however, reflects the nationalist and cinematic discourse on cultural diversity as a strength rather than a drawback of the Indian national character (67).

Likewise, it happens in modern nation-states. People come together with some common values and code. They are bound together by the spirit of the constitution, which considers everyone as equal and ensures the fundamental rights of every citizen. Diversity in the cricket game suggests our inclusiveness, which is also one of the main characteristics of Indian nationalism, as discussed in the first chapter. Indian

nationalism is inclusive in nature. There is no discrimination based on language, religion, gender, caste and creed and race. So, in the making of the cricket team, we see nation-building. Farred writes: “*Lagaan* represents an imagining of how Hindus, Muslims, Dalits, and Sikhs can cooperate to defeat the Raj by joining together in a single cricket team” (104). Sengupta also approves this by saying, “The contest that ensues is an inspiring nationalist metaphor that depicts the villagers coming together in the face of opposition in spite of internal factions such as caste divisions and untouchability” (67).

Just like the diversity of India, Bhuvan’s cricket team also represents diversity. As India is composed of Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Sikh, Dalit etc, so is Bhuvan’s team. There is Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Dalit, physically challenged, and even a Christian (Elizabeth), who supports them in winning the match. The team members belong to different castes and religions in the village. This demonstrates the making of a nation by different groups. This is also the second feature of Indian nationalism, which is its anti-colonial nature. People came together from different areas, and with linguistic and cultural diversity, to fight against colonial power during the freedom struggle. They consisted of Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs etc. In the movie, people come from different backgrounds to fight against colonial power to save them from taxes. They are also composed of different religious groups and different castes from the villages. People from another region also join them to defeat the Britishers. One of them is a Sikh, who is an ex-soldier in the British army.

The future of India is constructed through the cultural accomplishments of the past. In this case, Champaner represents India as it is imagined as the future of the secular Indian nation, imagining how Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and Dalits

(‘Untouchables’), can collaborate and defeat colonial power. The movie idealizes a fictional national community that evokes India's core principles of a democratic, secular state, the honourable mansion of free India in which all her children may dwell. The only difference is that in real situations, people were fighting against Britishers with weapons like pistols and swords but in this movie, they are fighting with bats and balls. In a real situation, they might have to lose their life but, in the movie, they are afraid of triple tax if they lose the match. Just like in real situations some Indians had betrayed other Indians, in the movie, Lakha betrays his people. Indians defeated Britishers in 1947 and forced them to leave the country and, in the movie, Bhuvan’s team defeats them. In consequence, they remove the cantonment from that area. In the context of the movie, it suggests that this movie supports the theme of Indian nationalism. Therefore, we can say in this movie, nationalism is depicted through a cricket game.

Furthermore, this movie supports the two main ideas of Indian nationalism. One of them is the nature of inclusiveness, and another is its anti-colonial nature. Moreover, there is no support for the idea of imperialism or the policy of expansionism. The movie depicts the acceptance of all cultures, castes, religions, and languages. These are the chief characteristics of Indian nationalism. This movie truly represented the idea of Indian nationalism at a time when there was insurgency in the Kashmir valley and tensions across the border area. Kargil war had happened at that time. Babri Mosque had been demolished. Riots in Bombay and other areas had taken place. Tension was at its peak with Pakistan. The movie *Lagaan* was released after or during these incidents, but without showing minority communities as ‘Others’ and stereotyping them. The director made this movie at a very vulnerable time. This is the main reason that this



movie was commended by international audiences and critics in many movie festivals. This movie delivers the message of inclusiveness and the power of tolerance to an Indian audience. This movie is also successful in conveying the theme of Indian nationalism.

Moreover, different aspects of Indian nationalism are discussed in *Lagaan*. In this movie, cricket is depicted as a national allegory. Indian cricket team players have no uniform in the match while Britishers wear a white uniform, which represents the uniformity or singularity - one of the main characteristics of European nationalism. It implies that they are acknowledging the European model of nationalism, which supports the idea of one nation, based on one language, one religion, one race, one ruler. Thus, the uniform of the Britisher's player suggests the same, which means they believe in singularity.

On the other hand, the Indian cricket team in the movie depicts different colours and diversity through players. This also signifies that India is a land of different colours and diversity. India consists of different geographies, for instance, mountains, plains, plateaus, desert, rivers, and forests. India has different weather seasons. India is a multicultural, multilinguistic, multi-religious society. In this movie, we see people from different strata of society, speaking dialogues in several dialects of Hindi. They communicate with each other in Purvi Hindi, Awadhi, Braj, standard Hindi, and Britishers speak English. This is also the main feature of Indian nationalism, which is acknowledged by the clothes and language of players of the Indian cricket team. The language and uniform of Britishers make them close to the European model of nationalism.

Initially upper-castes dominated the cricket game. In this movie also, it is portrayed that who should be included and who should be excluded from the game, is decided by upper-caste Hindu. For instance, in the movie, when Bhuvan decides to include Kahchra in the team, other members of the team do not welcome the decision taken by Bhuvan. They say if he includes Kachra in the team, they will not play. We can see an initial aversion against Kachra in the movie. So, it is decided by upper-caste Hindu people whom to include and whom to exclude in the team. Likewise, in the nation-state, whom to include and whom to exclude is the significant question. Who will decide the inclusion and exclusion of other groups becomes a very significant question of the day? This also remarks about Muslims in India, who are legally included in the nation-state but actually, they are excluded. Thus, we can say that this movie is about inclusivity and exclusiveness, both in society and nation-state. Cricket should be viewed as an allegory of the nation.

If we observe world politics, we can see a lot of instances where majoritarian groups play an important role in deciding the policy of the nation. Hindus make up the majority in India. They play an important role in Indian politics and any government may try to appease them. Likewise in Pakistan, Muslims make up the majority. They affect the main policies of the government. Pakistan's politicians try to appease them to take the vote from them. Similar policies, politics and methods are followed in the USA and so on.

If we interpret *Lagaan* from the postcolonial angle, it has many perspectives. It will also help us define modern nationalism. Nationalism in India means a change in people's understanding of their identity and sense of belonging. The growth of modern

nationalism is closely connected to the anti-colonial movement. People first identified their unity in the process of their struggle with colonialism. Sengupta writes:

A global culture, be it in colonial political form or post-globalization economic form, has always been a factor in shaping national culture in India, including the culture of cinema; nationalism, political resistance and the role of hegemonic discourse in supplanting these. At the same time, any analysis of the strengths of Indian cinema remains incomplete without an examination of the extent to which it resists global/western influences and stereotyping through the concepts of nationalism and national identity (11).

We see a white woman offering a cultural education to the colonized in the movie. The white woman teaches the villagers the game of the British, an interference that serves both as an anticipatory and mediating function in the movie and as an ideological betrayal of the colonial rule by one of its own.

Bhuvan becomes the embodiment of Indian resistance - he represents a Gandhian India, with the entire subcontinent united. He is the brave and courageous villager who has grown tired of colonial rule's injustices, as well as the colonizer's complicity and extreme poverty. In this movie, the director never thought about bringing the match to a draw. In this, it is expected either you will win the match or you will lose the match. As in nationalism either one achieves a nation-state or one gets suppression like, rebellion either succeeds or crashes.

Champaner's victory is negligible, given the cultural inequities. However, *Lagaan* suggests that Bhuvan does not want to fight directly with colonial power, though he is portrayed as a nationalist hero in the movie. Rather, he just seeks

economic relief. The “Indian” peasantry is oppressed by both indigenous landlords and British colonisers. Raja and members of the British government are in the middle of the political spectrum; they are neither good nor bad. Captain Andrew Russell is the embodiment of evil. *Lagaan* demonstrates how colonialism's violence creates a narrow but deep gap between the 19th-century Indian peasant class and the managerial Indian elite. Puran Singh may be colonised, but his slavery is not on the same level as Bhuvan's or the villagers of Champaner province. Recognizing the inequity within the ‘Indian’ community, *Lagaan* shows how Indian society was divided during the British Raj.

Thus, Champaner acquires anticolonial politics through cultural conflict. Thus, cricket provides a place where the ideal nation's fantasy can be imagined, recovered, and realized, although within the boundaries of Bombay cinema's fictional world. Every nation-state has a boundary; therefore, the game of cricket has a boundary too. Cricket plays a huge role in the movie. The villagers can become nationalist warriors by learning the game. Therefore, it serves as a metaphor for political adulthood. The anticolonial past coincides with the reimagined Indian future in *Lagaan*. In a single gesture, the movie expresses both grief and hope. It is an imagining of what India symbolically was during the Raj system and what it could be in the future, as a product of the past. Thus, in *Lagaan*, the future of India is constructed through the cultural accomplishment of the past.

This movie also suggests that the people of Champaner do not rebel against the British oppression. The challenge of the cricket match is accepted either out of desperation or as an opportunity. The movie delivers a message to the viewer that

oppression is tolerable until it becomes a question of life and death. Thus, *Lagaan* strengthens the notion of hierarchy and does not challenge the status quo.

The plot revolves around the central theme of the *Lagaan* (tax) and cricket match, the question of caste comes up in the movie for five minutes only. However, those five minutes are very important in order to understand the roles of the different castes in a filmic village. The director, in fact, never revealed the identities of the other characters. In the movie, they are referred to as peasants. The burden of caste was only carried by Kachra.

It was not decided by the *Mukhia* (chief) to fight against British forces. It was Bhuvan, who on behalf of the villagers and province, accepted the challenge of playing a gamble in the form of a cricket match. Bhuvan, though a common villager, has a more powerful position in the village than *Mukhia*. He was the one to challenge the British forces in such a game that was not played by the common person in India at that time. Bhuvan also gives very weak arguments in favour of Kachra, which all villagers agree upon. The profession of Kachra and other Dalits in the village is not depicted at all.

From the Dalit perspective, there arise many questions. Kachra's character is supposed to be based on Baloo Palwankar, the first world-class spinner the country produced (the 1910s, 1920s. In India, the word Kachara means 'garbage', or 'useless'. Kachra was selected in the cricket team because of his disability, not for his genuine talent. He was instructed to use his disabled hand to throw the ball instead of his normal hand. It is clear that Kachara could not make decisions about his bowling. Thus, a Dalit is further marginalized. Bhuvan is the one who notices this innate talent. Kachra

is not aware of it. Kachra here is wordless, as if he is dumb. The subaltern cannot speak. Dalits have no agency of their own to talk about themselves. They have to depend on the upper castes for everything. They have no right to make any decision. Then, why is he helping Bhuvan? In the movie, the consent of Kachra is also not taken. He has to do whatever the upper castes order him to do. A question about whether double taxation affects Kachra also arises? It is unclear whether Kachra is even aware of why the game of cricket is being played. Another question is: what are the major problems that Dalits are facing with the white colonizer-state? Are not their problems more closely linked to the caste-colonialism sustained by the Raja and the upper caste Hindus of the village. In the movie, we can ask why Kachra is playing for Bhuvan and the upper castes in the village? Kachra is not a peasant in the village. This is how *Lagaan* affects the Dalits of Champaner.

*Lagaan* needs to have a Dalit character to make the movie more inclusive. In the final scene, Kachra is presented as someone completely useless to the team at a moment when winning the match matters the most. The traditional notion that the Dalit cannot be a hero is also maintained in this movie. The hero must come from upper-caste Hindu. By chance, there happens to be a no-ball and a single run is taken, and control comes to Bhuvan who hits the winning six on the last ball and becomes the hero of the match. Thus, we see how the Dalit character is further marginalised in mainstream Hindi Cinema.

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