



Revisiting History through Visual Narrative: Politics and Representation in *The Bengal Files*

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ABSTRACT

Cinema is an influential medium through which societies encounter, interpret, and contest the past. The Bengal Files provides a case study for examining how political cinema turns historical conflict into a visual and affective narrative. This article analyses the film's narrative organisation, characterisation, symbolic imagery, and claims to historical recovery through scholarship on historiography, cultural memory, trauma, nationalism, and representation. It treats the film as a constructed interpretation of the past rather than as independent proof of historical events. The analysis asks how narrative selection and visual rhetoric invite viewers to identify with particular experiences, how the film frames competing political positions, and what ethical responsibilities arise when historical violence is represented on screen. It argues that the film's significance lies not only in the history it seeks to recall but also in the choices through which that history is made intelligible to contemporary audiences.

Keywords: Visual Narrative, Political Cinema, Historical Representation, Cultural Memory, Trauma Studies, Nationalism, Historiography, Indian Cinema

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary Indian political cinema has increasingly turned to historical reconstruction to engage with collective trauma, ideological conflict, and questions of national identity. Within this cinematic landscape, *The Bengal Files* emerges as a politically charged film that seeks to reinterpret Bengal's violent, contested history through emotionally intense visual storytelling. Rather than serving merely as entertainment, the film intervenes in historical discourse by foregrounding narratives of suffering, displacement, communal conflict, and political silence.

Within the tradition of contemporary nationalist political cinema, *The Bengal Files* centres on the experiences of individuals and families affected by political violence and ideological persecution. The film employs investigative narrative structures, testimonial accounts, flashbacks, and emotionally charged imagery to reconstruct historical memory. Through these techniques, the film attempts to transform historical events into an affective experience for viewers.

The plot of *The Bengal Files* revolves around uncovering hidden or marginalised histories tied to Bengal's socio-political conflicts. The narrative primarily follows Shiva Pandit, portrayed by Darshan Kumaar, whose investigative journey becomes the central narrative framework through which the audience encounters traumatic historical memory. Shiva Pandit serves as both witness and interpreter, gradually uncovering suppressed histories of violence, displacement, and ideological conflict. His character represents the younger generation's search for historical truth within a politically fragmented society.

The film further strengthens its ideological and symbolic dimensions through characters such as the older Bharati/Maa Bharati, portrayed by Pallavi Joshi, whose characterisation transforms the nation into a maternal and civilizational figure. Maa Bharati symbolically embodies cultural continuity, suffering, and resilience,



thereby aligning the narrative with nationalist allegory. Similarly, Mithun Chakraborty's enigmatic character, Madman Chatur, serves as a symbolic commentator whose fragmented speech, prophetic warnings, and psychological instability mirror the film's fractured historical consciousness.

Historical and political figures also occupy central positions within the narrative. Anupam Kher's portrayal of Mahatma Gandhi, Mohan Kapur's depiction of Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, and Rajesh Khera's representation of Muhammad Ali Jinnah situate the film within the political turmoil surrounding Bengal's communal and ideological conflicts. Through these portrayals, the film blends dramatised fiction with historical reconstruction, thereby complicating the boundary between cinematic imagination and political historiography.

Thematically, the film engages with issues of ideological violence, communal polarisation, political betrayal, and the politics of historical memory. The visual narrative repeatedly emphasises loss, fear, displacement, and silence, constructing an atmosphere of collective trauma. In doing so, the film aligns with what Alison Landsberg calls "prosthetic memory," where mediated experiences let audiences emotionally internalise events they have not personally experienced (Landsberg 2).

The relationship between cinema and history remains deeply contested. Hayden White argues that historical narratives are shaped through processes of emplotment and ideological selection rather than objective neutrality (White 7). Similarly, Robert Rosenstone observes that historical films inevitably dramatise and fictionalise the past in order to produce emotional and narrative coherence (Rosenstone 45). These theoretical insights are especially relevant to *The Bengal Files*, where cinematic representation operates simultaneously as historical reconstruction and ideological interpretation.

Recent scholarship on Indian political cinema further highlights how films increasingly function as sites of ideological negotiation and public memory formation. Contemporary studies on visual nationalism and trauma narratives suggest that political cinema not only revisits the past but also shapes ongoing debates concerning citizenship, identity, and belonging. In this context, *The Bengal Files* may be seen as part of a broader cinematic movement that seeks to recover contested histories through emotionally immersive storytelling.

This paper critically examines how *The Bengal Files* revisits history through visual narrative and political representation. It analyses the film's plot structure, characterisation, symbolic imagery, cinematography, and ideological framing, drawing on theories of historiography, trauma studies, nationalism, and cultural memory. The paper further explores how the film negotiates the tension between historical authenticity and cinematic dramatization. By focusing closely on the film's narrative and aesthetic dimensions, the study argues that *The Bengal Files* functions both as a cinematic memorialization of trauma and as an ideological intervention in contemporary debates about history, nationhood, and identity.

METHODOLOGY AND SCOPE

The study uses qualitative textual analysis of *The Bengal Files* as its primary object. It examines four connected categories: (1) narrative form, including investigation, testimony, and shifts between past and present; (2) characterisation, especially figures positioned as witnesses, interpreters, or national symbols; (3) visual and aural rhetoric, including mise-en-scène, framing, editing, sound, and recurring symbols where these can be identified in the film; and (4) ideological organisation, including the distribution of agency, victimhood, responsibility, and silence. These categories guide interpretation rather than predetermine the film's meaning.

The method is interpretive, not an empirical audience study and not a comprehensive archival history of Bengal. The film is read alongside established theoretical work on historical representation and memory. Historical statements made or implied by the film should be checked against independent scholarship and documentary records; cinematic dialogue, characterisation, and dramatic sequencing are treated as evidence of the film's perspective, not as sufficient evidence that an event occurred exactly as depicted. Because this article does not conduct frame-by-frame shot logging or audience interviews, it avoids claims about audience effects that would require such evidence.



This distinction is central to the argument. A film can make a meaningful intervention in public memory without being a neutral record. Accordingly, the analysis asks both what the film brings into view and how its formal and ideological choices shape that visibility.

Plot Overview and Narrative Structure

The narrative structure of *The Bengal Files* centres on a contemporary investigation that opens onto memories of the violence surrounding Partition. The present-day missing-person case provides a plot mechanism through which the film moves between contemporary political tensions and dramatisations of 1946 Bengal. This structure is important not because it independently proves the historical claims made in the film, but because it establishes a relationship between a present investigation and a contested past.

The central narrative follows CBI officer Shiva Pandit, who investigates the disappearance of a young woman journalist in present-day Murshidabad. As reported in contemporary plot summaries and reviews, the investigation brings him into contact with the older Bharati and becomes a narrative bridge to the film's reconstruction of the Great Calcutta Killings and the Noakhali violence. The investigative framework turns historical discovery into a dramatic process: the protagonist and, by extension, the viewer are positioned as people who must reinterpret the present through newly disclosed accounts of the past. This device gives the film momentum, but it also risks making complex historical causation appear to resolve itself through a single investigative route.

Madman Chatur, portrayed by Mithun Chakraborty, occupies a particularly complex narrative position. At one level, he appears socially marginalised and psychologically unstable; however, the film gradually transforms him into a symbolic repository of historical memory. His fragmented speech patterns and emotionally charged monologues function as traumatic testimony. Through this characterisation, the film visually dramatises Cathy Caruth's argument that trauma repeatedly returns through fragmented recollection rather than coherent narrative (Caruth 4).

The older Bharati/Maa Bharati, portrayed by Pallavi Joshi, functions less as an individual character and more as a symbol of the wounded nation. Her recurring presence within emotionally intense scenes contributes to the film's nationalist visual rhetoric. The symbolism surrounding her character repeatedly associates motherhood with cultural suffering and historical endurance.

The film's representation of political leaders further intensifies the narrative's ideological dimensions. Mahatma Gandhi, portrayed by Anupam Kher, appears within the film's political discourse as a figure whose ideological influence remains contested. Similarly, Mohan Kapur's portrayal of Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy and Rajesh Khanna's portrayal of Muhammad Ali Jinnah contribute to the film's reconstruction of Bengal's communal and political tensions. The film represents these historical figures not merely as individuals but as embodiments of competing political ideologies.

The film's use of flashback sequences is especially significant. Rather than presenting history linearly, *The Bengal Files* constructs memory as fragmented and psychologically intrusive. Cathy Caruth argues that trauma repeatedly returns through belated recollection because traumatic experience resists complete assimilation into consciousness (Caruth 11). The film visually dramatises this idea by allowing traumatic memories to erupt suddenly into the present narrative.

Another key aspect of the narrative is its moral polarisation. Characters are often divided into categories of victims, perpetrators, witnesses, and truth-seekers. This binary structure intensifies emotional engagement and strengthens ideological clarity. However, such narrative simplification also risks reducing historical complexity into emotionally charged oppositions.

The plot further emphasises themes of silence and erasure. Several scenes symbolically portray abandoned spaces, destroyed homes, interrupted conversations, and fearful silence, suggesting the suppression of traumatic memory within public discourse. Pierre Nora argues that modern societies create "sites of memory"



precisely because lived memory is disappearing (Nora 12). In this context, *The Bengal Files* functions as a cinematic site of memory that attempts to preserve and reactivate historical trauma.

Ultimately, *The Bengal Files*' plot structure is designed not merely to narrate historical events but to produce emotional identification and ideological engagement. The narrative strategy encourages viewers to experience history affectively rather than critically, thereby intensifying the film's cultural and political impact.

Close Reading of Key Narrative Sequences

The opening investigative strand provides the film with a contemporary point of entry. Shiva Pandit's arrival in Murshidabad and his inquiry into a missing young woman establish the present as a space marked by political influence, institutional pressure, and uncertainty. The investigative conventions—an outsider or central investigator, a case that initially appears local, and the gradual expansion of the inquiry—encourage viewers to treat the case as a route into a larger historical explanation. As a narrative device, this structure links an individual disappearance to collective memory. Its limitation is that the relationship between the contemporary case and the 1940s must be demonstrated by the film's own causal and visual organisation; thematic resemblance alone cannot establish historical continuity.

The movement from the present into the 1946 sequences intensifies this linkage. The past is not presented simply as contextual background but as an explanatory frame for current political anxieties. The non-linear construction can be read through White's concept of emplotment: events acquire meaning through the order and causal relations a narrative assigns to them. The sequence of revelations may therefore shape the viewer's sense of who is responsible, which suffering is foregrounded, and what lessons the present should draw from the past. This analysis concerns the film's rhetoric; the accuracy of individual claims must be assessed separately against historical scholarship.

A second revealing point is the film's representation of Gopal Patha and Mahatma Gandhi. Shubhra Gupta's review in *The Indian Express* notes that Patha is introduced as a figure who mobilises armed followers, yet his role is limited in the larger narrative; the review also describes the film's presentation of Gandhi and Jinnah as opposing political figures. These observations are useful as a critical account of character placement, not as neutral descriptions of the historical actors. The contrast raises a question about narrative agency: which characters are allowed to act decisively, which are associated with helplessness, and which political explanations are made to appear persuasive? A close reading should examine the dialogue, performance, framing, and placement of these figures in the sequence rather than accepting the film's characterisation as a factual verdict on them.

The scene reported in reviews in which Patha questions Gandhi about women's protection is especially relevant to the film's construction of political authority. The exchange appears to be designed to dramatise a conflict between non-violence as a moral principle and immediate demands for protection during communal violence. Its force depends on the scene's staging and dialogue: Gandhi's response is framed as a test of the practical limits of his philosophy, while Patha's question gives the demand for direct action moral urgency. The scene should nevertheless be treated as dramatised dialogue unless corroborated by a reliable historical record. Its analytical value lies in how the film stages the debate, not in assuming that the exchange occurred exactly as represented.

Finally, reviews describe the film's recurring graphic depictions of communal violence and its extended shifts between historical and contemporary timelines. The visual intensity may seek to make historical suffering affectively immediate, a process that can be discussed through Landsberg's concept of prosthetic memory and Sontag's reflections on images of suffering. Yet emotional intensity does not by itself guarantee historical understanding. When repeated images of violence are tied to a sharply divided distribution of victimhood and culpability, they can elicit empathy while also narrowing the viewer's sense of historical complexity. This tension is central to the film's ethical politics: the question is not whether violence should be represented, but how the image, narrative context, and allocation of agency shape what viewers are invited to conclude.



Cinema and Historiography: Theoretical Perspectives

The historical context requires particular care. Janam Mukherjee's study of the Calcutta riots situates the August 1946 violence within the wider conditions of wartime Bengal, famine, political mobilisation, economic opportunism, and the failures of colonial governance. This broader account complicates explanations that attribute the violence to a single actor or cause. The film's emphasis on individual leaders and communal antagonism should therefore be compared with scholarship that treats the riots as historically specific events produced by interacting political, social, and material conditions. This comparison does not deny the violence or the suffering of its victims; it prevents cinematic emphasis from being mistaken for a complete historical explanation.

A useful distinction follows from White and Rosenstone: the fact that all historical narratives select and organise material does not mean that all representations are equally supported by evidence. Cinematic form can illuminate the meanings attached to the past, but historical claims remain open to verification. The film's dramatic compression, symbolic characterisation, and emotionally forceful sequences should therefore be evaluated as narrative choices while factual propositions are assessed against independent historical research. This approach avoids both treating cinema as transparent documentation and dismissing it merely because it is constructed.

The relationship between cinema and historiography has attracted considerable scholarly attention in cultural studies, film theory, and historical criticism. Traditional historiography privileges written archives, documentary evidence, and factual reconstruction, whereas cinema operates through visual representation, narrative dramatisation, and emotional engagement. Despite these differences, films have become central to how the public understands history today.

Hayden White argues that historical narratives themselves are structured through literary and rhetorical devices. According to White, historians organise historical events into meaningful narratives by employing emplotment, characterisation, and ideological framing. This insight destabilises the assumption that history is purely objective and opens the possibility of viewing cinema as another form of historical narration.

Similarly, Robert Rosenstone contends that historical films should not be judged solely on factual accuracy but on their ability to evoke historical consciousness and emotional truth. Historical cinema often compresses timelines, fictionalises characters, and dramatises events in order to create coherent narratives. The film can be examined as an example of how dramatisation and emotional reconstruction organise representations of historical violence; the specific accuracy of its historical claims requires corroboration beyond the film itself.

In India, cinema has played a major role in constructing national identity and historical imagination. From post-independence nationalist films to contemporary political dramas, Indian cinema has repeatedly engaged with themes of colonialism, partition, communal violence, and social transformation. Films often serve as cultural archives that preserve collective memory and shape ideological discourse.

Recent scholarship by Rachel Dwyer and M. Madhava Prasad demonstrates that contemporary Indian political cinema increasingly merges nationalism with affective visual storytelling. This trend is particularly visible in films that reconstruct traumatic histories through testimonial narratives and symbolic imagery. Such films frequently position themselves as corrective interventions into allegedly neglected historical narratives.

The concept of "counter-history" is particularly relevant to films like *The Bengal Files*. Counter-historical narratives challenge dominant historiographical frameworks by foregrounding neglected experiences or suppressed memories. Such films often claim to recover truths marginalised by institutional or ideological structures. However, counter-history itself can become ideologically selective, privileging certain narratives while excluding others.

Cinema's visual dimension intensifies its historiographical influence. Cinematic images carry an aura of immediacy and realism that can persuade audiences of the authenticity of the events they depict. Techniques



such as documentary-style interviews, realistic mise-en-scène, and emotionally immersive cinematography contribute to the perception of historical authenticity.

Memory, Trauma, and Visual Culture

Theories of memory and trauma offer important frameworks for understanding films that engage with historical violence and political suffering. Collective memory refers to the shared understanding of the past that communities, nations, or social groups maintain. Maurice Halbwachs argues that memory is socially constructed rather than individually isolated.

Trauma studies further complicate the relationship between history and representation. Cathy Caruth defines trauma as an overwhelming experience that resists direct representation and returns through fragmented memories, repetitions, and haunting images. Historical trauma often produces silences within public discourse because traumatic events are difficult to articulate fully.

Films dealing with political violence frequently employ fragmented narratives, flashbacks, testimonial structures, and symbolic imagery to represent trauma. In *The Bengal Files*, visual narrative functions as a medium of testimonial memory. The film's representation of violence and suffering attempts to transform historical trauma into public consciousness.

Visual culture also shapes how societies remember violence. Images of suffering possess extraordinary emotional power and can become iconic representations of historical events. However, the repeated circulation of traumatic images also raises ethical concerns. Susan Sontag observes that images of suffering can generate empathy, but they may also desensitise audiences or reduce complex histories into spectacles of pain.

Recent studies on visual memory cultures in South Asian cinema further suggest that contemporary political films increasingly employ trauma aesthetics to construct emotional nationalism. Such films frequently mobilise memory through recurring symbols, emotionally charged performances, and fragmented temporal structures.

Political Cinema and Nationalism in Contemporary India

Contemporary Indian political cinema reflects significant transformations in the nation's cultural and ideological landscape. Films increasingly engage with themes of nationalism, historical injustice, religious identity, and political conflict. These narratives often intersect with broader public debates about nationhood and collective memory.

Benedict Anderson famously described the nation as an “imagined community” constructed through shared narratives, symbols, and cultural practices. Cinema contributes to this process by visualising national identity and constructing emotional bonds among audiences.

The Bengal Files appears situated within this cinematic tradition of nationalist political storytelling. By revisiting historical trauma, the film contributes to contemporary efforts to reinterpret Indian history through visual narrative. The film's emphasis on historical suffering and political conflict aligns with broader trends in contemporary cinema that foreground cultural memory and nationalist sentiment.

At the same time, political cinema often claims moral authority by positioning itself as a voice for historical truth. Such claims can enhance a film's cultural influence because audiences may perceive cinematic representation as corrective historiography. Yet ideological framing still deeply shapes the construction of historical truth through cinema.

The aesthetics of realism play an important role in political cinema. Documentary-style visuals, realistic dialogue, location shooting, and testimonial narratives create an atmosphere of authenticity. These cinematic techniques encourage viewers to interpret the film as historically credible.



Representation, Ideology, and Ethical Concerns

Representation is deeply connected to ideology. Stuart Hall argues that representation is not a neutral reflection of reality but a process of meaning-making. Cinematic narratives therefore shape public understanding by organising historical events into particular ideological frameworks.

In political cinema, ideology frequently manifests through characterisation, narrative structure, and visual symbolism. Heroes and victims are contrasted against villains and oppressors, creating moral binaries that simplify historical complexity. Such representations can generate strong emotional responses but may also reinforce polarised interpretations.

The Bengal Files constructs historical memory through an ideological lens that emphasises suffering, silence, and recovery of truth. This approach aligns with broader trends in contemporary political cinema, where films present themselves as corrective narratives that challenge dominant historical discourse.

However, the politics of representation raises important ethical questions. Historical trauma involves real human suffering, and cinematic adaptation risks transforming pain into spectacle. The representation of violence must therefore balance historical documentation with ethical responsibility.

Susan Sontag warns that repeated exposure to images of suffering can produce desensitisation. Audiences may consume traumatic imagery as spectacle rather than engage critically with historical realities. Political films must therefore balance emotional intensity with reflective depth.

Another ethical concern involves historical simplification. Complex socio-political conflicts are often reduced to emotionally accessible narratives. While simplification may enhance cinematic coherence, it can also marginalise alternative perspectives and obscure structural causes of violence.

Despite these concerns, cinema remains a powerful medium for engaging with history. Films can revive neglected histories, preserve memory, and stimulate public discussion. The ethical value of political cinema ultimately depends upon its capacity to encourage nuanced understanding rather than ideological manipulation.

Contemporary Reception and Public Discourse

The critical reception of *The Bengal Files* illustrates that political cinema is interpreted through competing expectations about historical recovery, cinematic craft, and communal representation. Reviews should be treated as evidence of critical discourse rather than as a substitute for systematic audience research. They show how reviewers assess the film's choices, but they cannot establish what all viewers thought or how the film changed public opinion.

In the digital era, cinematic narratives circulate through reviews, interviews, social media, and political commentary. The film's reception can be studied through this public discourse, but claims about audience consensus require a defined sample of reviews or audience data. In this article, published reviews are used selectively to identify disputed aspects of the film's framing, not to claim a comprehensive account of its reception.

Published reviews of *The Bengal Files* differ in their evaluation of its political purpose and execution. For example, *The Indian Express* criticises the film's narrative coherence and its potentially inflammatory framing, while *India Today* describes its attempt to connect past and present through a non-linear political thriller. Such differences demonstrate interpretive disagreement among critics; they do not establish a uniform public response.

Audience reception also shows cinema's power to shape emotional and political consciousness. Viewers frequently experience historical films not merely as fictional entertainment but as moral and political statements. Emotional engagement with cinematic suffering can strengthen ideological identification.



Controversy surrounding political cinema often increases its cultural visibility. Debates over censorship, historical accuracy, and representation increase the film's public significance. In many cases, controversy itself becomes part of the film's political identity.

A further question concerns the distribution of voice and agency. In representations of communal violence, the choice of whose testimony is foregrounded, whose motives are explained, and whose experiences remain outside the frame is itself politically consequential. A critical reading should not assume that attention to one group's suffering automatically provides a complete account of a conflict. Instead, it should consider whether the film differentiates among political actors and historical contexts or encourages viewers to read communities as internally uniform. Such questions do not invalidate the work of remembrance; they clarify the ethical standards by which remembrance can be assessed.

The investigative structure deserves attention because it gives the search for historical knowledge the shape of a present-tense inquiry. Testimony and recollection are not simply inserted as background information; within this structure, they become narrative events through which the protagonist and viewer are asked to revise what they know. Yet an investigative plot can also create an expectation that a complicated history will culminate in a single, coherent revelation. The film's truth-seeking framework should therefore be read in two ways: as a device that makes neglected suffering narratively legible, and as a structure that may narrow historical complexity by privileging some testimonies and causal explanations over others.

The character of Madman Chatur is similarly important as a representational device. His fragmented speech is associated in the film's narrative with a fractured historical consciousness. This association can evoke the difficulty of articulating traumatic experience, but it should not be treated as a clinical account of trauma or mental illness. The character's symbolic function is an artistic construction; the analysis must ask what authority the film grants him, how his speech is framed, and whether symbolic status substitutes for the social and historical specificity of the people whose suffering the narrative invokes.

CONCLUSION

The Bengal Files offers a significant case for examining contemporary political cinema that revisits history through visual narrative. By engaging with themes of trauma, memory, nationalism, and historical representation, the film actively participates in constructing public historical consciousness.

The study demonstrates that cinema functions not merely as entertainment but as a significant cultural and ideological institution. Through visual storytelling, films can reconstruct historical events, shape collective memory, and influence political discourse. *The Bengal Files* exemplifies how cinematic narratives transform historical suffering into emotionally compelling experiences that resonate deeply with audiences.

The paper further reveals that historical representation in cinema is inseparable from ideology. Every cinematic reconstruction involves processes of selection, framing, and interpretation. The film's emphasis on trauma and political conflict reflects broader contemporary anxieties concerning identity, nationalism, and historical justice.

At the same time, the representation of violence and trauma raises important ethical questions. Political cinema must negotiate the tension between memorialization and sensationalism, empathy and spectacle. While films can preserve neglected histories and stimulate public discussion, they can also simplify complex realities and reinforce ideological polarisation.

Ultimately, *The Bengal Files* demonstrates the enduring power of cinema as a medium of historical imagination. Through visual narrative, the film reconstructs the past while simultaneously intervening in present political discourse. Its significance lies not only in the stories it tells but also in the questions it raises about history, memory, and representation.



Filmography

The Bengal Files. Directed by Vivek Ranjan Agnihotri, performances by Darshan Kumaar, Mithun Chakraborty, Anupam Kher, Pallavi Joshi, Saswata Chatterjee, Mohan Kapur, Saurav Das, Rajesh Kherra, Puneet Issar, Namashi Chakraborty, Dibyendu Bhattacharya, and Simrat Kaur, Abhishek Agarwal Arts and I Am Buddha Productions, 2025.

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