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The representation of the Sociocultural Landscape of India through Bollywood cinema costumes from the early 20th to the 21st century

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Abstract

This research compiles a year-by-year trajectory of Bollywood film history, delving into characterizations, fashion as an engaging spectacle, the fantastical world through dress, and the power of stardom to launch aspirational worlds through costumes to the general public. Data analyzed through visual analysis, archival studies, audience reaction analysis, comparisons between Bollywood and regional movies, and Intertextual studies lead us to the framework of this research, analyzed along a historical-political, social stratification, gender-sexuality, and modernity-versus-tradition axis. The research finally identifies six historical costume regimes from 1913 to the present, with the dominant ideological formations of each era defined as: Colonial ambivalence, Nation-building idealism, Feudal romanticism, Liberalization and NRI imagery, Niche identity and hyperreal spectacle leading to an identity crisis, naturalized through Bollywood costumes..

Keywords: Hindi cinema; Bollywood; Film costume; Narrative culture; Popular media; Stereotypes; Masquerade; Pastiche

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Neetu Singh

In the 19th century, the world received the ultimate artistic expression in visual art: ten short films by the Lumiere brothers, screened in Paris. After the huge success of Paris Lumiere, the brothers, along with Robert Paul, brought films to Indian society in 1890, when silent films were introduced. The popularity of Indian cinema, also known as Bollywood, influences the dress and attire of common people worldwide due to its dominance over the past decade(S. Sumita, 1994). The Hindi film industry, popularly known as Bollywood, has been the nation's popular source of entertainment since its inception in 1913 through Dadasaheb Phalke's Raja Harishchandra, followed by Alam Ara, produced as the first sound movie by Ardeshir Irani, which depicted the true splendor of Indian music and sound artists, set designers, and dress designers of India (Dwyer, 2006). The costumes depicted in Indian cinema during these times focused on the life and religion of the ordinary, the day-to-day lives, mundane and not exotic. Religion in movies also engendered new religious practices and altered existing notions through dress and costume in society (S.Plate, 2003). The framework for this research, hence, draws upon four theoretical pillars. The first pillar is the semiotics of dress, where costume functions

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as a sign system, with garments carrying both denotative and connotative implications that are amplified through the medium of cinema and the mass audience(Entwistle, 2000; Roland, 1983). The second dominant ideological pillar is formulated through colonial deference, nationalistic pride, post-colonial modernity, and globalized hybridity, with costumes worn by Bollywood actors becoming aspirational for viewers (Gramsci, 1971). The third pillar emerges from the Indian mindset, intersecting colonial mimicry with indigenous assertion through dress. Thus, postcolonial hybridity led to ambivalence in adopting a westernized style of clothing and appropriating it to appear more "Indianized" (Bhabha K, 2004; Spivak, 1988). The fourth pillar stems from the patriarchal regulations that encode chastity, modernity, and transgression in Indian cinema, while also functioning as a space of female agency and spectacle (Mulvey, 1975).

Methodology

The methodology of this research focuses on studying film history, delving into the cultural anthropology and sociology of the region, and seeking to understand the complex reciprocity between Hindi films and India's cultural heritage (Rajinder, 2014) . The research employs content analysis and thematic analysis techniques to understand the socio-economic complexities through the portrayal of costumes, perpetuating gender roles, caste, religion, class,

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.894 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

and regional identities within Hindi cinema, popularly known as Bollywood, from the early 1900's till the early 21st century(Tejaswini, 2013). Data spread across film archives, magazine reviews, books, movie posters, and digital repositories has been analyzed through Semiotic (Visual analysis), Production (studies of archives), Reception (Analyzing audience reaction), Comparative (Comparing Bollywood versus regional movies), and Intertextual studies (juxta positioning of films into fashion). The research framework operates across four interlocking dimensions, each of which intersects with and reinforces the others over a historical timeline. - These can be described as follows:

-The Historical-political continuum: Tracing the ideological imprint of political transformation on costume through colonial rule, Independence (1947), the emergency (1975-77), economic liberalization (1991), the rise of Hindutva nationalism, and the contradictions of post-globalization.

-Social stratification continuum -Examining how class, caste, religious identity, social hierarchical levels, and social positioning are demarcated through costumes.

-Gender-sexuality continuum -Analyzing the normative constructs of masculinity, femininity, desire, and transgression encoded in dress and shifting across timelines. This axis foregrounds the female body as a focus of intense scrutiny, where the competing interrelation between

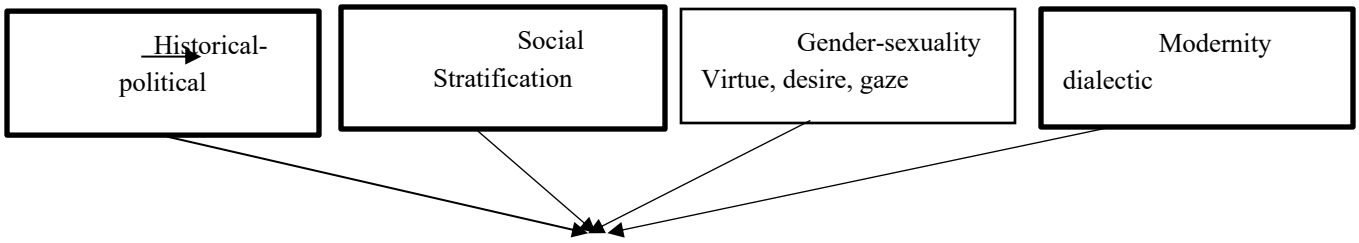
Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.894 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

modernity and tradition is negotiated.

-Modernity versus Traditional continuum - The dialect within Indian cinema between representing authentic cultural identity and true Indian-ness through traditional dress forms and articulating aspiration through westernized clothing. This tension is palpably displaced and ambivalently resolved through the heroine's female body.

Hence, the four theoretical dimensions of Bollywood cinema can be expressed in terms of six historical costume regimes (Figure 1), each with its dominant ideological formations: colonial ambivalence, nation-building idealism, feudal romanticism, liberalization and NRI imagery, niche identity, and hyperreal spectacle leading to identity crisis, naturalized through Bollywood costumes.

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.894 | http://cinej.pitt.edu



Regime 1-1913-1947- Colonial ambivalence- Mythological dressing, orientalist spectacle, wearing a salwar suit as a symbol of modernity, while a sari is equivalent to a sign of female virtuousness

Regime 2-1947-1960- Nation-building idealism-Working-class aesthetics, heroine dressed in tight clothing. Pan-regional dressing style equivalent to a unified Indian citizen dress code.

Regime 3-1970-1980-Feudal romanticism/high masculinity--Age of feudal romanticism and action-oriented masculine male protagonist. Aspirational clothing style through proletarian shirts depicting rage and bellbottoms depicting aspiration. Good women are depicted through traditional attire, while the vamp is dressed in Western clothing.

Regime 4-1990-Early 2000's- Liberalization and NRI imagery -Age of Global Indian Identity, displaying modern and upper-class aesthetics through Bollywood costume. Movies were shot in scenic international locations, with both male and female actors wearing designer and imported clothing.

Regime 5-2000's-2010's- Multiplex realism and niche identity-T-shirts, Jeans, and regional dresses as identity markers. The class divide is made pertinent through costume specificity.

Regime 6-2010's-Present -Hyperreal spectacle/Identity crisis-CGI enhanced period epics, Age of the Instagram influencers and OTT fragmentation of Indian cinema. Regional cinema gains foothold, challenging Bollywood's hegemony of "Indian dress code."

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.894 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

Figure 1: Theoretical framework of research.

Regime 1 (1913-1947) - Colonial ambivalence

The first Hindi-language film in India was a silent black-and-white film titled "Raja Harishchandra," directed by Dadasaheb Phalke in 1913. Harnessing the potential of mythology, attracting the Indian audience, this movie was based on the legend of a righteous king, becoming a raging box-office success, with its narrative style of myths and legends inspiring all movie makers of the era "Alam Ara" was released in 1931, followed by the first color movie, "Kisan Kanya," in 1937 (Barnouw & Krishnaswamy, 1980). Alam Ara was a romantic drama centered around a mythological kingdom ruled by a prince and his romance with a gypsy girl, bringing to screen a "swashbuckling tale of warring queens, palace intrigue, jealousy and romance" (Soutik, 2022, p. 1). The costumes represented the traditional glory of an Indian kingdom, reflecting the royal and cultural elements to portray the status of both royalty and commoner life alike. Mythological films were heavily inspired by the Parsi theater traditions with elaborate costumes, ornate jewelry, and theatrical makeup used to create visual imagery of Hindu civilization continuity, borrowing heavily from its Persian and Mughal ruled history.

Before India gained Independence, Indian fashion was deeply rooted in its culture and diversity, drawing on each state's textiles, cloth, and traditions to shape identity. Women wore

sarees (draped cloth), salwar (loose trousers), Ghaghara (long skirt), and choli (fitted blouse), while men wore Dhoti (draped loincloth) and a turban, symbolizing culture and heritage; eventually, an Indian identity (TOI, 2025). Women's representation during this Age consisted of myth, custom, and ritualistic practices, with victimization syndrome being a component of women's image and life history (Ayushi, 2021; Jain & Rai, 2015). The Sari (draped cloth) emerged as a nationalist garment during this period, when films like Raja Harishchandra (1913),Achhut Kanya (1936), and Kismet (1943) demonstrated the sari-clad female protagonists encoded in femininity and sacrifice. The protagonists in these movies, wearing Western suits, symbolized education, administrative authority, and social mobility, and represented aspirational colonial modernity. Indian cinema-makers tackled the volatile Indian political system and the burning issues of Indian partition and ensuing violence during the 1930's and 1940s, through their movies. The era between 1940's and 1960s in Bollywood saw some intense movies like "Pyaasa, Kagaz ke Phool, Awaara, Shree 420, Aan, etc."(Britannica Encyclopaedia, 2003, p. 137) introducing the brooding underdog played by eminent actors like "Raj Kapoor, Guru Dutt, Dev Anand, Nargis, Meena Kumari, etc." (Anketa et al., 2020, p. 297). The heroes in these movies, Raj Kapoor most notably in Awaara (1951) and Shree 420 (1955), adopted an almost tramp-like ensemble style with baggy pants, oversized coat, and a worn hat, a deliberate echo of Charlie Chaplin's disposed wanderer or everyman aesthetics. Anand

dressed sharply in western suits, trousers, neck scarf, and hat, displaying an aspirational urban sophistication, while Guru Dutt, through Pyaasa (1957), dressed in a disheveled Kurta and Pajama, showcasing a disillusioned poet intellectual at the brink of existential crisis and despair(Dwyer, 2006; Dwyer Rachel, 2002). The 1940s were the golden era of Indian movies, when Kismet in 1943 became the first blockbuster hit of India, addressing a social issue arising from India's independence struggle. During the independence struggle, leaders stressed the use of homegrown textiles and clothing, with anti-colonial sentiments transforming Indian textiles into movements of resistance (Anu, 2014). Costume, therefore, became highly ideological, with Indian clothing representing morality and authenticity, and Western wear symbolizing alienation from Indian roots.This era, therefore, formulated the creation of an Indian identity through costume , navigating the complexities of imitation, hybridity, and nationalism through dress and attire.

Regime 2 (1947-1960) - Nation-building idealism

The shift from mythology and legend occurred in the 1950's, after India attained its freedom from Britain in 1947, leading to the violence of the partition and a traumatic turn of events that filmmakers captured as a serious theme (Bhattacharya, 2020). Most of these themes reflected on previous historical events, with the characters at the extremes of the system. The

decade between 1947 and 1957, the post-independence period, saw Indian cinema transition from colonial to nationalistic themes, costumes, music, and language (Rachel, 2009; Raghavendra, 2014). Beyond films, advertisements, and magazines like The Filmfare and Illustrated Weekly of India, regaled their primary readers, mainly females, with every aspect of cinema, ingraining the costume culture fully into the Indian diaspora. The period between the 1940s and the early 1960s is the golden era of Indian cinema, marked by social realism in its sets and costumes. "Pather Panchali" (Song of the little road), a Satyajit Ray film released in 1955, was followed by "Aparajito" (1956, the unvanquished) and "Apu Sansar" (1958, The world of APU), which won numerous awards, capturing people's imagination(Kapil, 2024). These works by Satyajit Ray, described by Jean Renoir as the “father of Indian cinema”(Brian, 2018, p. 1), were created in sharp contrast to the popular commercial Hindi films, which showcased a raw, natural style that, at the time, was mistaken for documentary realism. The costumes showcased in these films were also rural, simple dhotis/tunics for men and sarees for women, in a typical minimalist style comparable to the documentary pioneer Robert Flaherty, leading towards national governments' desire to create an alternate cinema driving social awareness and a conscious departure from commercial films(Brian, 2018). The unstitched, draped piece of cloth, the Sari, worn with an underskirt and a blouse, or the "choli," is the most common outfit for Indian women in these movies(Banerjee, 2008). Men wore dhoti pants,

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.894 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

tunics, or regular trousers/shirts, as shown in Bollywood movies at the time. Actresses like Begum Para, Meena Kumari, Suraiya, and Nargis had a distinct impact on people during the 1950s with their traditionally draped saris, dapper suits, and Anarkali, an elaborate long shirt worn over loose trousers or pajamas, adorned with winged eyeliner and pearl necklaces. Lightweight fabrics were replacing the heavily embossed and embellished traditional silk and brocade sarees, enabling movie heroines to showcase more activities and stealthy dance moves (Kapil, 2024).

During the 1950's and 60's, the role of women actresses in Hindi cinema was questionable and incomplete if not portrayed as "damsels in distress" saved by the male protagonist. The male-dominated Hindi cinema, therefore, mimicked the status of women across India at that time, showcasing them in traditional domestic roles adorned in traditional attire (Ashis, 1999; Sail, 2023). Women-centric roles were few and far between, with female characters reduced to glamorous mannequins, dancing divas, or scantily clad seductresses catering to the male gaze in song-and-dance routines. Nevertheless, powerful women-centric films like “Mother India” (1957) depicted a self-sacrificing woman through her rural attire, symbolizing sacrifice, with her red-bordered saris and agrarian attire defining motherhood as a national identity itself. Bollywood had by now begun employing a wide range of techniques to incorporate traditional

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.894 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

ceremonies and festivals in great detail in the movie, requiring multiple song-and-dance sequences (Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 2004; Mokashi-Punekar, 2011). Men on screen dressed in both simple Indian wear and westernized outfits, and hairstyles were simple and tidy. Western outfits like wide-leg trousers, light chiffon sarees, and bell-sleeve tops were also prevalent. Asif's "Mughal-E Azam" was a magnum opus and a cult classic in 1960, focusing on the Mughal era. The protagonist actor Madhubala, who played the role of court dancer Anarkali in the movie, wore a bodice that featured a curve below the bust, a signature silhouette created in silk brocade and extensively embellished, conveying the grandeur of the decade. The dress was accompanied by a characteristic feather hat and cuff earrings, creating a grand costume that was widely replicated by consumers across streets celebrating India's composite culture (Inaya, 2025). The male leads in these elaborate costume dramas wore heavily embellished tunics or long kurtas, in brocade silks and embroidered, sequined to showcase the grandeur of the era. Westernized versions of women wore non-Indian clothing, flared trousers, and bright tops, but to depict homeliness, the female protagonist always turned to the humble saree and blouse(Banerjee, 2008; Madhava, 1998). The classic vamp who led the song and dance routines wore western clothing, showing flesh, as displaying of flesh was associated with deviant sexual intentions, as compared to the demure, understated dress of the protagonist heroine. In 1968, the movie "Braham Chari" showcased a three-tiered saree, draped fittingly

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.894 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

across the heroine in three layers, giving rise to a westernized silhouette that retained the elegance of a saree and became highly popular in the Indian markets (Bhanu, 2010). The sociocultural ethos of this era celebrated collective morality, family values, and secular nationalism. Costumes of this era minimized sexuality and highlighted morality, the dignity of labor, and emotional perseverance(Gledhill, Christine ; Williams, 2000).

Regime 3 (1970-1980)- Feudal romanticism/high masculinity

The 1970s and 1980s were dominated by Political instability, unemployment, and emergency, shaping the costume culture of that era. This Age gave rise to the "angry young man" portrayed effectively by Amitabh Bachchan in Deewaar (1975) and Trishul (1978), emerging as a dominant figure in rugged shirts, boots, and leather jackets, showcasing unbridled class rage and masculine rebellion through a working-class silhouette(Devasundaram, 2018; Dr. Vikrant Kishore, 2011; Lal, 2010). Clothing such as bell-bottom trousers, colorful prints, and synthetic fabrics reflected an urban aspiration and the influence of global youth culture (Ciecko, 2001).

Fantastical dressing took center stage, encouraging actresses to push their style boundaries as Hindi cinema represents a collective fantasy (Sujata, 2023). Helen, an Anglo-Indian actress, developed her own fantastical, over-the-top dressing style as her main roles were

those of a siren, dancer, seductress, or vamp, giving her leeway to experiment with her costumes and character. As a Spanish flamenco dancer in "Teesri Manzil" (1966) or wearing a shiny two-piece outfit in "Sachaai" (1969), Helen always took the limelight (Sujata, 2023). Her cabaret performance in the 1967 movie "Jewel Thief" was an overnight success, in which she wore a red, sequined leotard-style outfit fitted with feathers and plumes. Her headgear was also ostentatious in most of her performances, ranging from flowers, feathers, and plumes to a basket of fruit on her head, topped with a tiara and embellished shoes. This era showcased unbridled, glamorized fashion to Indian viewers, enabling the female protagonists to display their sexuality (Dwyer Jackson Madeline, 2000). The consumers idolized the heroines and the seductresses alike, with bell-bottoms, flared pants, large belts, oversized sunglasses, platform heels, and high-piled hair becoming fashion. In the 1970s, this look gained prominence in several movies like "Hare Rama Hare Krishna", "Trishul", "Maha Chor", and "Yaadon Ki Baarat".

By the 1970s, women-centric films like Pakeezah (1971) and Nikah (1982) showcased women as oppressed under societal pressures and presented them to the cinema-goer from a male point of view. However, films like Devi (1960) by Satyajit Ray were breaking stereotypes, showcasing women as revolutionary protagonists and using myth as a paradigm for the ideal construct of womanhood (Devika, 2021; Jain & Rai, 2015). The era until the 1970s introduced multiple Indian designers and stylists, amid a milieu of new fabrics, textiles, and silhouettes

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.894 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

that veered away from traditional Indian apparel of the pre- and just post-independence eras (TOI, 2025). The representation of the woman first as a victim and second through commoditization revealed the role of the sensuous vamp or seductress (Patricia, 1990). The 70s were a period of excess with loud makeup and tight costumes enhancing the womanly curves. A new age sensuous heroine Zeenat Aman stole the limelight borrowing the Helen's sensuous dance moves and dressing style, with the movie "Satyam Shivam Sundaram"(1978), showcasing the boldest form of heroine who literally dressed as an angel from a fantastical dream, wearing low cut, figure hugging scantily clad costumes which today would call out for objectification of female form(Bhawana, 1999; Kasbekar Asha, 2002). Hence, while traditional Indian garb communicates positive values, traditional Indian women imbue traditionalism and modesty through their attire, the negative character, or the “vamp,” was renowned for donning westernized or revealing clothing, showcasing “negative” female characters that lack virtue and restraint (Kabir, 2001, p. 95). Embodying excess, the vamp embodied modernization, communicating moralistic strictures against the sins of westernization and materialism, as a woman defying traditional rules and boundaries (Deepa, 2001, p. 287; Jyotika, 1962; Nayar, 1997). While most women during these times wore traditional Indian wear, the clothing was getting influenced by westernized styles, and young, urban, and unmarried women were wearing clothes like trousers, jeans, T-shirts, and blouses, with some even wearing ball gowns

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.894 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

and swimming costumes inspired by heroines like Nargis and Nutan (Tarlo, 1996; Wilkinson-Weber, 2005).The padded bustlines and hips of heroines in various movie sequences made little concession to the practical or moralistic requirements of women viewers outside the film setting.

Filmmakers were conscious of setting unreasonable boundaries for women viewers through innovations in Bollywood costumes that transgressed explicit (or implicit) sartorial boundaries. Thus, directors and costume designers had to assimilate clothing innovation into their self-presentationClick or tap here to enter text., conveying the heroine's comforts through restrained, comfortable clothing, in line with Indian femininity, such as the simple Sari worn by Nargis in the film Shri 420 (1955)(Tarlo, 1996). The Sari embodied not only femininity but also national identity, communicating a sense of embeddedness in a decent, virtuous society to the person wearing it. (Bhawana, 1999). The salwar-kamiz (Loose pants and tunic), once a conventional outfit worn by the Muslim or Punjabi communities, later became suitable attire for all young women, with various interpretations and styles, with the salwar becoming tighter as churidars (tight-fitting trousers) and the shirts getting smaller. The kurta (shirt) became figure-hugging and tight, accentuating the bust, as worn in the 1960s by heroines like Sadhna, Asha Parekh, and Vyjanthimala, giving the salwar kamiz a fashionable twist as never seen before (Assomull & Ram, 2019; Bhanu, 2010; Dwyer Rachel, 2002).

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.894 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

Men dressed in western attire; suits, tight pants, printed shirts, and pouf hair, which quickly became a national sensation, influencing the dressing sense of the common people across India. The 1982 movie Disco Dancer introduced Disco aesthetics, with flashy styling and sequined outfits that signified consumer fantasy (Booth, 2022). Heavily crystalized sarees, deep blouses inspired by Bollywood outfits, elaborate hair accessories also came to the fore, motivating young girls to dress the type (Singh & Gupta, 2014). Audiences' appropriation of the heroine's costumes often involved recreating variations stripped of the Bollywood connotations by the local seamstress or the humble neighborhood tailor. This period saw a contradiction between socialism and the rising desires

of Indian consumers.

Hence, while Bollywood costumes enthralled Indian viewers, they eventually negotiated their way into recreating a normalized version of what they saw onscreen, enabling middle- and upper-class viewers to visualize masculinity, moral anxiety, and urban frustration while engaging with films through their costumes (Jackie, 1994; Wilkinson-Weber, 2005).

Regime 4 (1990-Early 2000's)-Liberalization and NRI imagery

Liberalization eliminated the states' control over economic activities after 1991, providing greater opportunities for business and for decision-making in the country. The liberalization

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.894 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

policy of 1991 brought about a major change in the Indian economy, boosting private-sector participation, relaxing restrictions, and allowing International investment, thereby changing the competitive framework of India (S. A. Joshi, 2013; Mathur, 2010). Till now, the narrative in Indian cinema has been focused on the masculine representation of aggression and dominance, with women relegated to domesticated and subordinate roles. However, with the end of the 20th century, globalization and the advent of satellite television led to a transition for women, who now began to gain protagonist or lead roles, making an impact through cinema.

Bollywood fashion in the late twentieth century was considerably bold and flashy. Elaborate silhouettes in men's clothing, shoulder pads, shiny colors, and heavy embellishments. Women's clothing also became shinier, lighter, and sheer, using gossamer fabrics such as chiffon to project sensuous sexuality (Assomull & Ram, 2019). Before the 1980s, only a handful of fashion designers existed, but the late 80s and 90s saw the advent of many more in India. Post-liberalization, the influx of retail brands and organizations saw a revival of traditional Indian techniques and an upsurge in weaving, printing, dyeing, and embroidery, with Bollywood leading the trend (Singh & Gupta, 2014). Satellite television and the internet became instrumental in spreading trends and styles across the country, with movies like Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge (1995) presenting the Global non-resident Indian where Shahrukh Khan's leather jackets and branded casual wear symbolizing affluent globalization and the heroine

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.894 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

Kajol dressed in traditional outfits balanced modern romance with traditional moral standards(Chatterjee, 2022; Dwyer & Pinto, 2011; Jigna, 2004). The heavy, embellished Sari made a comeback through Madhuri Dixit in Hum Aapke Hain Kaun (1994), Sushmita Sen in Main Hoon Na (2004), and Priyanka Chopra in Dostana (2004). Wedding fashion culture also made a comeback through movies like Hum Aapke Hain Kaun, featuring elaborate lehengas, embroidered sherwanis, and coordinated festive attire (Dwyer Rachel, 2002). Movies like Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham intensified luxury aesthetics through couture costumes, foreign locations, and hyper-family imagery. Bollywood movies, by now, were largely focusing on portraying Hindu imagery through wedding sequences, festivals, and Hindu family rituals (Uberoi, 2002). This era normalized Hindu family aesthetics, portraying them as aspirational Indianness and merging nationalism and consumerism (Rajinder, 2014).

Regime 5 (2000's-2010's)- Multiplex realism and niche identity

Liberalization in the 90s brought about the rise of multiplexes and real estate development, encouraging audiences to enjoy multilingual, regional, and International cinema (Paulicelli & Clark, 2009; Schaefer & Karan, 2012). Costumes, therefore, became a means of communicating a story, becoming subtle, individualized, and socially grounded. Cinema communicated realism rather than fantasy, with clothing reflecting class, geography, social

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.894 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

status, and occupational identity. Movies like Dhobi Ghat (2010) showcased actors wearing ordinary shirts and kurta jeans, using faded fabrics and day-to-day silhouettes, emphasizing realism. In Gangs of Wasseypur (2012), the character wore region-specific clothing, loincloths, cheap sunglasses, regional styling, and locally available brands to showcase specificities of caste, crime, and urban marginality(Gopalan, 2002; Sinha, 2013).

Globalization brought global trends to Indian soil, and International brands also entered, allowing consumers to create stylized versions of not only Bollywood but also Hollywood celebrities (Punathambekar, 2016). The seismic shift in government economic policy and the relaxation of restrictions on private-sector investment allowed foreign investors and brands to enter India, leading to rampant commoditization and changing the face of urban India forever (Jyotika, 1962; Mazumdar, 2007; Tejaswini, 2013). Fashion in films like Wake Up

Sid (2009) and Band Baaja Baaraat (2010) reflected urban youth culture through casual T-shirts, hoodies, sneakers, and affordable styling options.

The foray of brands also led to an influx of product placement and marketing strategies to attract consumers, using overt references to films, a practice referred to as “out-of-film marketing,” that materializes media into consumable things (Lash & Lury, 2007; Natarajan et al., 2018; Nelson et al., 2019). Rampant brand advertising led to 'consumers' understanding of

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.894 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

new, upcoming clothing/accessory brands, with the affluent customer replacing the self-denying working class as a role model citizen in the minds of middle- and upper-class consumers (Kripalani, 2007; Mazzarella, 2003) . The Bollywood industry mirrored these changes in society by changing themes and visual styles, making consumerism compelling through narratives enacted by celebrities (Celia, 2004; Liechty, 2002). For years, the Bollywood industry has served as the ultimate form of sinful material luxury, with global commodity chains depositing consumer goods like clothes, cars, food, furnishings, and gadgets prominently featured in films and advertising (Foster, 2005; Gary & Miguel, 1993; Kaarsholm & Biśvāsa, 2006). Styling actors with high-end brands became the new norm, replacing simple costume design.

Brand partnerships with apparel, accessories, lifestyle, and jewelry brands in movies like Dhoom 2: Back in Action (2006), Don (2006), and Jodha Akbar (2008) presented a much more stylish version of the original products and became increasingly popular with young, corporate, working-class consumers. Costume in this era became an authenticity marker instead of aspirational. The Age coincided with new middle-class anxieties amid blatant consumerism, urban migration, and fragmented identities. Costumes represented diversity, regionalism, and realism in films (Wilkinson-Weber, 2014).

Regime 6 (2010s-Present) -Hyperreal spectacle/Identity crisis

Contemporary Bollywood combines hyper-stylized spectacles with fragmented digital identities. The creation of magnum opus movies like Bajirao Mastani (2015), Padmaavat (2018), and Heeramandi (2024) was vibrant, with elaborate costume design and traditional splendor, creating cinematic brilliance. These movies featured rich embroidery, heritage textiles, handcrafted jewelry, magnum opus sets, and stylized royal silhouettes. These costumes serve as heritage performers alongside visual nationalism. New Indian designers have been balancing Indian tradition with modern aesthetics, challenging traditions, and embracing bold individuality(Brand, 2025). The current generation has moved on to digital platforms for their cinematic experience, which ranges from realistic to fantastical, historical, and regional. Movies like Gully Boy (2019) and realistic shows like Sacred Games (2018) and Delhi Crime (2019) reflect contemporary India's urban, bureaucratic, and criminal environments, favoring grounded realism and real-life costumes. Gully Boy sits at an interesting intersection, with street style as a class marker and aspirational identity mixing hip-hop styling codes with low-class vernacular. The designers for the coming-of-age Netflix movie, Archie's (2023), focused on creating a bespoke look while recreating the 60s era. The costume design emphasized customization, representing freedom, rock and roll, and the sexual revolution, all themes that resonated with young Indian viewers (Ipsita, 2023) . The movie also carved out a sweet spot with young digital

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.894 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

viewers through brand collaborations, affiliated with the new generation Z population. (Afaqs!, 2023). Thus, the current-day cinematic experience, when paired with trendy costume aesthetics, staccato dialogues, trendy lyrics, and a fun storytelling experience, resonates well with the young Netflix consumer fed on a constant dose of consumerism(Sanjukhta, 2023). The current costume regime reflects an identity crisis between globalization, nationalism, social media aesthetics, and regional resurgence. Costume, by itself, is fragmenting, with cinema mixing luxury brands, streetwear, traditional silhouettes, digital fashion influences, and realism. Regional cinema, Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, and Kannada, is gaining a strong foothold through RRR's (2022) maximalism

and Kantara (2022) depicts rural simplicity challenging Bollywood costume sensibilities, bringing alternate aesthetics rooted in local histories and cultures.

Conclusion

The research findings offer five theoretical propositions emerging from costume regimes and their sociocultural contexts. Across all regimes, the sari functions as a symbolic garment for female characters, renegotiated to encode chastity, virtue, modernity, regional cinema, caste, and sexual identity. The adoption of Western clothing by female characters has led to a

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consistent moral ambiguity, making them desirable yet threatening to the very pedestal of morality they are supposed to be on. Current Bollywood cinema is dominated by a strong Hindu, upper caste, north Indian costume aesthetics, defaulting to "Indianness", rendering the lower castes, Dalit and tribal cultures as invisible or exoticized. Thus, the clothing of the marginalized community is a symbol of victimhood, poverty, or rural authenticity (Gopal & Moorti, 2008; S. Sumita, 1994) .The costume sensibility of Mughal and Nawabi culture, intricate styling, brocades, silks, kurta pajamas, and embroidered artisanry is demarcated as high aesthetic culture and reserved for period films and dramas (Priya. Joshi, 2015; Uberoi, 2002).The post-2000s Bollywood costume is increasingly globalized and hybrid, amalgamating Indo-Western silhouettes, combining global luxury brands with Indian traditional ones, and navigating the Indian middle class's aspiration to achieve global modernity (Sen Amartya, 2005).Indian films are currently maintaining a delicate balance between tradition and modernity, along with the changing aspirations of the neo-Indian society. Hence, not only the themes but also the costumes and design address themes of universal resonance, all the while providing a platform for the critique of certain aspects of Indian culture and practices, and reflecting changing societal norms and practices.

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