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LEGACY OF BAN STORY OF CINEMA IN CONTEXT TO FREEDOM OF PRESS

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LEGACY OF BANS ON TRUE STORY FILMS:

The prohibition of cinematic works, especially those drawn from real historical events, constitutes far more than a mere act of regulatory enforcement or moral rectitude[1]. It is, at its heart, a culturally charged and politically significant intervention into the democratic order[2]. In societies that claim the mantle of democracy and proclaim allegiance to the ideals of free expression and public debate, the silencing of a film functions as a symbolic rupture an exposure of the fault lines that exist between constitutional promise and institutional practice. To ban a film is not only to stifle a work of art but to curtail an entire ecosystem of discourse that might emerge from its viewing[3]. Each such suppression bears the weight of deliberate calculation, rather than whimsical arbitrariness; it arises in response to cinematic narratives that unsettle the status quo, that prod the sanctified assumptions of political power, cultural purity, or religious orthodoxy. The justifications deployed invocations of public decency, national security, or communal harmony are often facades, constructed to mask a deeper apprehension of alternative histories, unflattering truths, and uncomfortable reckonings[4]. The screen, instead of serving as a reflective surface for the nation's soul, becomes an arena of ideological struggle where memory is managed, dissent is neutralized, and imagination is policed. Such censorship reveals not the fragility of the medium but the fragility of those who fear what the medium might provoke[5]. When truth is rendered cinematic, it gains a texture that is visceral, intimate, and immediate; hence, its capacity to disturb is exponentially

[1] See Constitution of India, art. 19(1)(a).
[2] See Romesh Thappar v. State of Madras, AIR 1950 SC 124, 132.
[3] See K.A. Abbas v. Union of India, AIR 1971 SC 637.
[4] See Bengaluru Declaration on Video Activism, 2006.
[5] See Stuart Hall, Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices (1997).

heightened. Those in power often react not to the film itself, but to the conversation it may spark, the solidarities it may forge, and the silences it may shatter.

The Indian cinematic tradition, particularly from the decade of the 1970s onward, provides an illuminating chronicle of the friction between the artist's truth and the state's tolerance[6]. This period, marked by political upheaval, the imposition of Emergency, and the rise of populist authoritarianism, saw cinema emerge not only as a cultural artefact but as a contested political terrain. Films such as Garam Hawa (1974), a mournful reflection on the displacement and disillusionment of Indian Muslims post Partition, or Kissa Kuris Ki (1977), a biting political satire that mirrored the excesses of Indira Gandhi's government, exemplify how filmmakers began to deploy cinema as an instrument of dissent. These were not films of facile entertainment; they were films of confrontation unafraid to interrogate the nation's foundational myths. Bandit Queen (1994), in particular, stands as a landmark in the annals of cinematic controversy, not because of its nudity or profanity charges often levelled by those who had not seen it but because of its unapologetic portrayal of caste based sexual violence[7]. The film, based on the life of Poland Devi, shattered the bourgeois romanticism that often attends tales of rural India and instead delivered a searing indictment of systemic brutality. Its suppression, and the legal battles surrounding its release, revealed a profound societal discomfort with narratives that present marginalised women not as victims of isolated cruelty, but as survivors of entrenched structural injustice[8]. What the censor board and many politicians found intolerable was not the sight of a woman's naked body, but the nakedness of a truth that defied moral euphemisms. In these acts of censorship, the state often presumes that the average citizen lacks the intellectual or emotional maturity to engage with complex realities a presumption that is both patronising and undemocratic. It robs the audience of agency, treating them as vessels to be protected from impurity, rather than as thinking beings capable of discerning meaning and nuance.

Cinema's unique potency lies in its ability to transform historical trauma and lived experience into a form of public reckoning[9]. Where books may be read in solitude, and paintings admired in galleries, films invite communal witnessing. A true story rendered onscreen becomes a site of collective reflection sometimes of celebration, often of reckoning. The fear that such films inspire in state institutions is not rooted merely in the spectacle they create,

[6] See Ashish Rajadhyaksha & Paul Willemen, Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema (1999).
[7] See Bandit Queen 1994 (Film); Censor Board decision records.
[8] See Saumya Roy, Gender-Based Violence and Indian Cinema, J. Gender Studies (2017).
[9] See Bhaskar Sarkar, Mourning the Nation: Indian Cinema in the Wake of Partition (2009).

but in the consciousness they awaken. Once the story is seen, it cannot be unseen; once the questions are asked, they cannot be unasked. This is precisely why films that delve into subjects such as genocide, political corruption, caste violence, or communal hatred often face bans or delayed releases. They do not merely depict events they demand responses. They threaten the carefully curated narratives of nationalism and social harmony by presenting fragments of truth that disrupt the official version of history. Suppressing such films is tantamount to curating amnesia. It denies citizens access to parts of their own story, thereby weakening the democratic promise of full and fearless participation in the nation's life. Moreover, the act of banning only amplifies the film's resonance. In the age of global digital access, censorship often backfires, drawing international attention and enhancing the very curiosity it seeks to extinguish. Yet the more insidious consequence lies not in the notoriety such bans engender, but in the chilling effect they produce. Filmmakers become hesitant, scripts are diluted, production houses avoid contentious topics. A culture of fear replaces one of courage, and the public sphere grows ever narrower. The tragedy, then, is not only the loss of a particular film but the quiet, cumulative erosion of a society's capacity for honest introspection.

Cinematic expression, when rooted in the raw material of lived experience particularly those narratives shaped by collective trauma, historical injustice, or entrenched social discrimination possesses an affective intensity that few other mediums can rival[10]. Unlike the scholarly detachment of textual archives or the fragmented recollection of oral testimony, the visual frame imposes an immediacy that renders suffering palpable and presence undeniable. The camera does not merely record; it implicates[11]. Every frame becomes an ethical gesture, every sequence a reckoning. In societies already burdened by the weight of unacknowledged histories and unaddressed wounds, such portrayals carry the threat of illumination. They confront the viewer with a reality that has often been systematically neglected or deliberately obscured. It is this potential for rupture this ability of cinema to disturb the sedate comfort of forgetting that renders it so dangerous in the eyes of institutional authority. Governments, regulatory bodies, and ideological arbiters do not fear fiction for its flights of imagination; they fear truth for its demand to be answered. Hence, the machinery of censorship is rarely activated by vulgarity or aesthetic critique alone[12]. It is deployed in response to films that

[10] See Bhaskar Sarkar, Mourning the Nation: Indian Cinema in the Wake of Partition 22–24 (2009).
[11] See Bill Nichols, Introduction to Documentary 32–34 (3d ed. 2017).
[12] Cinematograph Act, No. 37 of 1952, Sec 5B (India).

unsettle the controlled narratives of national virtue, social harmony, or political legitimacy[13]. When a filmmaker dares to grant the silenced a voice or the invisible a face, the state often responds not with reflection, but with suppression. This is not merely an attempt to guard against public disorder; it is an attempt to maintain the sanctity of sanctioned memory.

One of the most evocative illustrations of this censorship impulse lies in the suppression of India's Daughter, the 2015 documentary by Leslee Udwin chronicling the horrific 2012 Delhi gang rape[14]. The film, structured around candid interviews with the perpetrators, lawyers, and social commentators, sought not to sensationalize the crime but to unravel the misogynistic architecture embedded deep within the cultural and judicial psyche of the nation. Yet, its very effort to expose this rot to force a confrontation with the social and ideological currents that incubate such violence provoked governmental ire. Branded as tarnishing India's international reputation and potentially inciting civil unrest, the film was swiftly banned from television broadcast within the country[15]. But the real affront lay not in the film's language or imagery, but in its moral clarity. It refused to flatter the national ego with platitudes of progress and instead demanded that the audience bear witness to the brutal continuity of patriarchal impunity. In this refusal to avert its gaze, the film became an indictment not only of the crime but of a society complicit in its recurrence. The reaction of the state, then, was not one of defense but of denial of complicity, denial of context, denial of collective culpability. Similarly, Rakesh Sharma's Final Solution, a piercing documentary on the 2002 Gujarat riots, encountered a nearly identical fate. Despite relying heavily on first hand accounts, verifiable footage, and survivor testimony, the film was deemed "provocative" and "potentially inflammatory," and was denied certification by the Central Board of Film Certification. Yet, what could be more provocative than the deliberate silencing of a documented human tragedy? The state's discomfort was not with exaggeration or inaccuracy, but with the film's fidelity to truth a fidelity that exposed not only the wounds inflicted upon a religious minority, but the complicity of political actors who had allowed, if not enabled, that wound to fester

Censorship of such cinematic works constitutes far more than an act of bureaucratic interdiction; it enacts what may be termed a secondary violence. This violence is not inflicted through physical instruments but through systemic erasure. By denying victims the right to be

[13] See S.S. Venkat, Censorship and the Indian Politics of Representation, Int'l J. Cultural Policy (2018).
[14] See BBC, India's Daughter (2015).
[15] See Ministry of Information & Broadcasting, Govt. of India, Order No. 1301/2015-TV(I) (Mar. 2015).

seen, by obstructing the narrative that might render their suffering intelligible to the broader public, the censor not only diminishes the moral gravity of the original crime but also forecloses the very process of societal reckoning. In silencing the storyteller, the state also silences the witness, the survivor, and the citizen. This is a violence of subtraction, where the cultural archive is deliberately rendered incomplete, the national narrative made dishonest by omission. Such acts of suppression compromise the ethical integrity of democracy itself, which thrives not on unanimity but on dissent, not on coherence but on the confrontation of contradictions. A healthy republic does not merely tolerate uncomfortable truths it nurtures the means to engage with them. Cinema, particularly that which draws from real events, should serve as a crucible for this engagement. It is the ritual space where art intersects with justice, where the fictional meets the testimonial, where silence can finally be translated into speech. To cleanse the screen of discomfort is to abandon this function. It is to reduce art to ornament and to transform public discourse into a charade of consensus. What remains is not a cinema of truth, but one of sedation films that soothe rather than stir, that distract rather than direct. The true cost of such censorship is therefore not borne by the filmmaker alone, but by the society that loses its mirror, its conscience, and perhaps, ultimately, its capacity to change.

Cinematic truth telling, particularly when rooted in biopics or docudramas, bears the ethical burden of representation while simultaneously serving as a powerful mode of historiography. The visual medium's capacity to evoke empathy and cultivate critical consciousness is unparalleled in its affective immediacy. This has not gone unnoticed by regimes, both democratic and authoritarian, which have historically regarded film with suspicion, fearing its potential to mobilize dissent or unsettle dominant ideologies. The works of thinkers like Sachi Sri Kantha underscore the formative impact of films on intellectual and moral development, especially in youth. Referencing James Watson's reflections on cinema's influence, Kantha reveals that even within the sciences, the narrative and visual power of films shape imagination and perception in profound ways. The implications of this are far reaching. When states suppress films under the guise of moral policing, they are not merely gatekeeping cultural content they are obstructing pathways to critical thought and moral awareness. In the contemporary media ecosystem, where fiction increasingly blurs with nonfiction, and visual storytelling often outpaces traditional historiography in public influence, this form of suppression has grave consequences. Documentary films like An Insignificant Man, exploring the rise of the Aam Aadmi Party, or biographical films touching

upon the tumultuous lives of controversial figures, are vital in capturing socio political fluxes in real time. Banning such films narrows the spectrum of civic knowledge, encouraging a homogenized version of reality that negates plurality. The danger is not in what these films reveal but in what their suppression conceals: a reluctance to confront the multiplicity of truths that coexist in a vibrant democracy.

The justification for banning films based on their alleged potential to incite unrest, promote obscenity, or challenge national unity must be examined with a keen understanding of power, privilege, and the politics of offense. History suggests that what is deemed offensive or dangerous often aligns closely with what is politically inconvenient. The regulatory structures in place such as India's Central Board of Film Certification function not merely as passive classifiers but as cultural gatekeepers, navigating a complex terrain of political pressure, populist sentiment, and bureaucratic inertia. In practice, this often translates into overreach and arbitrariness, with films being censored or banned not on objective criteria but on subjective evaluations of social tolerance. The impact of such practices extends beyond filmmakers; it permeates the broader cultural ecosystem, engendering an atmosphere of self censorship, creative timidity, and intellectual conformity. In today's globalized and digitally connected world, attempts to suppress cinematic content often backfire. Banned films find life online, are shared widely on international platforms, and attract global solidarity, thereby amplifying their reach and message. In this sense, bans paradoxically enhance the visibility of the very content they seek to bury. Yet the deeper cost remains borne by the democratic fabric, which is strained each time the right to offend is sacrificed at the altar of political expediency. Democracy demands not the elimination of discomfort but the capacity to engage with it. Films, especially those grounded in real events, provide a forum for such engagement a mirror to society's frailties, injustices, and aspirations. To ban them is to flinch from that reflection and to accept a version of democracy devoid of dissent, dialogue, and dynamic storytelling.

EXERCISING THE RIGHT TO FREEDOM OF SPEECH:

Democracy, in its truest sense, is not merely a structure of governance or a periodic ritual of elections. It is, more profoundly, a culture of rights a living architecture of freedom that allows for the articulation, critique, and contestation of power. Among the constellation of rights enshrined in any democratic order, none bears as much weight, or carries as much emancipatory potential, as the freedom of speech and expression. This freedom forms the

crucible from which all other liberties derive their meaning. It enables the individual to dissent, to create, to agitate, to question, and to imagine alternatives to the present. In the Indian constitutional tradition, this right finds its most prominent articulation in Article 19(1)(a), which declares that all citizens shall have the right to freedom of speech and expression. The framers of the Constitution, drawing from a rich inheritance of anti colonial struggle and global democratic thought, recognised that this freedom was not a privilege to be bestowed, but an essential condition of citizenship. Yet, the same Constitution that offers this liberty also tempers it with a counterweight Article 19(2)which permits the state to impose "reasonable restrictions" in the interest of sovereignty and integrity, public order, morality, and several other enumerated concerns. This duality gives rise to a constitutional tension that is neither incidental nor insignificant. It lies at the heart of India's democratic journey: the constant negotiation between liberty and order, between the autonomy of the individual and the anxieties of the state.

Within this paradox, the question of film censorship assumes particular poignancy. Unlike written texts or spoken word, cinema operates through images often visceral, immediate, and emotionally potent. It collapses distances between private grief and public spectacle, transforming social suffering into shared experience. It is precisely this capacity for immediacy, this unmediated access to emotion and memory, that renders cinema both powerful and perilous. When filmmakers employ this medium to interrogate injustice, to challenge majoritarian myths, or to resurrect buried histories, they do more than tell stories they activate conscience. In such moments, the state is frequently caught in a bind. To permit such films is to allow dissent to circulate through the bloodstream of the republic; to ban them is to betray the democratic promise of open debate and pluralism. The latter course, regrettably, has often prevailed. Across decades, Indian authorities have invoked the provisions of Article 19(2) to shield the public from narratives deemed too volatile, too provocative, or too morally disruptive. But beneath the rhetoric of "public order" and "decency" lies a deeper discomfort a desire to preserve a version of national identity that is unblemished, unchallenged, and singular. Films that depict communal violence, question caste hierarchies, portray gender based oppression, or expose political complicity are not censored because they are false; they are censored because they are too true. In suppressing such cinematic expressions, the state does not merely silence the filmmaker it subdues the democratic impulse itself, the capacity of a society to look unflinchingly into the mirror and confront what it sees.

The legal rationale for censorship often couched in the language of "reasonable restrictions" reveals its pliability in the hands of those determined to suppress dissent. What counts as "reasonable" is seldom measured against objective standards; rather, it is assessed through the prism of prevailing political convenience or moral orthodoxy. This elasticity turns the Constitution's safeguard into an instrument of control, enabling regulatory bodies to become the arbiters of artistic merit and social acceptability. The Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC), originally conceived as a certifying authority, has morphed into a censorial body that routinely oversteps its mandate. Its interventions, whether through cuts, delays, or outright bans, often reflect the prejudices of power rather than the sensibilities of the public. Ironically, many of the films censored under the pretext of maintaining social harmony have gone on to receive critical acclaim internationally and have spurred important national conversations once released through alternate platforms. The suppression of such films in the name of democracy is, in truth, a betrayal of it. The democratic ethos does not thrive on uniformity or comfort; it demands dissonance, provocation, and the willingness to engage with multiple truths. When censorship becomes habitual, the public sphere shrinks, intellectual courage wanes, and the imagination of citizenship is impoverished. The visual silence imposed on screens becomes a metaphor for a larger societal silence a reluctance to confront complexity, a fear of plurality, a rejection of self critique. This is not merely a cultural issue or a legal debate it is a crisis of democratic confidence. For in censoring the image, the state censors the imagination. And without imagination, there can be no true freedom.

The recurrent suppression of cinematic works that interrogate caste hierarchies, religious tensions, gendered subjugation, or political repression does not stem from democratic fragility alone; it is rooted in a deeper ideological disposition that privileges control over critical engagement. This disposition, lodged within the administrative and cultural apparatus of governance, is paternalistic in nature shaped by the presumption that the citizenry is incapable of rational discernment in the face of controversial or unsettling content. It is not democracy that is deficient here, but the faith of those who govern in the intellectual and emotional maturity of the governed. Such a stance reveals a fundamental mistrust of public reason, wherein the state imagines itself as a guardian of civic morality rather than a facilitator of democratic deliberation. By assuming that the populace might erupt into chaos upon encountering narratives of historical injustice or systemic oppression, the authorities not only exaggerate the volatility of society but obscure their own unwillingness to allow space

for dissent. The consequence is a form of governance that privileges harmony over truth, stability over justice, and silence over confrontation. Cinema, in such a context, ceases to be a participatory medium it becomes a battleground of ideological filtration. Every film that attempts to reflect the raw, often violent, textures of reality is subjected to a moral test, not to evaluate its truthfulness or artistic merit, but to gauge its alignment with an approved national narrative.

This pattern of cinematic censorship is rarely a response to grassroots outrage; more often, it emerges from institutional anxiety. Films that explore the unresolved traumas of postcolonial India be it in terms of territorial conflict, sexual autonomy, religious identity, or caste oppression are typically stifled not because they threaten public peace, but because they threaten to disturb the curated image of a unified, morally coherent nation. The reaction to Vishal Bhardwaj's Haider, for instance, was instructive. Set against the backdrop of insurgency and military presence in Kashmir, the film dared to explore the interiority of a region scarred by violence and disenfranchisement. Its critical gaze toward state actions and its poetic portrayal of betrayal and loss invited intense scrutiny, yet its suppression was less about national security than about discomfort with alternative perspectives. Similarly, Alankrita Shrivastava's Lipstick Under My Burkha, a film that gave voice to female desire, resistance, and inner lives, was initially denied certification on the grounds of being "lady oriented" a phrase that betrayed not only patriarchal discomfort but an institutional fear of the subversive power of womanhood in cinema. These acts of censorship did not arise from an organically offended public; they originated within bureaucratic chambers steeped in the politics of respectability and control. The films did not incite mobs or provoke riots they incited conversation. Their power lay in the questions they posed, not in the answers they provided. Yet, it is precisely this capacity for inquiry that censors sought to neutralise. By controlling what is shown, the state does not merely edit the cinematic narrative it edits the national conscience, trimming away the inconvenient truths that refuse to fit the sanctioned frame.

At the heart of this censorial impulse lies a troubling philosophical posture: the denial of civic agency. When authorities decide which films may or may not be viewed, they presume the audience to be emotionally unstable, morally corruptible, or intellectually ill equipped to form independent judgments. This infantilisation of the citizenry transforms them from active participants in democratic life into passive recipients of state sanctioned narratives. The very act of banning a film thus becomes symbolic a gesture that proclaims the state's prerogative

to manage not only public behaviour but also collective imagination. Such a model of governance is antithetical to the democratic ideal, which presumes the maturity and autonomy of its citizens. A democracy is not weakened by complexity; it is enriched by it. To expose citizens to uncomfortable stories is not to endanger the social fabric it is to strengthen its capacity for empathy, critical thought, and reform. Cinema, when allowed to flourish without the shadow of censorship, can function as a forum of ethical witnessing, a medium through which silenced histories are reclaimed and marginalised voices are restored to the centre of public discourse. The refusal to trust audiences with such narratives betrays not just an institutional insecurity but a crisis of democratic imagination. The state, in casting itself as editor of permissible truth, forfeits its role as the protector of democratic integrity. It declares that unity is to be maintained not through mutual understanding, but through erasure and silence. In such a system, art ceases to be a mirror and becomes a mask, concealing the fractures that demand to be addressed.

The tendency to suppress provocative or dissident expression is neither isolated nor uniquely Indian. It reverberates across the cultural and political landscapes of many liberal democracies, revealing an anxious preoccupation with maintaining normative ideological coherence. In contexts where democratic institutions profess allegiance to the principles of free speech and intellectual autonomy, the practice of censorship nevertheless thrives albeit cloaked in the rhetoric of moral guardianship, national interest, or psychological welfare. The phenomenon of book banning in the United States, especially in public school libraries and educational institutions, serves as a striking illustration of this contradiction. As documented in the report Book Bans in the US: Attempts to Censor Library Material, literature that explores themes of race, sexuality, gender identity, or political resistance is frequently targeted under the pretence of protecting minors or preserving community standards. Such rationalisations echo the language of censorship used in postcolonial contexts like India, where the state often justifies film bans by citing public decency, communal harmony, or national security. Despite the disparity in socio political histories, the ideological convergence is unmistakable. At the heart of both practices lies a fundamental fear of uncontrolled narratives of stories that elude state supervision and, in doing so, challenge hegemonic authority.

This convergence suggests that censorship is not merely a function of cultural difference or institutional fragility, but a structural reflex of power itself. Whether democratic or authoritarian, state apparatuses exhibit a shared unease with the unregulated circulation of

ideas, particularly those that question dominant assumptions or expose the fractures beneath polished surfaces. Svetoslava Dimitrova's insights on the suppression of intellectual freedom are instructive here. She argues that the ability to access, produce, and disseminate contested knowledge is not a luxury of advanced societies, but a precondition for their survival. Censorship, in any of its forms whether through literary interdictions, digital silencing, or cinematic bans functions as an act of epistemic violence. It excises certain truths from the public record, depriving democratic societies of the tools necessary for self reflection, reform, and regeneration. The consequences are not merely artistic or symbolic; they are deeply political. A society denied access to its contradictions cannot mature; it can only calcify into conformity.

The public sphere, envisioned by theorists like Jürgen Habermas as a space for reasoned dialogue and critical debate, is rendered inert when disagreement is reframed as danger. In such climates, the citizen is no longer a participant in the democratic process but a subject to be managed, whose exposure to complexity must be mediated by authority. Whether in the book challenging campaigns of conservative school boards or the cinematic censorship of politically sensitive films, the cultural logic remains consistent: dissent must be contained, difference must be domesticated, and the narrative must remain singular. Censorship, in this light, emerges not as a protective measure but as a strategy of erasure a method by which the state delineates the borders of thought and relegates deviation to the margins. What is lost is not only artistic integrity but the very soul of democracy: the ability to hear, to question, and to differ.

Cinema, despite the repressive climates it often finds itself navigating, continues to assert itself as one of the most resilient instruments of democratic expression. It resists containment by transforming the screen into a site of confrontation, not only with society's visible injustices but with its silenced truths. More than a cultural artefact, cinema becomes a visceral language one that does not merely depict the world but interrogates it. Films such as Article 15, which drew its narrative from the harrowing Badaun rape case, did not content themselves with aesthetic ambition or commercial appeal[16]. Instead, they forced their viewers into uncomfortable yet necessary reflection. Through its stark realism and moral urgency, the film summoned attention to the entrenched caste prejudices that continue to plague India's

[16] Article 15, Dir. Anubhav Sinha, 2019.

social fabric. It offered not escapism, but an ethical provocation one that demanded the audience reckon with the dissonance between constitutional promises and lived realities.

The potency of such cinematic Interventions lies not merely in what is shown but in the moment of their emergence. Released during periods of heightened socio political tension, these films become more than stories; they are declarations. Their timing renders them consequential, giving them the quality of public testimony. When the state reacts with censorship, it inadvertently acknowledges their disruptive force. A ban, far from neutralising a film's influence, amplifies its message, inviting wider discourse and inadvertently validating the filmmaker's purpose. Suppression becomes a mirror reflecting the insecurities of power rather than the supposed volatility of the public. In such instances, the law assumes a pivotal role not just as an arbiter of technicalities but as a guardian of democratic ethos. Judicial pronouncements that uphold artistic expression perform more than legal acts they restore the space for political imagination.

The judiciary's resolve becomes especially vital when artistic freedom collides with the demands of majoritarian sentiment. In S. Rangarajan v. P. Jagjivan Ram (2011), the Supreme Court of India made a profound assertion: that freedom of expression cannot be curtailed merely due to threats from intolerant factions. This declaration was not just a vindication of an individual's right to speak it was an affirmation of the collective right to listen, to engage, and to disagree. Yet, the protection of this right cannot be the judiciary's burden alone. A vibrant democracy requires its citizens to remain vigilant and its artists to remain unafraid. When filmmakers confront power with truth and audiences meet their narratives with openness rather than outrage, democracy expands its moral horizons. Film, in such a democratic ecology, ceases to be a source of public disturbance; it becomes an extension of public conscience. Conversely, censorship, often disguised as moral duty, emerges as a mechanism of erasure a betrayal not only of art but of the democratic promise itself. The true measure of a nation's freedom is not found in the volume of its slogans but in the stories it allows to be told without fear.

ARGUMENTS FOR AND AGAINST FILM CENSORSHIP:

The controversy surrounding the banning of films often unfolds along deeply entrenched lines of moral, cultural, and political anxiety. Advocates of censorship frequently invoke the spectre of social unrest, moral degradation, or religious offence, insisting that unregulated cinematic expression poses tangible threats to communal harmony and public morality. This

argument, though cloaked in the language of collective well being, often rests on a precarious foundation. The Modern Movies and Violence study has been repeatedly cited to demonstrate the supposed causal link between on screen depictions of sex, drugs, or violence and the behavioural tendencies of impressionable youth. It is asserted that visual storytelling, when left unchecked, nurtures delinquency, fosters desensitisation, and erodes traditional values. Yet, such claims, though not entirely devoid of substance, frequently serve as a rhetorical façade camouflaging a deeper ideological impulse to sanitise public discourse and marginalise dissent. Scholars like Johnson (2009) and Coyne (2016) have challenged the reductionist assumption that media content uniformly influences all consumers. Their research underscores that individual traits, socio cultural context, and psychological predispositions significantly mediate how individuals engage with and internalise media. This perspective dismantles the logic of blanket bans, revealing them not as measured responses but as overreactions that neither reflect empirical evidence nor advance the public good.

The defenders of cinematic freedom, by contrast, argue for a more mature relationship between society and art. Cinema, in their view, should not be approached as a volatile force requiring containment, but as a powerful medium through which difficult truths are explored and collective self understanding is deepened. Rather than fearing provocation, democratic societies must cultivate resilience through education. Media literacy, rather than moral policing, is the more appropriate and effective response to controversial content. Empowering viewers to think critically about what they consume creates a public better equipped to handle discomfort, engage in debate, and reject simplistic narratives. Moreover, the assumption that audiences will react with violence or chaos to provocative films reveals less about public temperament and more about the insecurities of political authority. It is a projection of institutional fear masquerading as civic foresight. There is also a practical irony that censorship in the digital era often defeats its own purpose. Banned films, far from being buried, are resurrected through online leaks, peer to peer sharing, VPN enabled streaming, or viral campaigns that spread faster than state directives can suppress. The very act of prohibition lends these works a heightened visibility, transforming them into cultural artefacts of resistance and curiosity. What was once a modest artistic intervention becomes, through the politics of suppression, a symbol of defiance. This paradox exposes the futility of censorship in the information age. Far from silencing dissent, it inadvertently amplifies it. The effort to erase a film often ensures its survival in the public consciousness, thereby

confirming what democratic theorists have long insisted: that freedom, once glimpsed, is not easily extinguished, and the imagination, once stirred, cannot be legislated into silence.

OVERVIEW:

The history of film bans is not merely a chronicle of state overreach; it is a revelation of enduring anxieties embedded in the political imagination. Across geographies and political systems, whether under the overt authoritarianism of a closed regime or the more insidious paternalism of a democratic state, the act of banning visual narratives signifies a visceral fear not of violence or disorder, but of interpretative freedom. The screen, unlike the written word, does not demand literacy; it demands attention. Its immediacy renders it dangerous to regimes of control. Moving images speak in a language accessible across class, caste, and education divides, thus possessing the extraordinary capacity to influence perception, memory, and identity formation. In this power lies the reason for their regulation. Governments do not ban films to protect citizens from harm but to protect ideologies from dissent. Censorship operates as a prophylactic preventing rupture, ensuring silence, and safeguarding the curated mythologies that support the dominant social and political order.

India's own struggle with cinematic censorship has never been merely legal or procedural. It is deeply cultural and profoundly political. The post independence era promised an embrace of pluralism, yet successive governments have wielded censorship as a weapon of ideological consolidation. The logic of the ban has simply adapted with the times. What was once achieved through explicit cuts and bans by the Central Board of Film Certification is now often enforced through more covert mechanisms: the denial of certification, bureaucratic stalling, withdrawal of state funding, or the mobilization of populist outrage. The advent of digital platforms and social media has complicated this terrain further. Now, censorship is enacted not only by the state but by networks of ideological enforcement masquerading as public opinion. Online harassment, boycott campaigns, and manufactured outrage exert pressure on filmmakers in ways that are no less coercive than official prohibitions. Yet, paradoxically, the rise of piracy and digital dissemination has also diminished the efficacy of such efforts. A banned film in theatres may still find life online, where it often reaches a broader and more engaged audience than it might have through traditional channels. Suppression thus breeds curiosity, and prohibition often transforms a film into a cultural artefact of resistance.

The legacy of the film ban, therefore, cannot be understood solely In terms of institutional restriction.[17] It is a multi layered phenomenon legal in form, but cultural in reach and psychological in effect. It tells us as much about what a society wishes to hide as about what it seeks to preserve. The banned film becomes a site of contested memory, a repository of suppressed narratives, and a symbol of the struggle between truth and power in the visual age. What this history discloses is not the fragility of society, but the fragility of those who fear its awakening. In attempting to control what is seen, heard, and remembered, the custodians of censorship reveal not strength but insecurity fear of a populace that might begin to think, feel, and question beyond the bounds of officially sanctioned reality.

[17] See Rachel Dwyer, Bollywood's India: Media Culture and Politics, 2014.