



PROJECT MUSE®

Lagaan: Once Upon a Time in India (review)

Rebecca M. Brown

Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television Studies,
Volume 34.1 (2004), pp. 78-80 (Review)

Published by Center for the Study of Film and History

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/flm.2004.0008>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/170442>

the parents and Aunt Barbara encourage questioning and respect the children's perspectives. When Chelsea, age 11, wants to ask a question using the word penis she first says, "Can I say it? It won't be inappropriate?" By involving questions in the process of cultivating their children's values, the parents avoid stifling the learning process with prescriptions that would close down or limit discussion. They thereby demonstrate meaningful value-making through their interactions. Olivia, the 9 year-old niece, initially expresses fear when she meets Aunt Barbara, but later says that she "calmed down" after talking with her. Chelsea, the oldest daughter, feels proud that she stood up in class and provided the terms her classmate requested rather than simply allowing the class to snicker about a "man who wants to become a woman" without a direct response from the teacher.



The family's approach to interaction with their children is consistent: they present a topic, sometimes by asking questions, then they allow their children to think about the topic, reflect, interact with one another and answer each other's questions. Then, the parents respond to their children's inquiries and spark further discussion. Each of the sisters have very different reactions from one another as well as very different ways of coping, reflecting, and processing information, so each of them learns to employ the values that their parents encourage in their own way. When the children learn that their Uncle Steve decided not to meet Barbara because he is not handling the news very well, the mother says that her daughter was mad saying, "I do not understand! This is his brother, his sister! If that was my sister and she had something going on, I would always love her!" The children demonstrate that they have learned the values their family encourages.

The means used to cultivate family values in the film stands in stark contrast to the "traditional family values" rhetoric that demonizes groups of people. Aunt Barbara's family refuses simply to ostracize her; instead they consider the difficulties she experiences. As viewers, we learn about some of the struggles she will face as a transgender individual through the eyes of those who love her including her six year-old niece, Abby. Humanizing Barbara through their approach to her decision, Barbara's family recognizes that the learning process matters as much as the outcome. Indeed, the very root of the word traditional reveals that traditions, like its synonyms, custom and culture, are learned. So, if one's values in practice are not consistent with the values one claims to want to preserve, then a mixed message can result.

The familial context of this film reveals that the phrase "traditional family values," can be employed as an empty rhetorical tool that fails at the very process required to accomplish its alleged purpose of preserving tradition. Choosing not to focus energy on hunting down allegedly immoral people, the family does not concern themselves with how to protect their innocent chil-

dren, but rather they devote time to preparing their children to reflect and make decisions about how to live a life of love. The film thus gives the viewer hope that communities and families can still foster love, acceptance and humor despite the context of "the culture wars." By not treating their questions regarding their aunt as a threat from somewhere outside their family, the family in the film avoids a stifling debate over transgendered identity. Portrayed as *at war*, any focus on the values of consensus, love and acceptance can disappear from the discussion, but Regan's decision to present her subject through the eyes of children within intimate family settings enables her film to break through the impasses of these debates.

Without employing the phrase "family values," Chelsea, Olivia, Abby and the parents *exhibit* their family's values: they illustrate practical tools for cultivation and value-making steeped in love, where the parents' means for introducing values to their children are consistent with their desired ends. The process by which the family in *No Dumb Questions* teaches and learns the values of love and acceptance is refreshing and exhilarating to witness so intimately. This family's admirable approach to processing difficult family news would make any hard-to-deal-with family issue easier to consider. Faced very directly with a controversial topic, we witness parents guiding and supporting their children as they encourage them to think through complicated ideas and questions. The process of cultivation that they as parents employ enables them to return from meeting Aunt Barbara with an assessment of success, "If this has done anything, it has put a positive light in being accepting of others. [Our children] are going to be better off because of it." Appealing to their core values as a family, they take a courageous and very humane stance. Love leads them to accept Aunt Barbara completely, even when they cannot completely understand or relate to her decision.

Kristin Effland

Youth Program Coordinator

Gender Public Advocacy Coalition

Kristin.Effland@gpac.org

***Lagaan: Once Upon a Time in India* (dir. Ashutosh Gowariker, 2001)**

On the surface, the Bollywood film *Lagaan* offers a story of resistance. Set in the traditional musical mode of films coming out of the prolific Mumbai (Bombay) studios, *Lagaan* tells/sings/dances the story of the resistance of Indian villagers against their British colonial oppressors. Smaller resistances within the village shore up this larger unfolding of tension, as the hero Bhuvan (played by Aamir Khan) defends the village untouchable, welcomes the token Muslim, Ismail (Raj Zutshi) and token Sikh, Ram Singh (Javed Khan), and stops the villagers from violently killing the turncoat spy for the British, Lakha (Yashpal Sharma). We watch as the villagers conquer the clear evil of British Captain Andrew

Russell (Paul Blackthorne), whose smirks send simultaneous chills and giggles down one's spine and whose capricious wielding of power irks even his superiors at colonial central command. However, this message of resistance rides on the back of other, more problematic assumptions regarding our understanding of the historical colonial relationship—and it does so in order to serve contemporary Indian political realities. Just as architectural, archaeological, and textual history is often rewritten or ignored in order to support the notion of a Hindu India oppressed by Muslim or British outsiders,¹ *Lagaan* presents a colonial past in which resistance to the colonizer “unifies” the villagers, but only under the banner of Hinduism. From the conservatism of the film's depiction of the village to its token inclusion of Muslims, Sikhs, and untouchables, *Lagaan* unwittingly reasserts the primacy of Hinduism in India, and does so through the two-pronged approach of recasting both Indian history and Hindu gods.

Some have suggested that *Lagaan* might serve as a way to begin a discussion of colonialism, or even nineteenth-century subaltern resistance to colonial power.² The film's whitewashed-yet-accurate depiction of village life, Indian-style British cantonment headquarters and dusty cricket grounds suggest an historical precision that viewers may also extend to the relationships among the characters in the film. We are given the message that Gujarati villages of the late-nineteenth century had only one Muslim man (and his silent wife) rather than a larger community of Muslims, that those same villagers can be convinced within the span of one scene that untouchability and caste difference are wrong (never mind that caste itself has been argued to be a colonial construction³ and that it took Gandhi years to shift, and only partially, the place of the untouchable in India), and that despite all of these anachronistic socially progressive attitudes the lone Sikh is indeed stereotyped as a consummate warrior, fighting the British whether with “sword or bat.” Each move of inclusion, tokenism, or stereotyping in the film results in a reification of the Hindu-Indian identity as the norm, both then and now. By bringing these outliers in, the film enables a reading of historical Indian resistance as unified under a Hindu banner, a banner that has material effects on today's minority populations in India, whether Muslim or Sikh. The unwitting irony of filming in Gujarat, site of the terrible Hindu-Muslim riots in 2002, which left hundreds of thousands of Muslims as refugees, makes this conservatism more poignant.

This Hindutva (lit. Hinduness, describing the Hindu right's political movement) unity relies on a selective notion of what “Hindu” might mean, largely dependent upon late-nineteenth century Victorianizations of Hinduism, and often figured through selected iconography of Hindu gods. It has been remarked elsewhere that the main love story of *Lagaan*, between Gauri (Gracy Singh) and Bhuvan, echoes the



stories and imagery surrounding the Krishna-Radha narratives as told in various *puranas* and illustrated in Indian painting.⁴ In the iconography of the *rasalila* dance, the *gopis* (maidens) dance in a circle (each with their own Krishna), while Krishna and Radha dance in the center as the ideal couple. *Lagaan* echoes this iconography in the song “Radha Kaise Na Jale” in which Bhuvan and Gauri literally take the roles of Krishna and Radha in the village celebratory dance. The camera captures the dance from above, emulating the traditional iconography of the circular *rasalila*. In a (slightly) more subtle reference, the moment when the two declare their love for one another (“O Rey Chhori”) echoes the narrative iconography of Krishna as cowherd cavorting with his primary *gopi*, Radha, riding in the buffalo cart, and dancing together outside of the village.⁵ This musical number is also the only moment in the film in which we see Gauri in a somewhat “racy” context. Over the course of the song her garment shifts from covering her head and coyly obscuring her face to a midriff-bearing, cleavage-showing ensemble; her hair gradually frees itself from its braids, culminating in a suggestive shot in which her tousled head rises into the camera from below followed by Bhuvan's head and torso rising behind her. Certainly this references the rich sexuality of the Krishna-Radha relationship but comes nowhere near the seductive, explicit encounters we find in the *Bhagavatapurana*, the Sanskrit narrative of Krishna. *Lagaan* thus strikes the viewer as overly conservative: women in the village remain completely covered in very modest saris; Gauri's one exception to this in “O Rey Chhori” proves tame compared to other Bollywood love scenes. *Lagaan* thus appropriates the religious language of Krishna and Radha to the narrative but does so while simultaneously Victorianizing the Hinduism referred to here.

The combination of a unified Hindu identity and a vision of Hinduism as centering on particular interpretations of popular iconography undermines the overarching story of resistance, refiguring it with the message that only as a unified, Hindu-centered nation can India throw off the yoke of the oppressors. *Lagaan*'s success around the world, including an Oscar nomination in 2002, speaks to its popularity and the universality of its themes of rising up against oppression, falling in love, and fighting for a good cause. These same worldwide audiences may be unaware of the political strength of Hindutva in contemporary India, which serves as the foundation for this film's articulation of resistance against the British. That this was the film presented as *the* example of Indian cinema by India speaks volumes for its political subtext: the India herein is Hindu.

Rebecca M. Brown

University of Redlands

rebecca_brown@redlands.edu

Notes

- 1 For a discussion of this phenomenon in the context of the destruction of the Babri mosque in Ayodhya and the reconstruction of Hindu history, see

Gyanendra Pandey, "The Civilized and the Barbarian: The 'New' Politics of Late Twentieth Century India and the World," in *Hindus and Others: The Question of Identity in India Today*, Gyanendra Pandey, ed., (New Delhi: Viking, 1993), 1-23. See also the books of P.N. Oak, including *The Taj Mahal is a Hindu Palace*, (Bombay: Pearl Books, 1968) as an example of this kind of revisionist history as subtle as Captain Russell's smirk.

2 Ian Christopher Fletcher, "Teaching Radical History: Film and History," *Radical History Review* 83 (2002): 174 suggests that this film could form the basis for discussion of colonial, postcolonial and imperial issues, and it certainly could. The relative accuracy of its representation of subaltern struggles in colonial India is discussed by Nissim Mannathukkaren in his "Subalterns, Cricket and the 'Nation': The Silences of *Lagaan*," *Economic and Political Weekly* 36.49 (8 Dec. 2001), 4580-9. I contend that most

audiences have taken the film at face value, as a Bollywood-ized representation of that historical period; more popular reviews of the film fail to acknowledge its contemporary historical context.

- 3 Bernard Cohn, "The Command of Language and the Language of Command," in his *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 16-56.
- 4 My thanks to Niyati Thakur whose paper "*Film Songs and the Picturization of Identity in Lagaan*" (unpublished, delivered at the 31st Conference on South Asia, October 2002) began to explore the Krishna imagery in the "O Rey Chhori" scene and started my thinking along these lines.
- 5 For translations of these Krishna stories see Cornelia Dimmitt and J.A.B. van Buitenen, eds. and trans., *Classical Hindu Mythology: A Reader in the Sanskrit Puranas*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1978), 118-31.

Announcing the ... **Film & History 2000 CD-Rom Annual**-Continuing *series of Electronic Research tools for students and instructors.*

Each year, *Film & History* reviews a great number of fine articles which cannot be printed in the journal either because of space considerations or thematic focus or a combination of both factors. Yet these are fine articles which deserve to be seen and read. Working with the former Editor, John E. O'Connor, we have developed a CD-ROM Annual which will publish such refereed and approved articles. We will release this CD-ROM each year—with the library market as our target audience. The entire CD-ROM, which will include both the papers and the books, will be word-searchable—a wonderful option for the scholars.

To enhance the attractiveness of such a CD-ROM, two books, *American History American Film* and *American History American Television*, both edited by John E. O'Connor, have been added. These books have been out of print for a long time and libraries should be delighted to access them.

A few of THE DIRECTORS featured in the
Film and History 2000 CD-Rom Annual:
 CAPRA-CIMINO-GRIFFITH-KUBRICK-SPEILBERG-STONE
**SOME OF THE FEATURED FILMS INCLUDED
 ON THE FILM & HISTORY 2000 CD-ROM**

Annual INCLUDE:

Amistad	It's a Wonderful Life
The Thin Red Line	Alien Resurrection
Heaven's Gate	JFK
Barry Lyndon	Henry V
Mission to Moscow	Birth of a Nation

The 2000 CD-ROM Annual will be an important companion to the 26 volume *Film & History* CD-ROM, already proven to be a valuable resource in colleges and universities around the world. Not only will these articles introduce new perspectives on the relationship of film and history, creating lively discussion in the classroom, but this 2000 Annual also offers teaching techniques for the use of film clips.

Historians, Film Scholars, Literature and Cultural Studies Educators will all discover this 2000 Annual to be an innovative, informative, and indispensable tool in analyzing the impact of film, both on our history and in our culture. This *Film & History*

INTERNATIONAL CINEMA TOPICS INCLUDE:

- The Rhetoric of GERMAN film
- The Comedy of POLISH film
- The Subversion of SPANISH film

HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL ISSUES

- The cinematic representation of Blacks in both silent films and the "talkies," two articles examine films of these eras.
- Another article examines Paul Robeson and Jackie Robinson in Cold War Cinema.
- "Queer / Film / History"
- The 1950s in '80s SciFi and as interpreted in films of the '90s
- The patriotic comic support of WWII in the films of Abbott &