Sikh Martiality, Islamophobia, Raj Nostalgia, a pinch of saffron: Kesari’s nationalist cocktail and the power of trailers

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ABSTRACT
Taking 2019 Bollywood blockbuster Kesari as a case study, this paper argues that contemporary film trailers are not just promotional para-texts: they can be powerful ideological texts too, as they become accessible, reiterative, and interactive through social media. The paper performs a discourse and visual analysis of trailer and trailer-users interactions to demonstrate that the trailer formulates and disseminates an Islamophobic, anti-secular, Hindu nationalistic discourse with coherence and complexity. It also blurs difficult questions regarding Indians’ participation in the British Indian Army, and reclaims Sikhs as part of the Hindu nation in line with Hindutva ideology.

KEYWORDS
Discourse; Hindutva; Punjabi; martial; Saragarhi; trailer

The Afridis in Tirah proved themselves adepts at guerilla war fare; for, while incessantly harrying our troops, they rarely, if ever, exposed themselves to heavy loss. It is true that we penetrated and laid waste their country, but at a cost of life more serious to ourselves than to them. (Yate 1900, 215)

Introduction

Popular culture, movies in particular, have been receiving increasing scholarly attention beyond the field of cultural and film studies; and rightly so, as movies represent political texts that can work as tools for intervention, debate, ideology glorification or denunciation. Trailers have received comparatively less attention. Yet trailers are communicative objects with own aims, mechanisms, and peculiarities whose relevance and complexity are growing along with the evolution of mass and social media.

This paper proposes a discourse and visual analysis of the trailer of a recent (March 2019) blockbuster Hindi movie, Kesari, based on a historical event known as ‘the Battle of Saragarhi’ (1897). The aim of the paper is two-fold. On the one hand, it discusses the narrative within which this specific trailer frames the history it represents, its positioning vis-à-vis ideas of Sikh martiality, Islamophobia, colonialism, and Indian nationalism. On the other hand, using Kesari’s as a case study, the paper aims at contributing
towards the theorisation of the trailer as a communicative object. In so doing, it is relevant to the debate on South Asian popular culture, since its cinematic products are often used as vehicles for ideologies, first and foremost nationalistic ones.

The paper is structured as follows. First, it offers a background on the movie Kesari and a historical context of the Battle of Saragarhi. Second, it theorises the trailer as a communicative object whose aim is to sell not only a commercial entertainment product (the movie) but also the specific worldview embedded into it. Attention is paid to the peculiarities of contemporary trailers published on user-generated content platforms like YouTube. Third, it develops a discourse and visual analysis of Kesari’s trailer as a communicative object. It demonstrates that the trailer is constructed to socialise the viewer into a specific historical and political discourse that celebrates Sikh martiality while de-problematising questions related to Indian troops’ contribution to the colonial project, and promoting Islamophobia and anti-secularism. Multiple meaning-making strategies employed by the trailer (including cinematographic techniques, visual and audio symbols, metaphors, colourism, diglossic dialogues) are identified and analysed through the lens of semiotics, linguistics, and history. The paper also deconstructs the many creative licenses in which the trailer deviates from history, showing how these serve its ideological objective. Fourth, the paper considers the interaction between the communicative object and its audience on the platform YouTube to evaluate its performance in terms of users’ socialisation into the narrative earlier identified. Finally, the paper locates Kesari and its trailer in the historical context of the late 2010s to make better sense of the martiality and nationalism they display and highlight the power of contemporary trailers.

**Background**

Kesari is a 2019 Hindi film written and directed by Anurag Singh, already the creator of various Pollywood\(^1\) hits, and starring Bollywood superstar Akshay Kumar. The movie is based on a historical event, the ‘Battle of Saragarhi’, which occurred on 12 September 1897 in the homonymous locality of the Kohat district, in today’s Pakistan’s Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The battle went down in history as one of the greatest last stands, as a contingent of merely 21 soldiers of the British Indian Army posted to guard a fort fought till death resisting the attack of ‘thousands’ of Pashtun tribesmen (although Kesari and other celebratory sources report 10,000 or more).\(^2\) The 21 Rifles who fell at Saragarhi belonged to the 36th Sikh commanded by Col. Haughton, whose letters provide some of the few first-hand accounts of the events.\(^3\) Kesari develops on this less-known episode of colonial history as a celebration of the soldiers’ bravery. The unit consisted of 22 men in total, including a caretaker, a heliographer sepoy, and leader havildar Ishar Singh who in the movie is played by Kumar (hereinafter Singh-Kumar).\(^4\) All soldiers were Singhs. All men joined the fight, undoubtedly giving proof of extreme courage. Looking back on those events, in a letter dated 16 January 1989 Haughton writes:

> A great deal has been said about Saragarhi, and, as far as pluck goes, no one could have done more than the poor fellows who fought to the last gasp. (Yate 1900, 223)\(^5\)

Fort Saragarhi was one of the various guard posts built on the ill-demarcated western borders – a ‘rotten little post’\(^6\) – occupied by the British in their attempt of extending control over the Pashtun tribal areas.
Located between Afghanistan and British India ‘proper’, in the late nineteenth century, the Frontier’s indefinite status was the cause of great anxiety for the British, wary of possible inroads towards the Raj from Afghanistan and Russia. In 1849, British India had inherited the defeated Sikh Empire’s borders which extended on some Pashtun lands, the ‘settled districts’ including Kohat. Saragarhi lied on the border between these and the ‘tribal areas’, inhabited by independent Pashtun tribes (Marsh 2014, 16). In the late 1880s, the British resumed their ‘forward policy’ to bring the region under their influence (Tripodi 2016, 70). In 1893, the Durand Line controversially demarcated the official border between Afghanistan and British India, a border contested by Afghanistan still today. The British encroachment (possibly together with other factors) determined in 1897 a big tribal uprising: the Battle of Saragarhi would take place just a few months later (Yate 1900, 118–119, 159–160, 222).

While Kesari draws inspiration from real events, its abundant artistic licenses copiously deviate from history, making it a highly romanticised historical film. Including combats, stunts, special effects typical of action movies, and the now-in-vogue hyper-realist rendition of violence, Kesari is eclectic in terms of genre, and this is reflected in its movie trailer, the object of this paper’s analysis. Before we start dissecting it, the relation between movie and trailer needs to be clarified. What is a trailer: is it just a tester/teaser aimed at tempting the consumer to buy the full product i.e. the film? By discussing this question, I will define the trailer as a communicative object; and justify why I selected the trailer – and Kesari’s in particular – for this study.

**Theoretical framework: the trailer as text**

Cinema is one of the most popular and profitable branches of the entertainment industry. Movies are its main product and movie-goers its consumers. The trailer plays the same role as advertisement and free sampling for goods and services: it notifies about the product’s arrival on the market and offers a free trial that will hopefully convince the consumer to buy. But movies are not just commercial products (Gokulsing and Dissanayake 1998, 44; Murty 2009, 267–70); thus, trailers are not mere advertisements. In fact, movies are inescapably historical and political documents (Vasudevan 2000, 2). They are staged within societies and through characters who carry identities and are entangled in power relations: movies are normative texts (Rajgopal 2011). This no doubt applies to mainstream Hindi cinema, whose mix of comedy and drama entertains the Indian audiences via the on-screen projection of old or new anxieties, aspirations, and conflicts (Rajadhyaksha and Willemen 1998, 10; Pinney 2001; Kumar 2008, 178; Prasad 2013, 7–8). These are variously articulated along the cleavages of religion, gender, generation, diaspora and homeland, nation and foreignness, social class, centrality and periphery, making of movies powerful instruments for self-reflection, conservatism, or change. Hence, a movie delivers not only diversion, but also political narratives; and trailers reflect this duality, pushing us to buy movie storylines, dialogues, visuals, and songs as well as the worldview embedded into them.

Scholars reflected on the duality of the trailer as a promotional text. Dusi states that ‘the construction of the trailer is based on the condensation of the value- and semio-narrative systems of the film’ (Dusi 2002, 63). Hence, while watching it, the viewer is also ‘steered towards a reading that is preferential, fictional, and linked to a specific
intertextual configuration; in the best scenario the viewer “tastes” a core element of the film, its rhythm, its discursive and enunciative construction, its symbolic and pathemic efficacy’ (62). Following Genette (Genette 1997), Kernan identifies trailers as para-texts (Kernan 2004, 7). She looks at Hollywood trailers as commodity advertisement and as peculiar forms of narrative, thus dissect them via rhetorical analysis. However, in Kernan’s trailers ‘images are selected and combined in ways that privilege attracting the spectator’s attention over sustaining narrative coherence’ (7), so trailers remain mainly commercial advertisements, although sui generis.

Taking Bollywood’s Kesari as a case study, I highlight that certain trailers feature remarkable narrative coherence instead; and such carefully crafted coherence demonstrates the centrality of their not-just-promotional mission. Thus, at the least, the trailer-para-text offers a framework discourse viewers will use to order characters, words, images, and sounds when they will be playing in the film. In other words, the trailer provides a lens to gaze onto the film, influencing viewers to read the film as they are expected to. At best, the trailer offers a cohesive and complete discourse on its own, and effectively socialises viewers into it.

Secondly, I draw attention to the ecosystem within which the trailer is nested, one that from ‘cinematic’ has turned more and more ‘social’. The phenomenology of the trailer got more complicated with the advent of user-generated content platforms, like ever-popular YouTube. Because YouTube provides a free space for publicity (with the added incentive for the uploader of monetising the views received) film studios post their trailers on their public YouTube channel, making them accessible to potentially anyone equipped with an internet connection. This is a remarkable point if considered vis-à-vis India, a country where the internet monthly user base has already crossed half a billion users and keeps growing at a fast pace primarily via smartphones (Jha 2020). Open access platforms like YouTube enhance the commercial potential of trailers: for the trailer to reach users, these do not need to be already inside a cinema-hall anymore (where trailers of upcoming movies are screened before the movie of the day) nor tuned in to a specific TV channel at a specific time (where/when trailers are aired). Moreover, YouTube enables users to replay the trailer for free as they wish, reiterating the communication/persuasion performed by the object over and over again. Also, on YouTube, users can see the number of views a certain video has received, and receive suggestions on what to watch next based on popularity; in this way, the platform reinforces the perception of positivity and popularity for uploads (e.g. Bollywood blockbuster trailers) or uploaders (e.g. well-known production houses’ channels) that are already popular.

Finally, YouTube allows users to post a comment below the video. Such comments are public, not moderated (anything can be published), and never anonymous, often providing clues about the user’s identity. Thanks to this feature, users’ fruition of the object is not limited to the video proper (in our case, the trailer) but comes to include the comment section as well; and the comment section keeps expanding with time, becoming an extension of the communicative object. In other words, users’ engagement with the communicative object includes the comments posted by users who interacted with it before them. In this way, the communicative object keeps growing through its audience in a sort of generative circle whereby users’ fruition of the video produces comments, the latter in turn become an integral part of the next user’s object and fruition, and so forth.
In all, this interactivity and the abovementioned accessibility and reiterativity are peculiar properties of contemporary trailers. Also, the user-generated comment section provides us with a field to observe user-object interaction and enquire how persuasive the trailer is in disseminating its narrative.

This paper analyses an online trailer as a communicative object. I have selected the trailer of Kesari for several reasons. Firstly, it features the abovementioned accessibility, interactivity, and reiterativity (it is available on YouTube with English subtitles at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JFP24D15_XM), enabling me not only to attempt a discourse and visual analysis of the video trailer itself but also consider the interaction of the same with its audience. Secondly, Kesari’s trailer consists of more than a ‘collage’ of clips sourced from the movie. These are integrated with title cards that add information and judgements on the story, contributing to shape the narrative within which the viewer is persuaded to understand it. This is the case, for example, of a title card explicitly labelling the Pashtuns as ‘invaders’ and the soldiers of fort Saragarhi as ‘Sikh’ (Figure 1). In sum, title cards provide an additional site for the trailer’s ideology to emerge.8

Thirdly, I intended to select the trailer of a movie that was successful at the box-office. Kesari, with a total collection of about INR 208 crores in India and abroad (“Kesari Box Office Collection” 2019) was one of the biggest Indian hits of the year. Like the movie, the trailer did not go unnoticed either (at the time of writing, 55 million views in one year). This offers a point of view to consider the interaction between object and users, to ascertain whether it reinforces or challenges the object’s narrative. It also invites us to consider how powerful contemporary trailers can be, when they potentially access such vast numbers of viewers.

Fourthly, I selected Kesari because the topic it deals with (a documented battle between a unit of the British Indian Army and Pashtun tribes) is well suited to be politicised and shaped into a narrative. The inclusion of a high number of creative licenses in the short stretch of the trailer seemed particularly intriguing. This characteristic of Kesari’s enables me to demonstrate the trailer’s theorisation as a two-pronged communicative object: not a mere advertisement, but potentially a powerful ideological text.

In the analysis that follows, I adopt a post-structuralist theoretical framework to identify aesthetic, semiotic, and rhetorical strategies of meaning-making. My aim is to show

Figure 1. Stills from Kesari’s trailer: title cards.
that, as a trailer, Kesari’s is selling both movie tickets\(^9\) and a specific ideological reading of the (pseudo)facts represented. The first section focuses on how the trailer uses photography, chromatism, symbols, and metaphors towards such goal. The second section turns to history and linguistics to break down the numerous fictitious additions in which the trailer deviates from the ‘true story’ it is based on.

**Discourse and visual analysis**

**Rhythm, focus, norms, chromatism**

The trailer opens catapulting the viewer in the middle of the battle: a group (the Pashtuns) is charging; one soldier in khaki uniform (Singh-Kumar) stands still, ready for the impact. Then, an extended flashback narrates the arrival of Singh-Kumar at Sagarghari, and the endeavours of his unit. After that, the battle unfolds and culminates in a conflagration of explosions and carnage. The contrast between the Pashtuns’ movement and the sepoys’ stillness is consistent throughout the clip, thus connoting the first as violent aggressors and the latter as brave defenders.

The use of flashbacks and flashforwards interposed with violent battle scenes produces a fragmented narration made of highly contrasting visuals, sounds, and emotions, suggesting that the intruders have destroyed a previously idyllic state of things. The zoom dramatically alternates between close-ups of the soldiers, especially Kumar, and long shots of the tribals; hence, while the soldiers acquire individuality, the Pashtuns remain dehumanised and anonymous. Such unequal use of camera focus stresses the numerical imbalance between the two – few versus a multitude – thus emphasising the soldiers’ courage and military skill versus the power of mere numbers of the Pashtuns, who attack as a group and without any apparent strategy. By contrast, choreography and aesthetics emphasise the sepoys’ rationality and discipline: they wear neat uniforms and standard weapons, tie their turbans in the same style. Their facial hair is dark and well-groomed. They salute, line-up, fire in unison (Figure 2).

Chromatism strengthens the soldiers’ characterisation as positive and Sikh/Indian, and the attackers as negative and Muslim. The Pashtuns’ preparation for war is introduced by a black flag obscuring the sun, possibly a moral metaphor of evil overshadowing good, or obscurantism (typically associated with Islamic ways of life and epitomised in women’s black veils) against progress and civilisation. The Pashtuns’ clan standards dotting the dusty landscape are invariably green and red, the colour of Islam and blood. On the other hand, three colours identify the soldiers: the khaki of their uniform, the intense black of their facial hair, and most importantly, the ‘kesari rang’.

![Figure 2. Stills from the trailer: the unit visually communicates rationality and discipline.](image-url)
Khaki is a colour with strong colonial reminiscences (Hodson-Pressinger 2004) and a symbol of authority even in today’s India (e.g. the Indian police uniform is khaki). Black, colouring the unrolled beards, gets associated with the Sikh kesh. But the main chromatic symbol is kesari, the colour of saffron, which not coincidentally titles the movie.

Saffron has a symbolic meaning in different Indian religious traditions, including Hinduism and Buddhism, especially their ascetic branches: sadhus and monks typically dress in saffron. Sikhism adopted kesari too: Nihangs (Sikh warriors) often wear kesari elements on navy blue uniforms. However, in common parlance, saffron’s association with Hinduism and more recently political Hinduism remains the strongest, so much so that adjectivising something as ‘saffron’ provides it with a Hindu nationalist connotation. 10 ‘Saffron’ aside, it might also be noted that another meaning of the word ‘kesari’ is ‘lion’, an animal symbol of power and masculinity, adopted in Sikh and Rajput martial traditions. The kesari colour recurs visually in different sites: Singh-Kumar’s war pagri (an artistic license), a Nishan Sahib, as well as in manifestations of the Indian soldiers’ military might. For example, the bullets fired from the fort explode on the Pashtuns in kesari clouds, the fire enveloping a soldier like a divine aura is kesari, Singh-Kumar transfixes Pashtun bodies with a kesari-hot sword. Kesari populates not only the trailer’s visuals but also its dialogues. While the trailer unfolds, Kumar’s voiceover explains that kesari’s meaning is martyrdom (shahidi) and bravery (bahaduri). In another critical scene (that will be analysed below), he declares that in the upcoming battle his pagri, blood, and fighting will be kesari. Thus kesari is used as a symbol of courage, martyrdom, and resistance against the Muslim ‘invaders’. That this chromatism carries religious undertones is confirmed by the trailer’s title cards and dialogues: they explicitly identify the soldiers as ‘Sikh’, while the tribals are ‘Muslim’ by virtue of their ethnonym (‘Pathan’) and both rhetorical and visual references to a mosque (‘masjid’).

Overall, photography, aesthetics, and symbols construct a binary between the good Sikh soldiers and the evil Muslim Pashtuns. Moreover, portraying the first as rational defenders and the latter as backward attackers, the trailer frames the Battle of Saragarhi as dutiful resistance against a gratuitous aggression, as per the title cards labelling the soldiers ‘brave’ and the tribals ‘invaders’. Hence, by showing a British Army unit as legitimate custodian of Pashtun lands, the trailer mystifies the actual power dynamics at play at Saragarhi; and rather than stating and addressing them, it muddles the frictions intrinsic to the relation between the Indian soldiers and the imperialist cause they are serving.

Soundtrack and semiotics: a metaphor of Sikhism’s double soul

The trailer can also be interpreted as a religious metaphor, encapsulating the two souls of the Sikh – the pious householder and the supreme warrior. The trailer crafts a metaphor of the historical evolution of Sikhi – from Nanak’s humanism to the martiality of the Khalsa – through both visual and audio symbols marking the transformation of Singh-Kumar.

As mentioned, the trailer opens in the midst of the final battle, but then flashes back to Singh-Kumar’s arrival on the Frontier. He reaches its majestic mountains while a slow, solemn rendition of the Mul Mantar echoes in the background. We then see him (maybe
in his memory) affectionately embracing a young phulkari-clad woman, like husband and wife: he is wearing a modest turban and kurta-pajama. The mantra keeps playing throughout the first part of the trailer, gifting it a meditational aura, and accompanies Singh-Kumar and his sepoys when they venture on Pashtun land to build a mosque (a critical fragment that will be further analysed below).

But as the tribals dangerously approach fort Saragarhi, the Mantar ends suspended on a minor key. Pause. Drumroll. Kumar (who had already appeared in uniform but only with the standard khaki turban) now wears his big kesari pagri. The battle begins on a changed soundtrack: accelerating violins, explosions, war cries, swords clashing and fending live flesh provide the background for a grandiose rendition of Deh Siva Bar Mohe. The famous hymn written by the last Sikh Guru, Gobind Singh, is a prayer to God (here invoked as Siva) to provide the believer-warrior strength to fight – and if necessary, die – on the battlefield courageously. In this way, the audio-visual setting of the trailer connects Singh-Kumar and the soldiers at war with the image of the Sikh martyr: for the trailer presents them not as professional soldiers in a colonial army, but as ‘21 Sikh soldiers’ that in the name of ‘bahaduri’ (bravery) and ‘shahidi’ (martyrdom) fight to death ‘against 10,000 invaders’.

The evolution of Singh-Kumar emerges starkly when, at the end, in a close-up he roars transformed into a super-human warrior – eyes and mouth wide open, shiny black beard and kesari pagri displayed in their full glory. His appearance and roar make him look like a lion, thus recalling the association of the Sikh male with the animal (Singh), that symbolises physical power hence military might, but also Sikh ‘victory over Islamic persecution’ (as in Perinbanayagam [1990, 333] cited in A. G. Roy [2014, 204]).

Thus, through knowledgeable use of both visual and audio symbols, the trailer traces the hero’s transformation as a metaphor of Sikhism’s two souls. On the one hand, the ‘civilian’ Singh-Kumar accompanied by the Mui Mantar is the human, devoted householder, who focuses on God, living honestly and serving others as per Nanak’s teachings. On the other, the super-human, lion-like, saffron-clad soldier, slashing enemies on the notes of Deh Siva Bar Mohe, embodies the militant spirit of the Khalsa (Figure 3). It is also worth noting that while the character of Singh-Kumar, and his ‘Sikhi’, are represented as dynamic as he progressively unleashes his martiality, the Pashtun typology remains static.

The whole trailer places unequivocally Sikh symbols in clear display: kara; turban with chakkar and silai; kesh: both hair and beards, the latter always unrolled, and darker,

Figure 3. Stills from the trailer representing the two souls of the Sikh: the devoted householder and the lion-like supreme warrior.
thicker, and shinier than the Pashtuns’. These symbols appear systematically on bodies wearing the army uniform, thus strengthening the association Sikhi-martiality (Figure 4). This association emerges powerfully in the scene signifying the sepoys’ resolution to fight, where Singh-Kumar stabs his sword with a kesari-coloured Nishan Sahib attached to it into the ground. So, his weapon becomes a ‘pillar’ for the flag to stand, hence the symbols of war (the sword) and of the Khalsa (the Nishan Sahib) exist in symbiosis.

Finally, in the last scene of the trailer, a sepoy whose body is on fire walks fiercely towards a crowd of bewildered Pashtuns. Here screenwriters probably drew inspiration from the documented death of one of the unit’s men, who reportedly died in a fire during the siege. Creative license transforms his unfortunate death into a compelling image of supernatural power that recalls the Sikh iconography of martyrdom.

Deviating from history: artistic licenses

The theoretical framework has proposed that the trailer is both a promotional and an ideological (para-)text. Trailers must be short and persuasive, so they showcase only highly selected scenes. These are arguably ‘the best of’ the movie, i.e. those the filmmakers deem appealing enough to convince the viewer to watch the full movie (promotional); and to set up the viewer for a specific reading of the same (ideological). Combat scenes aside, Kesari’s makers included in the trailer several narrative scenes: micro-stories that offer insights into plot and characterisation. A closer look will reveal that most of them are creative licenses in which the trailer plainly deviates from the ‘incredible true story’ it is ‘based on’. These include Singh-Kumar’s saffron turban and the burning sepoy (as seen above); a Devanagari board affixed inside the fort; Singh-Kumar’s mosque-building and encounter with an old Pashtun woman; and his encounter with a Pashtun tribal chief. In this section, keeping in mind the objective of the trailer-communicative object theorised above, I analyse these fictitious additions with a view to understanding why they came into being and made their way into the trailer.

Masjid-building sepoys: a discourse on Sikh religious tolerance

One of the trailer’s micro-stories has Kumar persuading his sepoys to build a mosque for the Pashtuns. A soldier protests:

Koi faujion-wala kam hai, to batao sab-ji. Yahan in Pathanon se larne ae hai. Inki masjiden banane nahin

(Give us a job that befits a soldier, sir. We are here to fight the Pathans, not to build their mosques)
Singh-Kumar’s reply is calm and quite philosophical:

Jab larne ka vaqt aega, tab larenge. Abhi to Rab ka ghar banane ka vaqt hai. Aur Rab se kaisi larai

(We will fight when the time comes. But right now, we have to build a home for God & we have no differences with Him)16

Then we see him in the proximity of a small mosque, surrounded by seemingly incredulous locals, a few men of his unit, building utensils. He greets with joined hands an old lady: she is arguably a local, thus a Muslim (tattoos on her chin index her tribal identity). The woman kisses Singh-Kumar on the forehead, a universal gesture of non-erotic affection. In response, Singh-Kumar playfully squeezes her cheeks, and eventually the two embrace each other. (Meanwhile, the Mul Mantar is still playing in the background, meditational and solemn) (Figure 5).

Historical sources record no such event. Besides, such a public display of affection would have been unthinkable for both a Punjabi man (Singh, moreover, was under military service) and a Pashtun woman (whom strict purdah rules would have made in the first place inaccessible to strangers). Why would the screenwriter deviate from the ‘true story’ to add in the short span of the trailer something absurd by basic South Asian common sense? The reason is that this micro-story defines protagonist Singh-Kumar as the moral hero and Sikh archetype. His words and actions embody the universalism, anti-sectarianism and philanthropy of Sikh piety. A non-Muslim, he refers to the mosque as ‘a home for God’ (Rab ka ghar), suggesting that different religions are equal paths to the same divine being. By building a mosque he worships a God who knows no doctrinal differences. Also, the boundaries between serving God and serving the worldly society get blurred: it is the concept of selfless service, that pushes men to be absorbed in contemplation (Simran) but also actively engaged in their social surroundings (Karsewa). Thus, Singh-Kumar puts himself and his unit to the Pashtuns’ service, blind to labels imposed by religious identities. His encounter with the old woman is an allegory of Sikh piety: his silent homage to the non-Sikh stand for the respectful attitude with which Sikhi ‘greets’ – acknowledges, engages with, and welcomes – the ‘other’. The final embrace between the two represents Sikhi’s ability to ‘embrace’ humanity indiscriminately. In this way, a few seconds-sequence encapsulates Singh-Kumar’s religious manifesto: a Sikh archetype of adogmatic humanism, equality, and mutual respect. We shall recall this point soon while discussing how his counterpart, a Pashtun tribal chief, positions himself in relation to the same issues.

Figure 5. Stills from the trailer: the encounter between the hero and the old Pashtun woman.
Devanagari on the Frontier

The first part of the trailer ends with the sepoys’ preparation for the battle. In a quick shot, havildar Singh-Kumar returns the unit’s salute while standing in front of a board. White on black, the characters are unmistakably identifiable as Devanagari; the structured distribution of the text suggests it is a list, a somewhat official document. It is indeed a table, titled Sikh Regiment: Saragarhi Sanketan Choki (Sikh Regiment: Saragarhi Guard Post), listing the number, designation and names of the members of the unit, in which the words ‘sepoy’ and ‘Singh’ recur in each line (Figure 6). Of all scripts, Devanagari is the least historically accurate.

The language of the British Army was Urdu, written in Nastaliq or Roman script. The colonisers had chosen Urdu as the vernacular of British Punjab, making it the principal language of law and medium of education (Mir 2010, chap. 1). Hence, Urdu spread in the spheres of the military and administration once dominated by Persian. When the Battle of Saragarhi took place (1897), Punjab had been under colonial rule for about 50 years.17 If not in Roman script, that table (if it ever existed) would have been likely written in Nastaliq. However, this would pose a problem for the trailer’s narrative in the making: most Indian viewers would associate historically accurate Nastaliq script with the Urdu language, thus Islam, and confuse the association Muslim-Evil in progress. Likewise, using Romanised Urdu would appear oddly ‘foreign’ to viewers unfamiliar with the script or its history in the Indian Army. Most importantly, Latin characters would mean Angrezi, both as a language (English) and as a colonial nexus (angrezi raj); they would emphasise that the trailer’s brave soldiers were serving as the armed arm of a foreign project of domination: frictions that the trailer wants to conceal and de-problematise instead.

In force of its association with the post-colonial Indian state that has tried (with renewed vigour under the current ‘saffron’ leadership) to make Devanagari Hindi its national language, the Devanagari board helps to build a bridge between the character of the soldiers and the space of the fort on the one hand, and contemporary India on the other, conveniently bypassing the tricky colonial question that lies in between. Devanagari does not carry the elements of friction that Nastaliq and Roman scripts – although historically accurate – would imply. On the contrary, Devanagari counterbalances the ‘Muslim’ and ‘Angrezi’ component of the colonial India on display with a more supposedly authentic Indian essence. Because of its meaning in post-colonial India, Devanagari juxtaposes a stamp of Indianness onto the ambiguous colonial setup it pseudo-represents.

Figure 6. Still from Kesari’s trailer: a Devanagari board hangs inside the Saragarhi Fort.
in the board scene. Besides, now inextricably associated with Sanskritised Hindi ergo Hinduism, it provides an additional ‘civilisational’ layer to the resistance against the Muslim invaders performed on screen. Eventually, by purging Nastaliq and Romanised Urdu from the board, the trailer panders with efforts to eliminate ‘Islamic’ and ‘Western’ components from what is deemed to be Indian: its history, identity, state. In sum, through the board’s artistic license, the Devanagari script is used as a political metaphor that identifies the soldiers with the contemporary Indian state and its Sanskritising tendencies rather than with the colonial army they actually belonged to. Hence, from British encroachment in Pashtun lands, the soldiers’ endeavour at fort Saragarhi becomes a performance of legitimate, positive, Indian state power; and the siege of that fort, holding the ‘essentially Indian’ Devanagari board within, the siege of a civilised nation at the hands of barbaric destroyers.

**The Sikh havildar encounters the Pashtun chieftain**

A face-to-face encounter between the havildar and a Pashtun chieftain is possibly the most creative of the artistic licenses delivered by director Anurag Singh in *Kesari*’s trailer. This fictitious encounter has multiple purposes. It is a suspense-inducing scene, as well as a narrative scene centred on verbal interaction; so it ‘breaks’ the long sequence of stunts and panning shots of the battlefield. Most importantly, this encounter is a rare scene in which *Kesari*’s Pashtuns acquire individuality and the only such scene in the whole trailer. The camera zooms on the chief: a single and representative Pashtun who talks to the havildar offering him to surrender. I argue that this encounter articulates a critical message about the Sikh’s and the Muslim’s role on the battlefield of Saragarhi and, most importantly, on the broader arena of Indian history. To prove this point, I propose an overarching interpretation of the multiple allegories and discourses identified in the trailer. Before doing that, I shall analyse the havildar-chieftain encounter, focusing on the following meaning-making devices: aryanism and colourism; linguistic code; linguistic register.

**Aryanism and colourism**

In the first place, the confrontation between the havildar and the chieftain is a visual one (Figure 7). Our Punjabi character has ‘aryan’ features: fair skin, sharp nose, high cheekbones. On the other hand, the Pashtun appears far less ‘aryan’. For Indian standards his skin is ‘dusky’, and compared to his Punjabi counterpart he is exceptionally dark, as a man of the Frontiers in highly stylised Bollywood. *Kesari* is likely replicating the tropes of aryanism and colourism, whereby South Asian popular culture’s heroes and heroines are often fair-skinned and western-looking vis-à-vis dark-skinned and southern-looking villains (Osuri 2008, 115; Parameswaran and Cardoza 2009). Because Caucasian appearance is deemed both aesthetically and morally positive, the Pashtun’s unexpected looks further substantiate his characterisation as evil. Instead, Singh-Kumar is fair and handsome, thus virtuous: like a Greek hero, *kalos kagathos*.

Aryanism and colourism also contribute to exasperate differences between the two. Standing one in front of the other – and in front of the viewer – the Pashtun and the Punjabi look apart. Their looks suggest they do not quite belong together. Although the two ethnicities have much in common, *Kesari*’s fictitious tête-à-tête chooses to stress their differences rather than their possible similarities.
Secondly, the confrontation is a verbal one. The chief says to Kumar:

\[ Aaj \text{ tinon qile hamare haton men, aur in qilon ke sare Sikhon ke pagrian hamare kadmon men honge } \]

(Today we’ll conquer the three forts and the turbans (pride) of all the Sikhs will be at our feet).

He speaks in Urdu, and not Pashto, which could be arguably more natural for a tribal Pashtun (but hardly digestible to desi audiences). As for the havildar, with a smirk he responds: ‘Chal, jhuta!’, translated in the trailer’s English subtitles as ‘Dream on!’ Literrally meaning ‘Come on (chal), liar (jhuta)!’, the phrase has currency in more than one language. However, based on vowel sounds and tone used by Kumar, here it sounds like a Punjabi exclamation. In most of the trailer (except one occasion, considered below) Singh-Kumar speaks in Urdu/Hindustani even when addressing his fellow soldiers, not in Punjabi. But this scene has the tribal Pashtun throwing a blasphemous threat in Urdu and the Sikh soldier replying with a spirited twit in Punjabi. With Indian audiences in mind, the movie-makers put Urdu in the Pashtun’s mouth to strengthen his Muslim character, while Punjabi reinforces that the havildar is a Sikh. In a confrontation that is not just verbal but also ontological, different languages signify different identities, different ways of being. The screenwriter’s choice of linguistic codes reflects the process that in colonial and post-colonial India has made of Urdu a Muslim language and of Punjabi the language of the Sikhs (Rahman 1997b, 2008; Jalal 2000, chap. 3; van der Linden 2008, chap. 4; Diamond 2012, 228, 304).

Similarly, the Punjabi language is again deployed to index Sikhism, perhaps more explicitly, when Singh-Kumar exhorts his fellow soldiers to fight. Stressing the symbolism of the saffron colour, he drops his usual Hindustani and suddenly resorts to Punjabi in a dramatic dialogue:

\[ Ajj \text{ meri pagri vi kesari! Jo bahega mera lahu vi kesari! Aur mera jawab bhi kesari! } \]

(Today the turban I wear is SAFFRON. I will bleed SAFFRON and my comeback will also be SAFFRON!)

The three sentences connect the kesari colour to the Sikh turban (pagri), death on the battlefield (lahu), and resistance against invaders (jawab). Choosing Punjabi to deliver these metaphors, the screenwriter links the language itself to Sikhism (turban), its martiality and cult of martyrdom (blood), and its struggle against Muslim rulers. Finally, it is interesting to note that Kumar starts with a ‘full’ Punjabi sentence (‘Ajj

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**Figure 7.** Stills from the trailer: the Sikh havildar encounters the Pashtun tribal chief.
meri pagri vi kesari’) and then merges into Hindi/Hindustani (‘aur’, ‘bahega’, ‘bhi’). Is it to stick to the code-mixing of Punjabi-peppered Bollywood? Is it perhaps to merge what the two languages, Punjabi on the one hand and Hindi on the other, represent respectively? This is left to the reader to decide.

Linguistic register
Clearly, in the verbal exchange between the havildar and the chieftain, there is linguistic communalism at work: languages (codes) are employed as proxies of religious nationalism. In addition to this, there is a less explicit nuance concerning the linguistic registers at play. I argue that the linguistic registers associated with Urdu and Punjabi by virtue of their reciprocal relation of diglossia further the moral connotation of the characters.21

The Pashtun utters his curse with dramatic mannerism stereotypically associated with Urdu as a language of sophistication. ‘Urdu’ in Bollywood evokes in the Indian viewer images of regal mushairas, aristocratic mehfilis with tawaifs dancing to ghazals in the seclusion of elegant kothas, royal extravaganzas and palace intrigues. Urdu connects the Pashtun to its own intrinsically higher linguistic register; thus, the Indian viewer associates him not only to Islam (and possibly, Pakistan) (because Urdu is the Muslim language) but also to concepts of complexity and artificiality. These can acquire the meaning of elegance and sophistication but also disingenuousness and deception. Such qualities are not accidentally marks of exoticised Muslim culture and characters in Bollywood movies. On the other hand, the havildar, to express himself, leaves Urdu/Hindustani and turns to Punjabi. Indeed, he performs – through a quick derisory exclamation – according to the register that is stereotypically associated with that ‘vernacular’. Contrarily to Urdu, Punjabi is commonly imagined as a simpler, unpolished language, sometimes even rustic, almost vulgar, but always straightforward and never deceiving. Rather than replying to the blasphemy with another one, chivalrous Singh-Kumar turns to Punjabi irony instead. In sum, where the Pashtun’s Urdu is (‘Islamic’ and) affected, pompous, verbose, the havildar’s Punjabi is (‘Sikh’ and) spontaneous, unpretentious, sincere. Thus, the qualities associated to the two languages by their typical registers become moral qualities and get attached to their respective speakers: the cunning, subtle Muslim versus the authentic, hearty Sikh. In this way, a quick (and fictitious) verbal exchange makes of the Urdu-Punjabi diglossia a moral metaphor.

A discourse on religious intolerance: Islam
The tribesman’s threat underlies a discourse of religious (in)tolerance. The Pashtuns’ leader pictures their imminent conquest of fort Saragarhi and the unit’s defeat through an image of turban desecration: ‘the turbans (pride) of all the Sikhs will be at our feet’.

Consider the tribesman’s words vis-à-vis the havildar’s in the previous episodes. The Sikh hero respects fellow humans transcending doctrinal distinctions. His military mission gives him no reason to despise the enemy; instead, he puts himself to his service. The respectful gaze of the Sikh who joins hands to greet the Pashtun woman contrasts with the chieftain’s promise of turban desecration. In the trailer’s only scene where a single Pashtun does something other than attacking in group, humanisation is only apparent. The Muslim’s only goal is enemy annihilation, without moral caveats.

The sequence suggests that while in Sikhism’s asectarian world building mosques is Sewa, in Islam’s communal world dishonouring a kafir’s faith is legit. Thus, in a
reiteration of ‘the cliché of the inherently arrogant Muslim and the supposedly tolerant Hindu’ (Sanjeev Kumar 2013, 462), the Muslim Pashtun emerges as amoral and his Islam as a discourse of religious intolerance antithetic to Sikhī.22

**A Hindutva meta-discourse: reclaiming the Sikh**

Pushing our discourse analysis a bit further, let us consider at once the various allegory levels concentrated in the Sikhs typified by Singh-Kumar versus their antagonist(s). Besides the moral allegory (the encounter with the woman; with the tribal chief), I have argued that there is also a political allegory at play (the Devanagari board scene) where Singh-Kumar and the sepoys represent the modern Indian state, source of positive power that produces order and justice. By merging the two levels of meaning – the moral and the political – here we have the moral and religiously tolerant state (modern and secular India) challenged by amoral and religiously intolerant invaders (India’s Muslims). Singh-Kumar’s connotation is sufficiently ‘fluid’ for his meaning projection to oscillate between Sikhī specifically and (non-Muslim) Indianness more in general. In other words, he can represent more than Sikhī per se: after all, the homage he pays to the Pashtun woman bringing together his palms in a silent greeting qualifies as an Indian cultural reference more generally.23 So does the saffron colour that remarkably stands out throughout the trailer, also worn by Singh-Kumar on his big pagri while confronting the tribesman. Together, the various allegories and discourses converge to constitute a meta-allegory – India and the Muslims – and a meta-discourse about how they relate to each other: secularism; or, from an ultra-nationalist point of view, minority appeasement. India’s approach to the Muslims is respectful (i.e. the Indian-fashioned joined hands), well-disposed towards serving them (i.e. the mosque building, that recalls religious rights being granted). But the invaders she welcomes are communal and ungrateful to their benefactor. India is eventually repaid with the humiliation of what she deems dearest, i.e. the promise of turban desecration, symbolising the frustration of India’s (non-Muslim) essence. In other words, a story about Muslim betrayal of saffron-clad Kumar-India emerges – coherently, within the three minutes of the trailer – through a sequence of carefully crafted artistic licenses. This overarching meta-discourse revolves around the well-known topoi of Muslims’ communalism, national unloyalty, incompatibility with non-Islamic ways of life, and the alleged failure of secularism as a strategy to deal with them as a minority. The trailer gets these notions across by depicting Muslim characters as deviant, which is a favourite trope in Bollywood (Sanjeev Kumar 2013) but also in the doctrine and rhetoric of Hindu nationalism (Hansen 1996; Roy 2004; Jaffrelot 2007; Anand 2011). So, the ‘saffron’ colours Kesari’s trailer at a whole new level as well: that of ‘saffron ideology’. Kesari-clad Sikhs’ death on the battleground, defined shahidi (martyrdom), becomes the nation’s frontline resistance against Islam. Their courage is indeed the masculine energy that Hindu nationalism wants to re-inject into a weakened Hindu body politic, challenged by a backward but also united and threatening Muslim ‘other’ (Hansen 1996). So, the trailer appropriates Sikhs’ historical conflict with Muslims and their martial tradition to reclaim them as part of the Hindu nation as defined by Hindutva. Accordingly, Sikhs are conceived as an Indic cultural formation, hence members of the Hindu fold and of the Indian nation, not a separate one (Savarkar 1969, 124–29). Bollywood’s comfort with a Hindutvic definition of nationhood has been documented by scholars like Sanjeev Kumar, who noted that this cinema ‘by clearly drawing cultural fault lines in order to
separate those communities who do not form part of this nationalist project, has emerged as one critical tool in fomenting the process of marginalisation of the Muslim minorities’ (Sanjeev Kumar 2013, 461–62). Kesari falls within this typology as far as the characterisation of Islam is concerned, thus reflecting the political subalternity of the Muslim within Hindu nationalist India. Its representation of the Sikh, on the other hand, is opposite and complementary, as ‘cultural fault lines’ in this case get somewhat blurred rather than ‘drawn clearly’. As shown, this is achieved by making of the Sikhs the defenders of a civilisational state and a metaphor of Indic India, as well as through the ambiguous symbolism of the saffron colour. Hence, in Kesari’s discourse, while Muslims are supposedly repelled beyond the boundaries of the nation, Sikhs get included into it – to paraphrase Kumar – as a community who forms part of this nationalist project. Along with the marginalisation of the Muslim on the one hand, Kesari’s trailer also foments the re-absorption of the Sikh into the Hindu fold on the other.

**Audience interaction**

Kesari targets primarily Indian and South Asian audiences who are Hindi/Urdu-speaking, and their diasporas. Besides, because Punjabi and Sikh are recurring themes in the plot, the movie is possibly of particular appeal to Punjabis and specifically Sikhs. The box-office collection (abovementioned) confirms that India and Indian/Sikh diaspora hubs (UK, Canada) are home to the movie’s primary audiences.

As for the official trailer published on YouTube, it interacted mostly with South Asian users: inferring from names, nationality, language, and cultural references used in the comment section, most commenting viewers are from India. Thanks to the trailer’s interactivity, the comment section offers a peephole to observe users’ interaction with the communicative object. By analysing the trends and discourses stemming from the most popular comments in the section, we can gauge the users’ average reaction to the trailer and explore whether it criticises the ideology propagated by the object or conforms to it.

Many viewers turn to the comment section to idolise Akshay Kumar. This hardly comes as a surprise, considering that movie stars in India are literally object of cult, and Kumar is famous for playing very masculine, desi (Punjabi, and often Sikh), nationalist heroes. This typology aside, comments appear to be dealing with some recurring themes: the Battle of Saragarhi in Indian history; the Saragarhi soldiers as Sikhs; the state identified as the post-colonial nation-state; and the Pashtuns identified as Muslim invaders. Let us have a closer look at these users-object interactions.

A first recurring theme is the users’ framing of the Battle of Saragarhi in the broader context of Indian history. Indian users highlight the poignance of this event for national history. Many reclaim their right to acknowledge it and criticise official school syllabi for bypassing it. For instance, liked by 1,300 users, one of the most popular comments asks ‘Why there is no chapter about 21 brave sikh in our books’. Another, endorsed by 536, comments ‘Sad part of our life that our history books do not include such brave stories of Indians. They show us how we were invaded, lost. Our history books should glorify our country’s patriots and gems which our Indian history had IN’. School syllabi receive criticism also for their supposed political partiality, over-representing selected figures and events to the detriment of others. For example, in another popular comment, echoed
by many more, a user complains ‘I wish all these true stories are included in School. All we learn is how good was Gandhi and Nehru’.

Most Indian users acclaim the soldiers as patriots rather than locating them within the complex colonial context where they actually belong. This act of reclaiming a place for Saragarhi in contemporary India’s syllabi proves how effective the trailer has been in de-contextualising and de-problematising all issues concerning Indian troops’ participation in the colonial project.

In a second recurring theme, users identify and appreciate the soldiers as Sikhs. That soldiers are identified first and foremost by their religious identity is evident in the many comments acknowledging them through Sikh cultural references, or directly calling them ‘Sikhs’.

These interactions demonstrate that the trailer successfully emphasised the soldiers’ religious identity as Sikh, to the detriment of other critical identities of theirs, e.g. their professional and historical identity of colonial soldiers. Such celebration of ‘the Sikhs’ also reflects the substantial nexus drawn by the trailer between Sikhi and martiality reminiscent of the colonial construct of ‘martial races’.

Thirdly, comments reveal that users primarily identify the state on the battlefield of Saragarhi not with the British Raj but with post-colonial India. Which Army do the soldiers belong to? Whom are they fighting for? Most numerous and popular comments draw a clear association between them and the Indian nation-state (in line with the political metaphor identified in the discourse analysis: recall the Devanagari board scene). Such an association is discernible in the use of contemporary nationalist formulas such as ‘Jai Hind’, ‘Jai Bharat’, ‘Jai Jawan Jai Kisan’, ‘Bharat Mata ki Jai’, or simply ‘IN’; as well as in the choice of the pronouns ‘we’ and ‘our’, clearly indexing present-day India (as in ‘Sikhs fight for our country’, ‘Sikhs die for our country’, ‘our flag’).
Also this typology of comments demonstrates, once again, that the trailer has successfully obliterated the colonial dynamics at play, thus enabling Indian users to reclaim the actual defence of a signpost meant to expand British control over Pashtun lands as a sacrifice in the service to India, much in line with contemporary acritical celebrations of the Battle of Saragarhi.

With the ‘colonial’ identity of both soldiers and state effectively erased, the identity of the antagonists gets mystified correspondingly. As the colonial state and its army become ‘contemporary India’ and ‘patriotic Sikhs’ respectively, the Pashtuns reacting to British encroachment necessarily turn into ‘Muslim invaders’. In this fourth theme, comments not only identify the Pashtuns as attackers: they also associate to their supposed attack the menace of Islamisation. In other words, users perceive the Pashtuns on screen to be performing not just a territorial invasion, but also a cultural one that threatens India’s religious freedom. This remarkable association bears witness to the trailer’s ability to
coagulate multiple discourses, as argued in the discourse analysis. In this case, the trailer recalls the Sikh values of sacrifice and martyrdom but does so within the ideological framework of Hindu nationalism, whereby Muslims pose a civilisational threat to India imagined as a Hindu nation (note the comments’ references to Sanatan Dharm, also in relation to the saffron colour) and martial Sikhs are the shield of her freedom.

In stark contrast to the interactions reported above, very few comments demystify the trailer’s historical revisionism and call out the actual power relations at play, pointing out that the soldiers’ bravery was serving British expansionism. However, these ‘anti-trailer’ comments are strongly outnumbered and unpopular. For instance, a discordant
voice notes: ‘The irony is these Sikh were defending the British not their own ‘Mitti’. It was a great last stand however my sympathy goes to the Afghans’, but fails to get any support.

In sum, by overwhelmingly reproducing its discourse, the comments exemplify the trailer’s effectiveness as an ideological text. The power of the trailer lies in the fact that it constructs and convincingly disseminates a coherent discourse in the span of few minutes, resulting persuasive to the majority of its users. Indeed, most viewers appear convinced that the Battle of Saragarhi is about Sikhs’ resistance against a Muslim invasion, thus a patriotic sacrifice for India and its religious freedom. Quite paradoxically, the coloniser’s army emerges as the pride of the post-colonial nation.

In all, the average user reception aligns with the ideology stemming from the trailer, as intended by the film-makers. Kesari’s trailer was launched, together with the soundtrack song Teri Mitti (‘Your land’), at an event called Rang de Kesari. Obliteration of colonial questions and absorption of Sikh military value into vague patriotism recurred throughout the press conference in which actors, director, and producers introduced the film to the Indian public. Kumar declared:

You can imagine that 21 Sikhs, 21 sardars are inside a fort knowing that outside there are ten thousand people waiting to kill them. Death is certain. Nonetheless, these people fought for their country, for their desh (country, nation), for their honour, for their Guru. These people fought knowing what was coming… This film it is all about the martyrs, it is about what happened in 1897 on September 12th and it is about the sacrifice what they did for the country… So we have dedicated this film… to all the martyrs who have given their life so that we can live our life. (Dharma Productions2019)

At the launch, Kumar also emphasised the story’s authenticity and its importance for national consciousness with remarks that YouTube users seem to echo in their comments on the trailer. He added:

It is a sad fact that the British, they celebrate Saragarhi Day, but this got somehow lost in the pages of our history. Not many know about this. And I would like this, I’d make a request, that all parents should absolutely show this film to their kids because this is also an educational film, a historical film and a true story. (Dharma Productions 2019)

Producer Karan Johar reiterated: ‘This film is made of the very soil of the country in which we live, the soil of which we are made… This film is about being Indian’ (Dharma Productions 2019).

In conclusion, the interaction between the object and its audience recorded on the platform YouTube suggests that the trailer has formulated and disseminated its ideology effectively. It persuaded users to make sense of the (his)story (i.e. the Battle of Saragarhi) based on the narratives it displayed.

The object in its historical and cultural context

Unsurprisingly, when considered vis-à-vis the filmic representation of the Sikh, Kesari aligns with consolidated trends. Recent Hindi and Punjabi movies diversified the on-screen image of the Sikh by covering untouched topics, adopting new perspectives, and modernising the hero figure. Scholars have highlighted Indian cinema’s eventual coming to terms with the traumatic events of 1984 (Abbi 2018; Singh 2006); its
opening to non-male-centric Sikh perspectives (Chanda 2014); and the upgrading of the young Jatt hero to reflect Punjabi working-class upward mobility (Abbi 2020). However, in its cocktail of martiality, martyrdom, and nationalism, Kesari casts the turbaned Sikh again in the role of war hero, thus reproducing Indian films’ more stereotypical characterisation of the Sikh male as ‘the military man’, ‘the Sikh buffoon’, or ‘the Sikh terrorist’ (Singh 2006, 116).

Kesari’s success in Spring 2019 can be explained by a mix of factors. In the first place, its showcase of military skill, discipline, devotion to the country blended well with India’s current political atmosphere, marked by an emboldened Hindu nationalism and the saffronisation of the public sphere (Anderson and Jaffrelot 2018). Kesari’s cult of heroism and sacrifice resonates with Hindutva’s call to re-inject masculine vitality into a weakened body politic. In so doing, Kesari and its trailer have found a place in an established mainstream cinematic current that makes of movies normative nationalist texts (Murty 2009; Roy 2018). Furthermore, Holi was an ideal date for its release, not only because large festivals typically attract bigger crowds to the movie theatre. Holi is celebrated in both the Hindu and Sikh calendars, in the latter case having been established by Guru Gobind Singh as a festival of Sikh martiality (Holla Mohalla). Moreover, 2019 was a special year for Sikhs as it marked the 550th anniversary of Guru Nanak’s birth. Thus, as a Sikh-centric war film styled to cater to mass audiences, Kesari brilliantly banked on the esprit du temps.

Also India’s recent geopolitical tensions contribute to explain why war movies remain appealing. Because it revolves around the topos of the Muslim looming on India’s western border, the film found even more fertile ground among audiences galvanised by the recent Indo-Pak skirmishes which took place in February 2019 in Kashmir. The end of the decade saw the release of several films and series focusing on the motif of Sikhs at war, both in Punjabi and Hindi. Sajjan Singh Rangroot (March 2018, Punjabi) starred Diljit Dosanjh as a Sikh soldier fighting for the British in Europe during WWI. Subedar Joginder Singh (April 2018, Punjabi) adapted the biography of the homonymous soldier, who fought and died during the Indo-China War and was played on screen by Gippy Grewal. The drama series 21 Safarosh: Saragarhi 1897 (February-May 2018, Hindi) narrated, like Kesari (March 2019), the Battle of Saragarhi. While Subedar Joginder Singh dealt with the 1962 War and seemed to address Indians’ rekindled attention for the unstable Indo-Chinese border following the Dokhlam standoff of Spring 2017, Kesari and the other releases dealt specifically with Sikhs as soldiers of the Raj, serving the colonial master at war in different scenarios.

Indeed, in the late 2010s the debate on the colonies’ contribution to Britain came back to the fore correspondingly with the centenary anniversary of the end of WWI (1914–18). Consequently, the discussion of India’s role within the Empire focused on the service paid by her soldiers to the Imperial Army, epitomised by the bearded and turbaned Sikh sepoy in khaki uniform. Many, both in India and abroad, especially in the UK, reclaimed a more substantial acknowledgement of Indians’ participation in Britain’s war efforts.

While it is certain that the colonies’ contribution deserves far more attention than what it receives when the war is talked about and taught, the discussion which developed around the centenary remained in want for a critical engagement, consciously situated in post-coloniality, and reflecting on the Army’s complex role including its service to the
imperialist project. The army that the brave soldiers of Saragarhi belonged to was a colonial one, the same one that some two decades down the line would massacre innocent Amritsaris at Jallianwala Bagh on Dyer’s order, thus breaking many Indians’ hopes that London would have repaid their contribution to WWI with freedom. Yet frictions between the Jallianwalas and the Saragarhis of colonial history have remained largely unsettled onscreen as much as in real life. The memorialisation of events like Saragarhi, including through popular culture products like our trailer, testifies to the enduring difficulty in approaching such history critically. ‘Saragarhi Day’, for instance, is commemorated by the British Army since 2014 (GOV.UK 2015) and, remarkably, in Indian Punjab since 2017, in celebrations that, much in line with Kesari and its trailer, seem to submerge questions of power and racial relations to the still larger imperatives of ‘military value’, ‘loyalty’, and ‘national pride’ (whether British, or Sikh). Thus, Kesari rode the WWI centenary wave as well, but without any crucial contribution to the debate on Indians (and specifically Sikhs) at war for Britain and the Raj. Instead, it again upheld military might as an absolutised virtue, and reinforced a Raj nostalgia that Britain in the time of Brexit seemed to find ever more appealing (Burton 2018).

Kesari has also been a trendsetter, popularising not only the battle itself but also celebratory and nationalistic approaches to the same. For example, a recent book by Bloomsbury India is remarkably titled 21 Kesaris and pays ‘homage to the brave soldiers who defended the “kesari” flag – depicting their Khalsa heritage’ (Nirvan 2019). This elucidates how effective the movie was in consolidating, among other things, an association between Saragarhi and creative uses of the saffron colour, source of versatile and ambiguous symbolism. More films and books are on the way.

Conclusions

This article set out to perform a discourse analysis of Kesari’s trailer to test the proposition that trailers can not only tease viewers but also effectively socialise them into specific ideologies.

The trailer was found to masterfully deploy photography, choreography, costumes, chromatism, and soundtrack as well as semiotic and rhetorical artistic licenses to construct a multi-layered dichotomy. In the course of the trailer, the hero and the anti-hero clash at the level of religion (Sikh/Muslim); ethnicity (Punjabi/Pashtun); political loyalties and roles (state/invaders); development and civilisation (order/destruction); military virtue (chivalry and loyalty/viciousness and betrayal); language (Punjabi/Urdu); and ethics (humanism and secularism/intolerance and communalism). Their actions and interactions within the brief trailer’s span shape the viewer’s perception of ‘good’ as Sikh and Indian, militaristic and statal; and ‘evil’ as Islamic, un-Indian, tribalistic. Kesari’s trailer persuasively frames the Battle of Saragarhi within purposely de- or re-contextualised notions of martyrdom and Indianness. The inclusion of numerous deviations from history among the trailer’s highly selected scenes, far from accidental, eventually proved to produce a coherent Islamophobic and nationalistic reading of the historical facts represented, in line with the ideology of Hindu nationalism.

Indeed, the trailer’s power, as the discourse analysis showed, lies in its ability to articulate and disseminate such a discourse with coherence and complexity in mere three
minutes. The ability of popular culture to reproduce specific ideologies and effectively disseminate them via appealing, accessible, emotional formats, especially the filmic, is well known. Taking nationalism as a case in point, scholars of South Asian cinema have demonstrated that films might advertise a communal (Sanjeev Kumar 2013), or nativist (Rajgopal 2011), or bourgeois (Srivastava 2009) concept of the nation. The Islamophobic, statist, Hindutvic, revisionist, militaristic idea of the nation densely coagulated in Kesari’s trailer proves that, like the film, the trailer is a text capable of such a performance too. Thus, the trailer’s scope is not just promotional, but also a potentially ideological one.

Additionally, as a text, the trailer here considered appeared to speak independently. Its narrative-building proved considerably elaborate and complete. It qualified as a text per se, with which users can engage in meaningful interaction without necessarily needing to turn to the film for filling gaps.

Last but not the least, the trailer-text’s power increases as it turns ‘social’, thus gaining in accessibility, reiterativity, and interactivity. In conclusion, in critical discussions of South Asian popular culture there seems to be room for the powerful yet unexplored trailer.

Notes

1. India-based Punjabi-language commercial cinema.
2. According to Yate:

   When day broke on the 12th, the Orakzai-Afridi “lashkar” was seen to be in force near Gogra on the east, at the Samana Suk on the west, and round the Saragarhi post, thus severing Gulistan from Fort Lockhart. (Their total number has been variously estimated at from twelve to twenty thousand.) … The enemy turned the brunt of their attack on the little post of Saragarhi. Thousands swarmed round it; other thousands invaded Gulistan while a third body of the enemy cut off communication with Fort Lockhart. (Yate 1900, 126)

3. An account of the events based on primary sources, including Haughton’s letters, is found in Lieutenant-Colonel John Haughton Commandant of the 36th Sikhs. A Hero of Tirah. A Memoir (Yate 1900). This memoir also reproduces some of Haughton’s letters. It is, obviously, an account from the British perspective.
4. To distinguish the movie character from the historical figure of havildar Ishar Singh.
5. He also adds ‘but, personally, I think much more highly of the sortie from Gulistan, which was worthy of the best traditions of the Sikhs and of the Indian army’.
6. The Pashtun attack caught the 36th Sikh by surprise and Haughton was unable to provide assistance to the 21 men at Saragarhi. In Haughton’s words ‘Saragarhi, certainly, was a rotten little post, but I must confess that I did not expect it to be regularly attacked in the way it was, as I did not think the enemy would consider its capture worth the great loss they were bound to and did suffer’ (Yate 1900, 223).
7. Translated by this author from Italian.
8. The trailer’s title cards can be considered an objectivising mode of communication. Their narrating voice does not belong to an insider (e.g. a character) but to a neutral entity, so they contribute to construct the discourse’s credibility (Dusi 2002, 60). In addition to this, Kesari’s trailer features subjectivising modes of communication as well (e.g. Singh-Kumar’s voice over).
9. By ‘tickets’ I mean not only the access to movie theatres, but also the access to pay-per-view, or purchase of DVDs, etc.
10. For example: ‘saffron ideology’ is a metaphoric name for Hindutva ideology; ‘saffronisation’ is a neologism in South Asian studies meaning the spreading of Hindu nationalism across Indian politics (Anderson and Jaffrelot 2018).

11. The Mul Mantar is a formula stating Sikhism’s creed in God’s oneness and divine attributes. It is considered a fundamental compendium (Mul means ‘root’) of Guru Nanak’s teachings and, in a way, represents the most spiritual aspect of Sikhism; the one commanding to believe in One God, hate none. For details see P. Singh (1985).

12. The British made the use of a specific type of turban compulsory for Sikh soldiers (Cohn 1996, 110; Kalra 2005, 82–84; Ahluwalia 2017; Barkawi 2017, 25). Such turban did not feature saffron-coloured cloth.

13. In a letter dated 15 September 1897, Haughton recollects the fall of Saragarhi: ‘It is said that one poor fellow defended himself in the guard-room and shot twenty of the enemy inside the post. The brutes then set the place on fire’ (Yate 1900, 137).

14. The martyrdom of some of the most celebrated Sikh martyrs (including Guru Arjan, Bhai Dayala, Bhai Sati Das) featured the use of fire, as immortalised in the corresponding iconography.

15. Dialogues from the trailer are quoted as follows: the dialogue’s transliteration into Roman characters (by this author); followed by its English translation (as per the subtitles embedded into the video).

16. Literally: ‘When the time to fight will come, then we will fight. Now though it is the time to build the house of God. And how to fight against God?’

17. The East India Company annexed Punjab in 1849.

18. To be fair, it must be acknowledged that some grammatical mistakes in the Pashtun’s lines (timon instead of tin; ke instead of ki; honge instead of hongi) are probably meant to stress his lack of fluency, thus his foreignness. Yet his choice of Urdu remains remarkable, especially vis-à-vis Singh-Kumar’s response in Punjabi.

19. Literally: ‘Today my turban too is saffron. My flowing blood will also be saffron. And my response will be saffron too.’

20. Jawab dena (lit. ‘to respond’, translated in the trailer’s subtitles as ‘befitting reply’ and ‘come-back’) is also a rhetorical metaphor for vengeance. In the 1973 film Hindustan Ki Kasam, Raj Kumar famously vows vengeance on the body of a dead soldier with the lines ‘Jawab dene aunga, is jawan ki kasam, Hindustan ki kasam.’ These lines are echoed in Singh-Kumar’s ‘aj jawab dene ka vaqt agaya’, referring to a Britisher who considered Indians cowards. His ‘jawab’ is even more powerful when unleashed against the Pashtuns.

21. Diglossia (Ferguson 1959; Fishman 1967) exists when two dialects of the same language or two separate languages are conceived as a high (H) and low (L) variety respectively. The relation between Urdu and Punjabi in colonial Punjab (as well as in contemporary Pakistan) might be framed as a case of diglossia. Urdu is the H version – associated to written formal communication, and to the realms of power (Rahman 1999, 2010) – and Punjabi the L version – associated to oral informal communication, in the household and everyday life situations (Rahman 1997a; Zaidi 2014). Talking of triglossia rather than diglossia would be more precise because the linguistic landscape of Punjab has featured English as well since colonial times (Rahman 1997b, 2001; Mansoor 1993). However, this is not the case in the trailer, which features only Urdu/Hindustani and Punjabi. So, for the purpose of this analysis, I stick to the concept of diglossia.

22. The old rivalry between Sikhs and Pashtuns is possibly also at play here (‘told’ from a Sikh perspective, whereby the Pashtuns are depicted as bloodthirst and vicious). This rivalry dates back to the Afghan-Sikh Wars and has survived to this day into Pashtun and Punjabi folklore. Inter-ethnic feuds, like the Pashtun-Sikh one, were known to the British who often used them strategically. For example, Yate comments on the frontier policy of the time: ‘A suggestion has been made that the Sikhs, the hereditary foes of the Pathans, should be planted along the border in posts or small colonies, and that to them a free hand should be given to check Pathan raids’ (Yate 1900, 121). In the discourse here analysed,
the ‘Sikh versus Pashtun’ ethnic rivalry reinforces the ‘Sikh versus Muslim’ religious dichotomy.

23. Here I interpret the act of greeting by folding hands as an Indian cultural reference. Notably, Singh-Kumar respectfully joins hands without adding any verbal formula (e.g. ‘Sat Sri Akal’, ‘Namaste’, etc.) that would otherwise associate the gesture to a specific religious tradition (i.e. exclusively Sikh, or Hindu). Kept silent, the greeting might be interpreted as a symbol encompassing all Indic traditions that adopt it, thus non-Islamic India.

24. Emphasis added.

25. There is a growing body of literature concerned with analysing YouTube as a media and as a data source. For example, Neumayer (2012) discusses YouTube comments as potentially critical media; Benson (2015) discusses YouTube as text for digital discourse analysis. Building on relevant literature on media’s influence on users’ interpretation and discussion, Edgerly et al. (2013) show that YouTube videos shape user’s comments in topics and tone. User-generated comments on YouTube and other social media have been investigated through various research questions and techniques, including qualitative thematic analysis (Leppänen and Westinen 2017). In this section, comments are selected by popularity and their content organised thematically. Comments were last accessed on 10 May 2021. Comments are publicly accessible on YouTube, along with the official trailer, at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JFP24D15_XM&t=3s.

26. In 2018, the Punjab School Education Board included a poem on the Battle of Saragarhi in the class 5 Punjabi textbook (Sood 2018).

27. Because the first week of screening is critical for a movie’s success, publicity events are held to catalyse media and audience’s attention on the upcoming release. A trailer launch is one such event. Incidentally, this event was called Rang de Kesari (paint it saffron), seemingly a revised version of the revolutionary and patriotic motto and song Rang de Basanti (paint it mustard yellow). The latter is a symbol of resistance against the colonial power and often associated to the Punjabi Marxist revolutionary Bhagat Singh, executed by the colonial state. The film Rang de Basanti is titled after it.

28. Emphasis added. The first part of the speech has been translated by this author. The original speech follows, transcribed from the video by this author:

Aap imagine kar sakte hain ki 21 Sikh, 21 sardar ek fort ki andar hain aur unko pata hai ki bahar das hazar log khade hain unhe marne ke liye. Maut to nischit hai. Lekin phir bhi apne country ke liye, apne desh ke liye, apne honour ke liye, apne Guru ke liye ye log lare. Ye log lare jante hue ki kya honewala hai …

29. Emphasis added. The original speech (transcribed) follows:

Dukh to is bat ka hai ki British jo hai, they celebrate Saragarhi Day, but hamare itihaz ke pannon men yeh kahin kho gae. Is ke bare men zyada log nahn jante. Aur mein yeh hi chahungha, darkhwast karunga, ki jitne bhi ma bap hain, apne bacchon ko yeh film zaur dikhaen kionki yeh ek educational film bhi hai, itihazwali film hai aur sacchi kahani hai.

30. The original speech (transcribed) follows: ‘Jis desh men ham rehte hain, jis desh ki mitti ke ham hain. Yeh film us hi mittle se bani … Yeh film Hindustani honi ki bat hai’.

31. In 2017 Punjab Chief Minister Capt. Amarinder Singh declared a regional public holiday to commemorate the event, released a book on the topic, and joined the celebrations in London (Mohan 2017; Sharma 2017; The Tribune 2017).

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