

# Comparative War Narratives: Indian Military Conflicts in Selected Nonfiction and Cinema

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## Abstract

War narratives constitute an essential component of cultural memory, shaping how societies interpret and remember historical conflicts. This study explores the representation of four major Indian military engagements of the late twentieth century- the Sino-Indian War of 1962, the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971, the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) intervention in Sri Lanka during the late 1980s, and the Kargil War of 1999, through a comparative analysis of nonfictional historical texts and cinematic portrayals. The study examines how war is represented in nonfictional narratives, *Himalayan Blunder*, *Hamoodur Rahman Commission Supplementary Report*, *Assignment Jaffna*, and *Kargil: From Surprise to Victory*, alongside four corresponding war cinemas, namely *Haqeeqat*, *Children of War*, *Madras Cafe*, and *LOC: Kargil*.

Drawing on theoretical frameworks from war studies, media studies, and cultural memory theory, the paper compares the narrative structures, historical accuracy, ideological framing, and depiction of violence and trauma in textual and audiovisual media. The analysis demonstrates different approaches that nonfictional narratives and cinematic depictions take.

The nonfictional textual narrative primarily emphasises historical documentation and political analysis, whereas cinematic representations often rely on dramatisation and emotional storytelling, adding the director's creative freedom. Despite these differences, both forms contribute significantly to shaping the combined public memory of war. This shaped public memory shapes the future of the warring parties. The study concludes that the interplay between historical documentation and cinematic imagination reveals how war is simultaneously recorded, interpreted, and develops the collective memory of the nation within its cultural discourse.

**Keywords:** war representation, war cinema, nonfiction narratives, Indian military history, media studies, cultural memory

## Introduction

War has long been one of the most powerful subjects in literature, history, and visual media. Across cultures and historical periods, narratives of war have served as a means of documenting historical events, commemorating sacrifice, and interrogating the political and ethical dimensions of violence. As scholars of war literature have observed, the representation of war poses significant challenges for writers and artists, since the scale and chaos of conflict often resist straightforward narrative depiction (McLoughlin

3). War narratives, therefore, frequently combine historical documentation with imaginative interpretation to convey the human experience of conflict.

The study of war representation has gained increasing attention in interdisciplinary fields such as cultural studies, media studies, and memory studies. Scholars argue that representations of war are not merely reflections of historical events but are also shaped by ideological, political, and cultural contexts. Narratives of war, therefore, influence how societies interpret the past and construct collective memory. Literary scholars emphasise that war writing across genres from epic poetry to modern journalism attempts to confront the challenge of depicting violence, loss, and trauma (McLoughlin 1).

Cinema has also emerged as a powerful medium for representing war. War cinemas combine narrative storytelling with visual spectacle, enabling audiences to experience historical conflicts through emotionally compelling images, fictionalised creative freedom of the director, dialogues, and characters. Cinema scholars note that cinematic depictions of war frequently balance historical realism with dramatic narrative structures, which can both illuminate and distort historical realities (Ritzenhoff and Goldie 12). War cinemas thus occupy a complex space between historical representation and artistic interpretation and has a major impact on the audience to establish a collective memory in a particular manner and patriotism, especially in Indian war cinemas.

In the Indian context, several military conflicts of the twentieth century have generated a substantial body of historical writing and cinematic representation. Among the most significant are the Sino-Indian War of 1962, the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971, the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) operations in Sri Lanka during the late 1980s, and the Kargil War of 1999. These conflicts not only influenced India's strategic and political landscape but also left a lasting imprint on cultural production.

Indian cinema has produced several war cinemas that depict these conflicts. The Cinema *Haqeeqat* (1964) portrays the experiences of Indian soldiers during the 1962 Sino-Indian War. Similarly, *Children of War* (2014) dramatises the humanitarian crisis associated with the Bangladesh Liberation War. The political complexities of India's intervention in Sri Lanka are explored in *Madras Cafe* (2013), while *LOC: Kargil* (2003) presents a large-scale cinematic representation of the Kargil conflict.

While these cinemas are inspired by historical events, their narrative structures, ideological framing, and visual representations often differ significantly from the accounts presented in nonfictional texts such as military histories, memoirs, and official reports. This difference raises important questions regarding how war is interpreted across different media and how these representations influence public understanding of history and the establishment of the future course of the warring parties.

This study seeks to address these questions by conducting a comparative analysis of nonfictional texts and cinematic representations of four major Indian military conflicts. By examining how war is depicted in both textual and audiovisual media, the study aims to highlight the interpretative frameworks that shape the cultural representation of war.

## Literature Review

Scholarly discussions of war representation have emphasised that cultural, political, and aesthetic considerations shape narratives of war. War literature has historically served both documentary and imaginative functions, combining factual description with narrative interpretation (Fussell 25). According to Paul Fussell, the literature of war often reflects the disillusionment and trauma experienced by soldiers and civilians, challenging traditional heroic narratives.

Kate McLoughlin argues that war writing confronts a fundamental representational challenge because the

experience of war often exceeds the capacity of language and narrative to fully capture it. Writers must therefore develop narrative strategies that address the “epistemological and linguistic difficulties” of depicting conflict (McLoughlin 4).

Another important dimension of war representation concerns the role of cultural memory. Scholars such as Jay Winter and Pierre Nora emphasise that cultural artefacts, including literature and Cinema, play a crucial role in shaping the collective memory of war. These representations influence how societies remember past conflicts and interpret their historical significance.

War cinema has similarly attracted extensive scholarly attention. Cinema scholars argue that war cinemas often operate within recognisable narrative conventions, including heroic sacrifice, national identity, and moral conflict. However, contemporary war cinema increasingly explores the psychological and ethical complexities of warfare rather than presenting purely heroic narratives (Flanagan 42). Indian war cinema’s narration appears to have its main objective to generate patriotic feeling amongst the viewers and cover the mistakes committed during the operations. Disclaimer screened at the start of the war movie relieves the directors and others involved in making the movie from accountability and jingoism through incorrect depiction of the war.

Recent scholarship has also emphasised the importance of examining marginalised perspectives in war narratives. Studies of war cinemas highlight the need to consider the experiences of civilians, women, and other groups whose stories have often been excluded from traditional military histories (Tholas, Goldie, and Ritzenhoff 8).

In the Indian context, war cinema has developed its own distinctive narrative traditions, often combining patriotic themes with melodramatic storytelling. Cinemas such as *Haqeeqat* and *LOC: Kargil* emphasize the suffering, heroism and sacrifice of soldiers, and the patriotism of the family members of the soldier through sacrifice and suffering to help generate a collective feeling of patriotism amongst the audience, while more recent cinemas such as *Madras Cafe* adopt a more politically complex narrative approach. *Children of War* highlights the suffering of noncombatants of various age groups through four different stories, especially the sexual exploitation of women, and the treatment meted out to them like objects of sexual pleasure, resulting in the generation of an anti-war feeling.

Despite the growing body of scholarship on war literature and cinema, relatively few studies have conducted comparative analyses of nonfictional texts and war cinema within the context of Indian military history. This study seeks to address this gap by examining how war is interpreted across textual and cinematic media.

## Theoretical Framework

This research employs an eclectic theoretical framework combining perspectives from war studies, media studies, and cultural memory studies.

War studies provide the historical and political context necessary for analysing military conflicts. Classical theorists such as Carl von Clausewitz describe war as an extension of political policy, emphasizing the strategic and political dimensions of military action. Contemporary scholars continue to explore the relationship between warfare and political decision-making.

Media studies contribute analytical tools for examining how visual narratives shape audience perceptions of historical events. Cinematic representations of war often rely on visual imagery, dialogue, narrative pacing, and character development to communicate complex historical realities.

Cultural memory studies explore how societies remember and reinterpret past conflicts through cultural

artefacts. War narratives, whether textual or cinematic, play a central role in shaping the collective memory of the nation and warring parties.

By integrating these perspectives, the present study examines both the historical accuracy and narrative interpretation of war across different media.

### **Texts and Cinemas Selected**

The study adopts a qualitative comparative methodology. The primary corpus includes four nonfictional historical texts and four representative war cinemas:

Nonfictional historical texts:

*Himalayan Blunder* by Brigadier John P. Dalvi (1964)

*Hamoodur Rahaman Commission Supplementary Report* by the Government of Pakistan (1971, Made public in 2000)

*Assignment Jaffna* by Lt Gen S C Sardeshpande (1992)

*Kargil: from Surprise to Victory* by General V P Malik (2020)

War cinemas:

*Haqeeqat*, directed by Chetan Anand (1964)

*Children of War*, directed by Mrityunjay Devavrat (2014)

*Madras Cafe*, directed by Shoojit Sircar (2013)

*LOC: Kargil*, directed by J P Dutta (2003)

The analysis is conducted in three stages:

1. Comparison of nonfictional texts documenting the four conflicts.
2. Comparative analysis of the selected war Cinemas.
3. Cross-media comparison between nonfictional texts and cinematic representations.

The analysis focuses on the following key aspects:

Historical context and accuracy

Narrative structure

Portrayal of combatants and noncombatants

Representation of violence and trauma

Political and ideological framing

### **Findings and Discussion**

#### **Representation of War in Nonfictional Texts**

Nonfictional narratives of war typically emphasise historical documentation and analytical interpretation. Military histories, official reports, and memories attempt to reconstruct the sequence of events that shaped a particular conflict.

Accounts of the Sino-Indian War of 1962 often focus on geopolitical tensions between India and China, as well as strategic and logistical challenges faced by the Indian military. Historical analyses examine the political decisions that contributed to the conflict and the lessons learned from the war.

In *Himalayan Blunder*, J. P. Dalvi offers a detailed account of the Namka Chu debacle, wherein 7 Brigade, under his command, was tasked with holding tactically untenable positions along the Namka Chu river valley, leaving them dangerously exposed to adversarial forces occupying the surrounding high ground. Compounding this vulnerability were severe deficiencies in winter clothing, acclimatisation, arms and ammunition, artillery support, and logistical supply lines. The episode foregrounds the consequences of

political overreach and systemic military unpreparedness, thereby displacing conventional narratives of battlefield heroism with a critique of institutional failure.

A close examination of the index at the end of the nonfiction reveals the relative emphasis accorded to key personalities implicated in the planning, execution, and ultimate debacle of 1962. The frequency of references is particularly telling: Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru is cited across 131 pages of the 450-page text, while Defence Minister V. K. Krishna Menon appears on 83 pages. Among military figures, Lt. Gen. B. M. Kaul is referenced on 144 pages, and the then Chief of Army Staff, General P. N. Thapar, on 30 pages. Such patterns of citation not only underscore the prominence of these individuals within the narrative but also reflect the text's effort to assign responsibility through documentary emphasis. Moreover, the index highlights the significance accorded to specific locations and events, further illustrating the nonfictional commitment to detailed, structured, and referential documentation.

Similarly, nonfictional narratives of the Bangladesh Liberation War emphasise the humanitarian crisis in East Pakistan, including mass displacement and widespread violence against civilians. Scholars note that the conflict resulted in one of the largest refugee crises of the twentieth century.

The *Hamoodur Rahman Commission Report* interrogates the causes underlying Pakistan's defeat in the 1971 war, including the dismemberment of East Pakistan and the surrender of over 92,000 Pakistani military personnel and noncombatants. The report offers a forthright assessment of failures across political and military domains, documenting issues such as the military's encroachment into governance, widespread corruption, smuggling, and moral transgressions, alongside the systematic targeting of civilians. It situates these failures within a broader historical trajectory, tracing developments from Pakistan's inception in 1947 through recurrent military coups, the contested outcome of the 1970 elections, and the refusal to transfer power to the Awami League. The account of the 25 March 1971 crackdown (Operation Searchlight) illustrates the planned and coordinated execution of state violence. While acknowledging instances of mass killings, sexual violence, and misconduct by military personnel, the report simultaneously contests Bangladeshi estimates of casualties and violations as exaggerated. In doing so, it reinforces nonfiction's emphasis on documentation, accountability, and evidentiary scrutiny over emotive or nationalistic embellishment.

Historical studies of the IPKF operations in Sri Lanka highlight the cinematic representation of intelligence activities of R&AW and political complexities of India's involvement in the Sri Lankan civil war. Unlike conventional interstate wars, the IPKF mission involved counterinsurgency operations in a foreign land in the history of the Indian Armed Forces.

In *Assignment Jaffna*, Lt. Gen. S. C. Sardeshpande recounts the Jaffna University helidrop operation (1987), where Indian paratroopers encountered unanticipated resistance, exacerbated by misleading intelligence disseminated by the LTTE and a misplaced sense of operational superiority among Indian commanders. The narrative underscores the interplay of miscalculation, communication breakdown, and the inherent unpredictability of guerrilla warfare, thereby illuminating the complexities of the Indian Peace Keeping Force's engagement in Sri Lanka. The author also does not mince words while highlighting the mistakes of senior army officials while visiting the units involved in operations, the traits of middle-level officers and junior officers displayed on the war front

The Kargil War of 1999 has been extensively documented in military histories and journalistic accounts. These narratives often emphasise the strategic challenges of high-altitude warfare, the role of jointmanship amongst all three combat services, and the importance of timely intelligence and logistics in determining the outcome of the conflict.

The nonfiction documents critical operations such as the recapture of Tololing and Tiger Hill, foregrounding joint-force coordination, artillery precision, and the logistical challenges of high-altitude warfare. The emphasis remains firmly on strategy, operational execution, and institutional learning rather than on individualised emotional experience. From the study of these nonfictions, one can understand the development and improvement

Across the texts, the emphasis remains on historical documentation rather than narrative dramatization.

### **Representation of War in Cinema**

Cinematic representations of war often highlight emotional storytelling and visual spectacle. War cinemas frequently focus on individual experiences of soldiers and civilians, allowing audiences to connect emotionally with the narrative.

The film *Haqeeqat* portrays the hardships faced by the Indian soldiers during the 1962 conflict. Through its depiction of isolation, sacrifice, and patriotism, the cinema established many of the conventions that later Indian war films would adopt.

In *Haqeeqat*, the Sino-Indian War is rendered through stark images of Indian soldiers marooned in the inhospitable terrain of Ladakh, most memorably in the sequence where Major Ranjit Singh's platoon awaits reinforcements that never arrive. The film visualises abandonment and sacrifice, culminating in a heroic last stand that reframes military defeat as moral triumph, an interpretation that stands in sharp contrast to Dalvi's critique of political and military leadership. From its opening frames, the narrative trajectory is signalled through its dedication to Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and to the soldiers who perished in the conflict. At the same time, the film insulates itself from claims of historical misrepresentation through a prefatory disclaimer, framing the narrative as a fictionalised account and distancing itself from strict factual accountability.

*Children of War* adopts a different narrative perspective by focusing on the suffering of noncombatants through four stories during the Bangladesh Liberation War. The film portrays the atrocities committed during the conflict and highlights the human cost of war.

*Madras Cafe* combines elements of political thriller and war drama to explore India's involvement in the Sri Lankan civil war. Unlike earlier war cinemas, it emphasises political intrigue and covert operations by intelligence agencies rather than battlefield heroism.

*LOC: Kargil* presents a large-scale cinematic representation of the Kargil conflict featuring multiple characters and battle sequences that emphasise heroism and national pride of soldiers, as well as suffering and patriotism of the relatives of the soldiers away from the war zone in a variety of cultural and social backgrounds.

War cinemas, therefore, often prioritise fictionalised narrative engagement and emotional resonance over strict historical accuracy.

### **Comparative Discussion: Text and Cinema**

#### **Narrative Structure**

Nonfiction texts adopt chronological and analytical structures, whereas war cinemas rely on dramatic storytelling, emotional dosages, and character-driven narratives.

While *Himalayan Blunder* methodically reconstructs the sequence of strategic errors leading to defeat in the war, *Haqeeqat* compresses the conflict into a single, emotionally intense narrative of sacrifice, demonstrating how cinema fictionalises and prioritises biased narrative cohesion over historical breadth.

The author of *Himalayan Blunder* underlines the shortages of arms and ammunition, proper clothing, and other logistical equipment necessary for fighting the war and also failure to modernise the army and blames the political and military leadership of the time. *Haqeeqat*, on the other hand, displays it on the screen as sacrifice, courage, bravery, and patriotism of the fighting soldiers.

### **Representation of Violence**

Historical texts typically describe violence in factual language and, when questions arise, provide sufficient evidence to support it. War cinema, on the other hand, screens a disclaimer to avoid legal action for the wrong display of war, issues related to war, and the fictionalised depiction of war and violence through powerful imagery, to evoke emotional responses.

The mention of rape and killings in the *Hamoodur Rahman Commission Report* contrasts sharply with the graphic and personalised depiction of sexual violence, killings and an unruly situation depicted in *Children of War*. The difference between an archival non-emotional official recording of the outright violation of human rights by the national army to a visual embodiment intensifies audience engagement but risks sensationalisation.

### **Political Context**

Nonfictional works often provide detailed analyses of political decisions and strategic considerations. War cinemas, however, may simplify political complexities to maintain narrative clarity and avoid controversies with official narration.

*Himalayan Blunder* brings out in detail the historical developments leading to war since pre-independence and underlines political failures in assessing the seriousness of the developing situation and preparations of the enemy, while keeping Indian political masters occupied in discussions and under the heavy influence of the *Panchsheel* agreement and non-aligned leadership of third world countries. In contrast, the movie *Haqeeqat* does not bring any fault of political leadership in the war and its result.

*Assignment Jaffna* provides a granular account of the Jaffna operations, including intelligence failures and diplomatic constraints. In contrast, *Madras Cafe* simplifies these complexities into a linear narrative of betrayal and conspiracy, making the story accessible but less analytically rigorous.

### **Cultural Memory**

Both media contribute to shaping the cultural memory of war. However, cinematic images often become more impactful and widely recognised than written historical accounts. Being an audiovisual medium has a wide circulation and instant response from the audience. However, both lead to develop collective memory of the audience, society, and nation.

The image of soldiers freezing and fighting to the last man, last bullet in *Haqeeqat* or Captain Batra's as well as every soldier's heroic charge, irrespective of rank and age, even knowing the danger to life in *LOC: Kargil*, has become embedded in popular memory, often overshadowing the critical perspectives offered by nonfiction texts.

### **Conclusion**

The study demonstrates that nonfictional texts and war cinemas serve complementary but distinct roles in representing war.

Nonfictional narratives emphasize historical accuracy and political analysis. These texts contribute to

academic scholarship and provide detailed documentation of military conflicts.

War cinema, in contrast, translate historical events into accessible narratives that appeal to broader audiences. Through visual storytelling, cinemas may simplify historical complexities they also play a crucial role in shaping public awareness of war.

The representation of war across textual and cinematic media reveals the complex relationship between history, narrative, and cultural memory. Nonfictional texts provide detailed documentation and critical analysis of military conflicts with an objective to bring out the truth and create a record of lessons to be learned in future. Cinema often emphasises emotional engagement and narrative drama. transform these events into fictionalised but powerful visual narratives.

Despite these differences, both forms of representation play a crucial role in shaping how societies remember and understand war and the future course of action for the warring nations and parties.

### Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations. The corpus of texts and films analysed is relatively limited, and the analysis focuses primarily on Indian perspectives on these conflicts.

### Suggestions for Future Research

Future research could expand the scope of the study by examining additional cinemas, international representations of the same conflicts, and audience reception.

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