

Redefining the Lost Memory: A Study of Selected Biopic in Indian Cinema

Pradeepta Kumar Nayak

Assistant Professor in English,
Trident Academy of Technology,
Bhubaneswar, India

Jayprakash Paramaguru

Reader in English,
VSSUT, Burla, India

Abstract

With Sanjay Leela Bhansali's much awaited cinema *Padmavati* waiting to hit the big screen in December 2017, the trend of biopic in Indian cinema has come a long way. The distinction of setting this trend goes to Dadasaheb Phalke for *Raja Harischandra*. From 1913 to 2017, this trend has seen a sensational rise and set such an illustrious example that had he been alive he would not have had any regret in introducing the same to the film industry. The trend, over the years, has given birth to a number of blockbusters related to the unforgettable journey of foremost politicians, freedom-fighters, sports icons, business tycoons, historical figures, etc. The great thing about making a biopic is, people are aware of the person concerned, their achievements but their anxiousness remain towards the journey they do not. Here comes the responsibility of the film-makers to make a thorough research work and to bring the realistic picture of the personality to the big screen. Thankfully the Indian film industry is blessed with some gifted and talented film-makers and as a result of that we have witnessed some high quality biopic movies of Indian cinema such as: *Raja Harischandra*, *Padmavati*, *M.S.Dhoni: The Untold Story*, *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag*, *The Making of Mahatma*, *Neerja*, *Mary Kom*, *Pan Singh Tomar*, *Dangal*, *The Dirty Picture*, *Sarbjit*, *Bandit Queen*, *Azhar*, *Aligarh*, *Shahid*, *Daddy*, *Manjhi: The Mountain Man*, *Rang Rasia*, *Guru*, *Mangal Pandey*, *Legend of Bhagat Singh*, *Budhia Singh: Born to Run*, *Jodha Akbar*, *Gandhi*, *The making of Mahatma*, *Poorna*, *The Dirty Picture*, *Shootout at Wadala*, *Shootout at Lokhandwala*, *Mein Aur Charles*, and *Haseena Parkar* etc. In this paper an attempt has been made to analyse the major biopic movies produced in India. Further it examines the planning, composition, and execution of the biopic film making.

Keywords- *Blockbusters, Sensational, Biopic, Feature Film*

Introduction

Bollywood believes in setting a trend and the trend was set, the moment Dadasaheb Phalke's *Raja Harishchandra*, the first full-length Indian feature film hit the big screen on 21 April, 1913 and the immediate impact was felt. Without a second thought one can say that Bollywood has a great impact on the Society and audience as well. We often observe that Bollywood is a reflection of our society, because people are always curious and enlivened to watch movies which are based on true life incidents. Films are a larger-than-life reel depiction of real life, giving people an opportunity to watch their own lives being played on celluloid. Every movie lover connects to and sees himself in some or the other part of a movie. Biopics are a sub-genre of drama and epic films genres, and although they were popular in the 1930s, they are still prominent to this day. 'Biopic' is a term derived from the combination of the words 'biography' and 'pictures'. The films, based on biopic, depict and dramatize the life of an important historical personage (or group) from the past or present era. Sometimes, historical biopics stretch the truth and tell a life story with varying degrees of accuracy. The biopic "narrates, exhibits and celebrates the life of a subject in order to demonstrate, investigate or question his or her importance in the world; to illuminate fine points of a personality; and... to enter the biographical subject into the pantheon of cultural mythology" (Bingham 10). The first Indian feature film, *Raja Harishchandra*, was directed and produced by Dadasaheb Phalke. The film revolves round the noble and righteous king, Harishchandra, who first sacrifices his kingdom, followed by his wife and eventually his children, to honour his promise to the sage Vishwamitra. Biopics have become quite popular in Bollywood because the trend was set at the initial stage. Be it freedom fighters, politicians, sports persons, business tycoons, underworld dons or those whose life stories have become a source of inspiration, Bollywood certainly loves recounting tales of real-life people. The inclination towards biopics still remain a popular choice for several makers, but the biopics have shifted their concentration from the freedom fighters to the people who have achieved success in a particular field like business or entertainment or sports, some examples of the same can be *Guru* (2007), *Paan Singh Tomar* (2012), *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag* (2013) and *Mary Kom* (2014). The only issue with biopics has been that they are often looked upon by the mainstream audiences as "Documentary movies" and thus are devoid of any entertainment value. The rapid social changes in India, today, would seem to require new imaginaries of people, their lives, and times. These lives can also be read as a guide to morality and values in the changing times when India is finding a new role in the world and traditional values are under scrutiny. Biopics have become call of the day for Bollywood as they not

only give honor to the legends but are also being appreciated and enjoyed by the audience. Here are a few biopics from Bollywood that have created a stir in the viewers.

Gandhi (1982)

It was Richard Attenborough's lifelong dream to bring the life story of Indian political and spiritual leader Mahatma Gandhi to the screen. When it finally reached fruition in 1982, the 188-minute, Oscar-winning *Gandhi* was one of the most exhaustively thorough biopics ever made. This movie shows Gandhi's full over view of life, ideologies, leadership skills, humanitarian facet, personal life, political life and conflicts. The world knows Gandhi as an enigma or a mystic but the movie exposes a more human side of Gandhi with his mental strength, perseverance, determination, ethics and even the marital friction caused by his determination to live a saintly life.

The movie begins with the assassination and then backtracks to his experiences in South Africa, where Gandhi, then a London-trained barrister, who dressed in Western-style suits, first antagonized the British by organizing a campaign of civil disobedience on behalf of his fellow Indians. It is full of visually compelling scenes. Thereafter each scene of this didactic movie involves learning and teaching as Gandhi develops his ethical system, beginning by encouraging a handful of Indian immigrants to defy the police in South African township and ending up trying to unite the teeming millions of the sub-continent in passive resistance against the British Empire. This film is not thematically driven since it is more of a visual biography, it does appear to want to reveal the extent to which the British were oppressive and unwilling to let go of their empire. It also tries to show how non-violent means, especially if they are enacted by a large number of people, can be effective. In general, the film seeks to present not just the life of the man but also attempts to reveal a great deal about the political history of late colonial India and the struggles therein. Gandhi also campaigned for Hindu/Muslim brotherhood, against oppression of the untouchables, and for reform in the treatment of women. He was personally responsible for saving hundreds of thousands of lives in India through fasting which stopped communal rioting. Gandhi's leadership and example inspired people and many governments, in India and throughout the world, to a new and higher level of morality.

Gandhi offers us a conscience-exercising, mind-stretching, and growth-inducing experience, as it teaches us about a heroic man who was an ethical giant and a visionary. The film vividly portrays how Gandhi's courage and determination united his diverse homeland of India under a banner of moral idealism and how his philosophy and personality left an indelible mark on his nation and the world. This film teaches a great deal about the power of peace. It re-emphasizes the importance of non-violent

demonstration as a political weapon at a time when too many people are restoring to acts of terrorism in order to express the need for change. *Gandhi* premiered in New Delhi, India on 30 November 1982. Two days later, on 2 December, it had a Royal Premiere in London in the presence of Prince Charles and Princess Diana.

Chak De! India (2007)

There have been many biopics made recently on various personalities but these days, sports biopics have become popular. For many they are the dream project and for some it is a medium to pay tribute to their favorite sports star; but for the audience it is the moment of inspiration and rejoicing and reliving the victory of their favorite sports person. *Chak De India* revolves around a Muslim Indian Hockey Captain, named Kabir Khan (Shah Rukh Khan), who misses a do-or-die penalty shootout against arch rival Pakistan in the final of a world championship, accused of match-fixing and leading to his ouster. Kabir Khan is a man who overcomes the problems in life without being skeptical and disturbed. He isn't an outsider to the game of hockey as he had once led the Indian Hockey team and unfortunately experienced failure and disgrace. He approaches to be the coach of a disorganized bunch of girls as a challenge to overcome his failure and the obstacles that had once stopped him from taking India to the top league in the field of Hockey. Kabir's challenge lied in reshaping a team which in pursuing their personal goals had forgotten what it is like to play as a team. His challenge lied not in training or honing the skills of the team but rather to bring them together as a team and instill the virtue of belief. A belief in realizing that if you want, you can do it! Their determination, ambition and skills are put to test in an ultimate contest with the world's top teams. For the girls, it is a chance to make their nation proud. For their coach, it is a chance to reclaim his lost honor after being deemed a traitor seven years ago. Kabir Khan is obsessed with getting these arrogant girls to the World Cup and have them understand the importance of not just being women (who are meant to get married to cook and clean) but to have their own identities and stand the same as men, especially in sports. In a nation that is crazy over cricket, the team encounters groups of people who do not believe the importance of their efforts or the game. The movie gives a message that women should not be considered inferior and how proper training and encouragement can make possible the impossible. You also, end up with patriotic feelings. This movie is excellent for showing how to get out of very difficult situations. It expresses positivity and negativity in human. Negativity is expressed in the lower consciousness as ego. Ego is caused by the vital being pulling towards its own interests at the expense of others, or of the world. One can move out of one's ego when

discovers his/her true nature; one's true self. The movie is about getting back passion for a particular game and winning for your country; it's about believing in yourselves when others give up.

Chak De! India has become an influential film. The title track song "Chak De! India," now doubles as a national anthem in India and is played at numerous sports events. According to Salim Merchant, the song "almost became the sports anthem of the country, especially after India won the Cricket World Cup [2011]. It was no longer our song but the country's song.

Paan Singh Tomar (2012)

Paan Singh Tomar is a biographical film based on the true story of the athlete Paan Singh Tomar. He plays a national level athlete who becomes a dreaded dacoit in the Chambal Valley. Tomar is an army subedar who gets into athletics only because sportsmen get more to eat. He participates in the Indian National Games and wins the gold medal in the steeplechase event 7 years in a row. In 1958 he participates in the Asian Games at Tokyo, but couldn't win because of his inability to adjust with the track spikes only given to him in the final event. He felt frustrated when he was not allowed to go the borders to fight in the 1962 and 1965 wars because sportsmen were not allowed to fight in them. In 1967, he participated in the International Military Games and wins the gold medal in the steeplechase. After he quits the track and returns to his village, wherein a land struggle has turned bloody. When the corrupt police and corrupt government won't help settle the matter, Paan Singh picks up a gun and takes the law in his own hands. Then the sportsperson becomes a dreaded dacoit in the valley of Chambal. This biopic reflects two different worlds of a simple person- the world of sports and the world of outlaws. The journey of a good man becoming a bad man; all by choice not by chance. The beauty of the movie is that it blends the personal with the larger social truths. The movie works because Irfan makes *Paan Singh Tomar* come alive as an athlete, as a husband and as a dacoit. In a country obsessed with cricket, a biopic on a former national champion athlete is reason enough to celebrate. It is one of superbly crafted film that underlines the linkage of life, sports and society.

One thing that this movie draws our dire attention is the condition of and apathy towards our non-cricketing sportspeople. This is about a nation that forgets the athlete who brings laurels to the nation but does not get any monetary gains. The honest and earnest intention of the film maker has to be applauded for taking the effort and risks to portray an unsung hero on screen. The plight of Indian athletes is a known story but the consequence it has had is perhaps not. The film is claimed to be a dedication to all the unsung legends of sports who have met a tragic end like Paan Singh Tomar.

Bhag Milkha Bhag (2013)

A biopic gets the Bollywood treatment in *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag* which is inspired by the true-life achievements of runner Milkha Singh known as “The Flying Sikh”, represented India in the 1960 Rome Olympics as well as many Commonwealth games. It is a blessing that this film was made and the inspiring story of India's greatest sporting hero told to a generation who might otherwise never have known the legend of 'The Flying Sikh.' Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra has been called a patriotic filmmaker. His *Rang De Basanti* was film that captured India's youth on the brink of rebellion and sense of patriotism. While depicting the story he has reflected the literal blood, sweat and tears Milkha Singh shed in his pursuit of excellence. That is a patriotic message that is exhilarating indeed. *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag* evokes every possible emotion in the viewer as you are swept along on Milkha's tumultuous journey - and somehow changed by the experience.

Farhan Akhtar wears the character of Milkha like a second skin. The physical transformation is evident and Akhtar runs like a born champion, but his artistry lies in subtly conveying the many shades to Milkha's personality, while capturing both the physical agony that his ambitious undertaking demands and the simmering psychological torment that is the driving force behind his athletic prowess. The movie begins in 1960 with Milkha's failed attempt at securing a medal during the Rome Olympics. Despondent, he tries to withdraw from a race in Pakistan. One of the organizers can't comprehend why Milkha would quit, but the runner's coach explains that the young man has personal reasons. Naturally, the government official asks for further explanation. And, boy, does he get an answer. The ghastliness of the Partition traumatized Milkha Singh. As a child, Milkha's family was killed in front of him after the 1947 partition landed his Sikh village on the Pakistani side of the border. In the interview to the newspaper, Milkha says it is one of the two experiences of his life he can never forget. The other was the medal he missed in the 1960 Rome Olympics. When Milkha Singh won the gold medal at the 1958 Commonwealth Games, the prime minister rang him up, and taking the Punjabi athlete's whimsical wish seriously, declared a national holiday honouring the win. This isn't just a film about a sportsperson who brought untold glory to our country. It is the story of an individual's journey from scratch to pinnacles of success in a world where politics and violence are constant reminders of how little an individual's aspirations matter in the larger interest.

This biopic of "Flying Sikh" Milkha Singh is a real example of the famous proverb "where there is a will there is a way". A must-watch movie specially for the youngsters to witness how "the charm of a glass of a milk" inspired a poor guy to run barefooted to represent India in Olympic. In a TV interview, Milkha Singh spoke of having told his story to make the film: he said that 90% of the film is based on

fact, on his own life. Even *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag* made Pakistanis remember their 'Flying Bird' Abdul Khaliq, a super athlete from Pakistan.

Mary Kom (2014)

Mary Kom is a crisp two hours journey for the audience to become inspired and know about a sportsperson named Mary Kom who has made India so proud. The story is less about her as a sportsperson and more about the journey and the struggles towards being the World Champion boxer. Mary Kom is Bollywood's answer to the Oscar-winner Million Dollar Baby (2004), where Hilary Swank plays an amateur boxing champion trained by Clint Eastwood. The film puts into perspective, how the aggressive daughter of a poor rice farmer in Manipur went on to create history by becoming a five-time world champion. It's a story of grit, passion and immense hard work. The best thing about the movie is definitely the optimism it portrays. Manipur is a troubled region for quite some time now. It has political issues and local problems very intensified. So when a story of someone is depicted from such a region, who beating all odds made a name in their own field; it becomes very important to highlight the negative factors around her that ultimately helps building the character of the lead. The corrupt politics of the boxing federation made the uphill journey even worse. Even after proving her worth, she is still looked down upon due to being Northeastern and threats of getting banned limited her options to retaliate and fight for her rights.

The movie could have helped people visualize the struggle of the player by showing problems pertaining to the state. It could have focused on issues that restricted the growth of the state and the highlighted the struggles of the players due to the ongoing problems. In addition, how complex a woman's life is to keep balance on a personal and professional level and most importantly. A genuine cinematic work that entertains enlightens and inspires, *Mary Kom* is a celebration of undying spirit, believe, faith, sportsmanship and the spirit of womanhood and women empowerment. *Mary Kom* is truly an inspiration for every Indian and for every person who needs that little bit of motivation to overcome the hurdles of life. At the same time, the role of a caring husband who lovingly takes care of the twins and encourages her wife not to give up on her dreams. At least this movie has made Mary Kom a household name and to whom every Indian is proud of today.

The Dirty Picture (2011)

Inspired by the life of the late Silk Smitha, an actress noted for her erotic roles, *The Dirty Picture* is a decent biopic on the late sex-symbol. There are very few films made in Bollywood with sheer honesty and sincerity, showcasing "Life as it is" on the celluloid. *The Dirty Picture* can easily be included in the

top bracket of such films which dare to hold back nothing, showing the dark side of the game as it is without any hiding. Silk Smitha is known to almost all Indians of different age groups who have satisfied their inner fantasies through the videos of this dusky seductress of 80s. It is a huge task in bringing out a character as challenging like Silk who death was as mysterious as her life. "Three things make a film run: entertainment, entertainment and entertainment. And I am entertainment". These words of wisdom, spoken with a naughty and seductive smile by Vidya Balan told us the definition of the movie *The Dirty Picture*. The main reason why this biopic works, is because of the on-screen Silk, played exceptionally well by Vidya Balan. She stands out! It goes without saying that the film belongs to Vidya Balan and she does absolute justice in playing her part to perfection. Not only is she bold in terms of her body language, she comes up with an audacious act and brings out the inner turmoil and pathos of her character effortlessly.

The Dirty Picture is a tale of pain, desire, ambition, struggle, and darkness. It's about Silk & her entire journey. It's a complete look at the rise and fall on the late south-siren. Shiv Visvanathan, in his article titled *The Dirty Picture: Free, Sexual and Female* hails the film as the 'stuff of sociology and the meat of a feminist critique of a male world.' He writes, 'The film is a celebration of life, an ode to cinema and the liberating power of sexuality. This is a woman who enjoys sex and whose sexuality exudes power and freedom. The woman's body becomes her way of being herself.'

Manjhi: The Mountain Man (2015)

This biopic is a tribute to a common man with uncommon mental strength leading to an extraordinary task, mostly unthinkable. Ketan Mehta's film says it was inspired by the real-life story of the 'mountain man' who toiled for 22 years trying to hack a path through hard rock with his humble tools, and indomitable spirit. The man is Dasharath Manjhi, a dalit, the lowest of the low in the caste pyramid. They are as usual tortured, insulted, tormented and ignored. The men are treated like cheap property. Laws that ensure rights and equality have no relevance where Dasharath and his people live. Manjhi, India's mountain man who single-handedly made a road through the mountains of Gehlaur. What gave him the strength to take on this impossible task is his deep love for his wife who meets with an accident here. His wife dies after falling off the mountain and succumbs to her injuries for the want of timely medical attention. Before dying she tells Dashrath, "Hum pahad paar nahi kar pae, bahut uncha hai." It does not take much time for Dashrath to decide that he must break through the mountain to carve an accessible path for the villagers. He manages the unbelievably stupendous task he sets out for himself, and in so doing proves that where there is a will, there is always a way. He cuts through a mountain only

with a hammer and chisel. It took him 22 years to make a road through a mountain. Dashrath undertakes this Herculean task to ensure that no one else dies the way his wife did. Truly a maverick task! This man is unstoppable as he discovers his inner Forrest Gump and decides to walk from Bihar to New Delhi to meet the Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi. Dashrath traces his tumultuous journey as he struggles to make the path and has to fight friends, family and bureaucrats alike. Nawazuddin Siddiqui is effortless in portraying the character of Dasahrath. There isn't a single moment in the entire film where one can separate Siddiqui from Dashrath! Be it revolting against the zamindar or toiling for decades in the memory of his wife, Siddiqui brings out all the emotions to the fore with his facial expressions and emotes through his eyes.

This is a faith-inspiring story of resolve and resilience. It is truly awe inspiring and motivating. It says nothing is impossible. Only thing that one needs is a driving force and motivation. For accomplishing a great job one should possess a equally a great heart. The main themes that run throughout the movie are love, passion and the strength of a man's willpower. From fighting corrupt bureaucrats to annoying family members, Dashrath fights all odds to ensure that he completes the task he took upon himself, one that will serve the mankind and just not a selfish emotion. It was an inspired act of superhuman achievement. It's a rare and unique story that deserves to be told to the world.

Rang Rasiya (2008)

Art-centric biopics are a rarity in Hindi cinema. *Rang Rasiya* is a biopic based on the life of 19th century painter Raja Ravi Varma. The film is about the life and time of renowned painter Raja Ravi Varma. This remarkable film is in a league of its own in many ways. The film, which has been adapted from Ranjit Desai's Marathi biography of Raja Ravi Varma, probes multiple themes - freedom of expression, religious bigotry, deeply ingrained caste and class divides. The artist challenged the sensibilities of the time by painting nudes and portraying Hindu gods and goddesses in human form. It's this enterprise, the printing and distribution of his paintings, that, according to *Rang Rasiya*, led to two things -- to allowing "untouchables" to finally worship Gods and Goddesses and even bring them home, and to Ravi Varma being arrested and tried on charges of obscenity, and for offending public morality and hurting religious and cultural sentiments. The film is about freedom of expression. In this biopic, we witness Ravi Varma being transformed from an unassuming but supremely talented young man to a full-fledged rebel who paves the way for a wholly new approach to art. The biggest accomplishment of Raja Ravi Varma was his ability to make God available to all. The Hindu Caste Structure is so tightly wrapped in religion that for a good part of centuries, the religion had ostracized its lower castes.

Most Indians are familiar with the paintings of Raja Ravi Verma, at least in the form of bright colourful calendar art. The film brings out how colourful his life was. And the story of his life, with the central theme of an artist fighting for the freedom of his thought and creativity, is an easily relatable and timely one. Though the film is encased in an antique, vintage Indian setting that's often gorgeous, the film's soul is modern and Western. *Rang Rasiya* is by no means a perfect film, but for the manner in which it tackles an extensive range of important themes related to the place of art in a tradition-bound society, it is an impressive achievement. Smearred in color, vibrancy and sensuality, *Rang Rasiya* revels in its operatic, dramatic beauty and narrates a liberating tale of love, passion and freedom of vision.

Shahid (2013)

Shahid is a biopic on the life of lawyer Shahid Azmi who was killed in 2010 allegedly for defending 26/11 accused Fahim Ansari in a court of law. Ansari was eventually acquitted but by that time most of us had forgotten the 32-year-old intrepid lawyer. The film traces his amazing journey that saw him attempting to become a terrorist, then get thrown into jail under anti-terrorism law and finally finding his calling as a champion of human rights. Going back at the life of Shahid Azmi one will realise that he radicalised after the Mumbai riots in 1992. Azmi reportedly crossed over to Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (PoK) for training in militancy. Disgruntled, he returned but was arrested under TADA for plotting against the State. He was given a five-year sentence but was acquitted by the Supreme Court. During his stay in jail, he studied journalism and law and when he was released he started practising as a lawyer. He took cases of youngsters charged with terrorism activities without concrete evidence and secured around 17 acquittals. Shahid was forgotten after he was killed. It required a film to bring him back to the mainstream discourse. The director, Hansal Mehta feels "The incredible story of this man simply had to be told." "Shahid Azmi rose from humble origins to become a symbol of hope for all those who were at the receiving end of potential miscarriages of justice," adds Mehta. For Mehta, Azmi was a "noble character" whose eventful life epitomised the fight for social justice within the system. Shahid proved that the solutions to problem lie within the system.

After Shahid Azmi was shot dead, some media reports and political activists alleged that he had paid with his life for links with the underworld. But he was not alive to tell his side of the story to defend himself. So a movie was needed to bring the facts to light, also to project and protect a character of a responsible human being. He is truly a hero. Hansal Mehta says it was the "incompleteness" of Azmi's life that attracted him. Azmi was just 32 when he was killed, but in his short life, he had seen a lot. In a short

span, this man has done something which is normally not conceivable. *Shahid* was well received by Indian and international critics.

Some recently released biopics like *Padmavat and Dangal* have also been able to create sensation in the film Industry and recent surveys have shown how the movies are made popular in countries like China, The United States and others in terms of popularity and business. So there is no stopping to this trend and the trend will surely contribute to the growth and development of Indian cinema in the years to come.

The genre of biopics has been a real taste for audience these days. Even filmmakers pick such people and portray them on silver screen. Had that not been the case we would never able to know about The Mountain Man, Manjhi or the truth behind Shahid Azmi. The biopic has a substantial presence in Hindi movies starting from the beginning of movie making until present time. Biopics have been made on freedom fighters, politicians, sports stars, businessmen, outlaws, underworld dons or those whose life stories have become a source of inspiration for countless, Bollywood certainly loves recounting tales of real-life people. Great men biopics are the prism through which most citizens understand history. In a country where movie is now more than entertainment and such biopics link the past lives to present concerns to emphasize unity and sovereignty. It seems like playing biopic of legends was always a safe choice for any actor to make in his or her career. People love watching real stuff than usual masala movies which is mere entertainment and nothing else. A biopic makes sense for various reasons like watching reality, life lessons, success and seeing what you never seen before. Through this we know Neerja Bhanot, Sarbjit and truth behind such character. In a true sense of the term biopics are now working as tool for social reform by mirroring the as it is. We expect more such biopic are in the pipeline and will be conceptualized in coming days.

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