

Retelling the Nation: Narrating the Nation through Biopics,

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0209

The Asian Conference on Film and Documentary 2013

Official Conference Proceedings 2013

Abstract

Cinema plays a pivotal role in the negotiation and construction of national identity, selectively appropriating history, attempting to forge a sense of commonality in a set of people by evoking a sense of a shared past and by establishing a rupture with 'others'. One of the means of constructing a nation is through the biopic. Great men biopics chronicle heroic deeds, sacrifice, and lofty moral virtues and either fabricate, or rediscover, and authenticate the myths of the founding fathers and celebrated men. Biopics disseminate the "myth of nationhood" by use of various narrative strategies - such as a glorification of hypermasculinity, structuring binary oppositions in terms of character and thematic concerns, 'otherness', visualizing national territory, homogenizing a cultural diversity etc. These films become a part of the nationalistic discourse that reflect perceptions of what it means to be "Indian". Bollywood in general and the biopic in particular has moved away from the Mother India mythology and its feminine reading of the nation to produce a particular variant of nationalism. This paper attempts to deconstruct how the nation is simulated, and meanings, such as national pride and national idealism, are mediated to the audience in selected Indian biopics - Sardar, The Legend of Bhagat Singh, Mangal Pandey - The Rising and Bhaag Milkha Bhaag. Key terms: Cinema, biopic, Bollywood, identity, memory, otherness, gendering, simulation/construction.

Biopics selected for Study Sardar (1993) - Biopic on Vallabhai Patel, Statesman and India's first Home Minister. The Legend of Bhagat Singh (2002) - on Bhagat Singh, martyr and freedom fighter. Mangal Pandey-The Rising (2005) - on Mangal Pandey, rebel soldier of the Sepoy Mutiny, popularly known as the First War of Independence. Bhaag Milkha Bhaag (2013) - on Milkha Singh, Sportsman.

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The narrativization of the past in cinema has been a method of propagating the idea of the nation to a national public, a means by which a people can build a picture of themselves as individuals and community. The assumption that “nations are enduring primordial entities” (Hjort 2000, p. 8) is now perceived as fallacious and the modernist proposition holds that nations emanate from nationalism and not vice versa.

One of the means of narrating the nation is by reproducing the myths of its founding fathers.

In cinema, great men biopics have been a method of rallying the passions of patriotism. By chronicling heroic deeds, sacrifice, and lofty moral virtues and by fabricating, rediscovering, or authenticating the myths of celebrated men, biopics offer the audience with points of identification with the protagonists and sympathy to his cause. This paper attempts to deconstruct how the nation is simulated and meanings, such as national pride and national idealism, are communicated to the audience in four Indian biopics: *Mangal Pandey: The Risisng*, *Sardar*, *The Legend of Bhagat Singh* and *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag*. Further, the paper also attempts to show how films can be used as evidence of the nationalistic discourses and culture of the time in which they were produced.

In India, cinematic biography has enjoyed growing popularity over the years with the realist strand in Indian cinema producing many biopics, notably on the leaders of the Freedom Struggle. Critical writing on Indian cinema, asserts Lalitha Gopalan, frequently dwells on how Indian films are continually concerned with the questions of national identity and history (Gopalan 1996, p. 381). The Independence Struggle, cinematically identified with the lives of its leaders, has become a national frame of reference, a meta-narrative influencing collective identity, and film makers have either affirmed or deconstructed the mythology surrounding national leaders. One of the prime motives of the biopic is constructing the nation which can be seen from the fact that the basis of the movie is usually dramatic than historical/ factual.

While the plot of the film would endeavour to follow the historical ‘facts’ where possible, the director would not hesitate to substitute a fictional narrative for a historically accurate one when the overarching dramatic concerns of the film demanded (Chopra - Gant 2008, p. 75).

Biopics disseminate the “myth of nationhood” by use of various narrative strategies. These films become a part of the nationalistic discourse that reflects perceptions of what it means to be “Indian”. National cinema does not “simply articulate the cultural specificities of a given pre-existing nature” (Hjort 2000, p. 8), but enables the inhabitants of the geo-political space of India to imagine themselves as a distinctive national community.

Anderson’s definition of the nation as “an imagined political community – and imagined as both limited and sovereign” (6) is still the accepted notion of the nation. A nation is an imaginary construct – it is not the awakening of a people into political and social consciousness; it is a creation of a geo-political and cultural idea where none exists. “Both Gellner and Anderson stress that nations are ideological constructions seeking to forge a link between a self- defined cultural group and the state, creating *abstract* or *imagined* communities that we loosely refer to as ‘the nation’ and which gets passed off as ‘natural’” (Hayward 1993, p.89, italics in original). A nation emerges as an idea from the traditions of political thought and

literary language and also through nationalist discourses that present the idea of a nation as persisting through time. To maintain the illusion of cultural and social continuity, a nation needs narratives – a profusion of memories of a shared past, glorious heritage, and heroic endeavours, which are constructed by narratives that seek to name the land and space that a people inhabit.

There are two aspects that constitute the “spiritual principle” of the nation: one in the past; the other in the present – “the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories... [and] ... a present day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of a heritage that one has received in an undivided form” (Renan 1990, p. 19). What the biopic does is to create the one and instigate the other. Allied to a significant moment in the life of a nation, biographical stories of national heroes is pivotal in the process of memory, history and construction of a national self-identity.

Of the biopics chosen for analysis, *Sardar* is a 1993 film on Sardar Vallabhai Patel, Indian Freedom Fighter and Independent India’s first Home Minister. *The Legend of Bhagat Singh (LBS)* is a 2002 film on how Bhagat Singh develops his ideals and on his struggle for Indian Independence. *Mangal Pandey: The Rising (MP)* is a 2005 film based on the life of Mangal Pandey, the Indian soldier who is credited with initiating the Indian rebellion of 1857, also known as ‘The Sepoy Mutiny’ or ‘The First War of Independence’. *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag (BMB)* is a 2013 biographical sports drama on the life of Milkha Singh, “The Flying Sikh”, the Indian athlete who was a national champion runner and an Olympian. These films mark a change from the romanticised and moralistic versions of biographical narratives that were popular in Indian cinema and were all critically and commercially well-acclaimed. The argument this paper makes is that in presenting a quasi-realistic portrayal of the lives of the protagonists, the Indian biopic uses various narrative strategies in constructing and mediating an image of the nation to the audience. On the strength of the films being addressed here, it can be said that the most important narrative strategies are the construction of a masculine trope, the creation of binary oppositions, the use of visual, lexical and symbolic representations in response to what is seen as the current concerns of the nation.

Constructing a Masculine Trope

Indian cinema has moved away from the Mother India trope that depicted the nation as suffering and self-sacrificing to privilege the ideals of hypermasculinity as laudable and desirable. There are three means by which a masculine nation is mediated to the audience – the employment of myth/archetype, conveyance of didactic messages of heroic self-sacrifice, and glorification of normative male values.

- Use of myth/ archetype

The predominant archetypes in all four biopics are heroes of Hindu mythology. The dominant image is the Bheeshma archetype – the Mahabharata bachelor warrior “one of terrible oath” who renounces conjugal life to dedicate himself to his duty. *LBS* presents the young fiancé of Bhagat Singh who seductively sings “*meri bindiya, meri kangana bulaye*” (my bindi and bracelet beckon you) to which he replies “My path is rough; I cannot be one with you” (*LBS*); Milkha Singh tells Perizaad, his fellow athlete, that his is a fight from which he cannot be distracted.

BMB also introduces the Karna myth – the underdog who is technically superior being excluded because of jealousy. During his training, the background music echoes with mythical imagery: “Open the wheels of your chariot, make it the *Sudarshan chakra*”. In the Mahabharata, Karna was killed while removing the wheels of the chariot; here the movie exhorts the hero to remove it fearlessly and make it the weapon of Lord Vishnu.

Finally, the Ahalya myth is sounded in Mangal Pandey’s acceptance of Heera as his bride. He legitimises, like Rama, the fallen woman, an allusion that can be both symbolic of the rescue of Motherland from the clutches of the foreigner and significant in that Rama had by then become in the hands of the Right wing parties a symbol of nationalist resurgence. The ethnic fund of myths and symbolic practices provides a link with the past and the nation is invoked by the employment of archetypes that resonates with the “collective unconscious”.

- Heroic self-sacrifice

Biopics put up national heroes as exempla virtutis, exhibiting public acts of national heroism that is worthy of being emulated. A crucial epiphanic moment is presented when a moral choice is taken – Sardar when he is moved by Gandhi’s speech and throws his coat into the fire, symbolically committing himself to India, Mangal Pandey when he turns away from criticism of his country to devotion to its beliefs and challenges William Gordon “We can win back our *mulk* (country), *izzat* (honour, respect, dignity) *sab kuch* (everything)”; Bhagat Singh when he picks up the bloodstained earth at Jallianwala Baag; Milkha Singh when he identifies himself with a cause narrated in terms of identity with the nation: “*Main India Banoonga*” – “I will become India”(BMB). The moment when the protagonist takes an oath and dedicates himself to the nation is a memory that informs the thematic concerns of the film. The nation replaces family as the site of sacrifice and devotion.

Suffering is presented as spectacle accompanied by hyperbolic statements of national-historical import which amounts to nationalist propaganda. Bhagat Singh’s custodial torture during his fast; Milkha Singh’s wound during his first race; the first shot of Mangal Pandey through the noose readied for him highlight the scant regard they placed on their lives. This is reminiscent of Anderson’s idea of “purity through fatality” – the willingness to die for a cause (145).

- Glorification of normative masculinity

The protagonists of the films all exemplify hegemonic masculinity – strong, rugged, competitive, physically and emotionally tough. They are unafraid of violence and willing to fight to prove dominance. Mangal Pandey, Bhagat Singh and Milkha Singh are physically superb – their body types conform to the specific physiques popularized by Hollywood action heroes of the 80s – muscular, broad shouldered, massive biceps, perfect abs. The aged Sardar Patel, though not sinewy, reiterates the patriarchal ideology of manly ruthlessness. He is ready to fight, “Sword will be met with sword” and warns the Muslim League that if they create problems for the Government, that Government’s Home Minister does not “wear bangles” (*Sardar*).

The reluctance to be violent is seen as contemptible – Chandrashekar Azad in *LBS* dismisses the non-violent protest of the Congress as the actions of a “*napunsak*” (eunuch). Blood is baptism into manhood as seen in Bhagat Singh’s words, “Shedding blood is no great deed, whether yours or anyone else’s” (*LBS*). Milkha Singh’s rigorous training culminates in blood flow.

Heroes are strong erotic figures indulging in wrestling matches to the cheers of the watching male audience and drinking indigenous drinks (*bhang* or *lassi*). Songs and dances that evoke the nation include the *bangada* – the aggressively male Punjabi martial folk dance. Masculinity is performance in the recurring metaphor of twirling moustaches – both Mangal Pandey and Bhagat Singh show their pride and defiance when taciturnly twirling their moustaches as they listen to the verdict in court.

Hegemonic masculinity is evinced in lexical choices – “man of steel”, “lion in the lair”, “bullet from a gun”, “every vein of yours is an iron wire” etc. The masculine body is fetishized with close-up, low angle and arc shots that exaggerate the importance of the muscular physique. Writing on *He Ram*, Lalitha Gopalan says, “...the muscular militant body in the film services the cause of the ideal male image in Hindu nationalism” (Gopalan 1996, p.385).

The three political biopics present women characters as taking part in resistance movements, but they are for most part nameless and faceless. In *Mangal Pandey*, the women, in spite of their pivotal roles as romantic interests, fade into the backdrop when the actual agitation begins. In spite of the innumerable political leaders introduced in *Sardar*, women are mostly shown serving tea or accompanying the male protagonists. Women are described as “delicate as glass”, “will break at a turn” (*BMB*). Traitors, examples of subservient masculinities, are abused in feminising terms “*nayi dulhan ki tarah sharmata hai*” (behaving shyly like a bride) (*LBS*). Similarly, the contrast between the sinewy Punjabis, whose game is wrestling, and the lean Englishmen, who are pictured as playing the gentler game of cricket, is brought out in the challenge to the duel – “My opponent will be this one like a girl” (*LBS*).

Superior and inferior social agents are built into the social structure to consolidate the idea of hegemonic nationhood. The narrative ‘fixes’ the significance of the visuals and semantics to show that the mainstream expression of national identity is overwhelmingly male.

Binary oppositions

A country that faces the problem of divisions along caste and religious lines requires texts and visual experiences to enable citizens to regard themselves as part of a distinctive nation. Cinema asserts the collective identity by both homogenizing cultural differences and by the process of ‘othering’,

To reflect hegemonic perceptions on what it means to be “Indian,” plurality and diversity are erased and culture standardized. Distinct religious communities, identified only by their clothes (*fez caps*, *tilaks*, *turbans*, *bindis*) are shown as celebrating Holi together or praying in the *dargah* (*MP*). It is a Muslim who shouts “Bhagat Singh *Amar Rahe*” (Bhagat Singh is immortal) and another who brings food for the Hindu boys, on whose behalf the latter beat up the English men. The national

myth that India as a country did not know communal or regional squabbles or clashes before British rule is naturalized in films. The depiction of different communities, distinguished by the clothes they wore, ostensibly following the same ideals of devotion to the state is the common strategy of biopics. The communities are shown as living within specific boundaries but always typical of the nation. *Sardar* makes a fetish of presenting leaders from different areas and different communities in acting in unison and agreement on most issues. Amnesia is necessary for constructing a nation and the memory of communal discord that is a threat to the nation's fragile sense of unity is a taboo subject.

Films also "construct imaginary bonds" so that "diverse and often antagonistic group of peoples are ... invited to recognize themselves as a singular body with a common culture, and to oppose themselves to other cultures and communities" (Higson 1995, p.7). Nations are maintained by transforming cultural boundaries into political boundaries.

To proclaim its 'otherness' from other nationalities, cinema creates structural oppositions – between Indian and British, between Indian and Pakistani, between national integration and separatist tendencies. The others in political biopics are easily defined. In three films – *Sardar*, *Mangal Pandey*, *The Legend of Bhagat Singh* – the main opponent is the imperialist. The British is demonised as morally corrupt – the East India company trades in opium and use slave girls for sex; the British soldiers are drunk and lascivious as contrasted with the Spartan restraint of the Indian (*MP*). Englishmen are mostly portrayed as cruel and cowardly – attacking unarmed Indians viciously, fighting only when odds are overwhelmingly in their favour and retreating fearfully when challenged (*MP* and *LBS*). In *LBS*, the injustice and callousness of the Englishman is displayed in the sign "Dogs and Indians not allowed" and in the words of the British official at the site of the Jallianwala Baag, "Bloody Indians" followed by the British flag that waves before his face. The self-indulgence of the English is contrasted with the sacrifice of the Indian. Voice-over narration in *LBS* annotates the montage of Bhagat Singh's fasting – "On one side the revolutionaries' starvation, on the other side, the revelry and feasting of the British and the princes" (*LBS*).

Crowds and colour evoke the nation – the contrast is between the open, joyful world of the Indians to the claustrophobic discipline of the English. *MP* shows the clamour and companionship in the Indian market place followed by the empty silence of the British cantonment. In *Sardar*, citizens move out (exteriority) to greet him, women open windows and come to apply *tilak* on him while they rush indoors in panic as the British official drives past.

India's past and traditions are upheld as 'high' culture, "India is rich" (*MP*), "Neither my country is poor, nor illiterate. When your forefathers couldn't speak, our children studied the Ramayan and the Gita", "Your Rani wears the diamond looted from our Taj", "What are you so arrogant about?...for using paper instead of water for cleaning?" (*LBS*).

The opposition extends to women – English women are mostly lazy and sexually promiscuous and the object of Indian male gaze while the Indian woman is maternal, moral and principled even when a sex worker. Politically sympathetic English women

characters in *LBS* do not problematize the premise because the differences that arise are cultural, emotional and psychological – not political.

In the biopics set in the post-colonial and globalized era, the ‘other’ includes the Pakistani and the adherents of Pakistan. Jinnah, in *Sardar*, is shrewd, cunning and duplicitous shown first in a three- piece suit, stubbing out a cigarette. According to Barthes, poses and gaze signify values and identities. Visual semiology shows how the film presents Jinnah – he does not look at the viewer, and so there is no response from the audience. When he does, the camera is placed at a higher angle. At meetings, he looks sideways and down – with the negative connotations of defensiveness and duplicity. Gandhi comments on the founder of Pakistan, “Jinnah talks like a child – give me the moon – he will not take anything but the moon” – a lexical choice which connotes immaturity and unreasonableness. Jinnah’s threats of ‘jihad’ is followed by shots of burnt streets, dead bodies, paper reports “1000s feared dead in Calcutta” and Patel’s statement, “The House on one side wants to govern; on the other side, the League wants to destroy the nation” (*Sardar*). The ‘League’ is always a generic type – not humanized.

Likewise, the contrast is stark between the ascetic lifestyle and mature restraint of the widowed Sardar on the one hand, and the flamboyance and callow belligerence of the polygamous Rizwi of Hyderabad who declares that 40 lakh Hindus will die before Hyderabad becomes part of India, on the other. *BMB* is remarkable in that it raises the bogey of otherness at the climactic moment. The film glosses over Milkha Singh’s great triumphs as a montage – the culminating scenes are reserved for his eventual victory over the neighbouring country of Pakistan.

One of the means of celebrating the nation is by evoking differences as the binary opposites in terms of character or themes – for ‘us’ the integrity and moral virtue of people, the valour of men and the chastity of women; for ‘them’ deceit, cowardice, lasciviousness and retribution.

Visual, Lexical and Symbolic representations

The process of historical reconstruction of key events provides a spatio- temporal horizon for the audience to represent a nation’s past to itself. *Sardar*’s frame narrative consists of news reels of the Quit India Movement, clippings from newspapers, television footage of the swearing in of the last Viceroy. The horrors of the Jallianwala Baag massacre are played out through the memory of young Bhagat Singh. These significant moments are mapped out visually and temporally which creates a picture of a nation moving through “empty homogeneous time” (Anderson 1983).

Space is a necessary correlative of time, and biopics give an illusion of visualizing national territory with images of rivers, mountains, hamlets evoking the idea of a unique geographic entity. In *Sardar*, the terrain of India is shown in Patel’s travels: the Arabian Sea which opens the narrative, the flatlands, grasslands etc., along with the series of communities of different religious persuasions with period accessories such as dress rendered with fidelity. The Simla Conference begins with a pan shot of Nehru showing Edwina Mountbatten the mountains. National space is depicted by

visualizing national territory, the life of the country, its geography, flora, fauna etc. In *LBS*, the Taj, which is visible from the rooms where the Lahore conspiracy is hatched, creates an illusion of nature and history. If *BMB* speaks of a lower level army officer who goes on to become a celebrated athlete, the film's setting moves from the outskirts of Delhi's refugee camps, to small towns, to the vast terrain of the mountains where he trains. Landscape becomes important and the emerging consciousness of the nation can be seen in the attention paid to spatial details of a visually pleasing landscape.

The emerging consciousness of the nation is seen in the verisimilitude of the spatial details – period accessories and idealized depictions of dress. Significantly, character development is marked by a change in ensemble – Mangal Pandey is seen in the uniform of a British sepoy but he is hanged wearing his attire of a Brahmin. The contrast between the Indian contingent and Jinnah in *Sardar* is also one of clothes – the one in the sartorial mode of the Oriental, the other following the English with his three-piece suits. Milkha Singh “becomes India” when he wears the blazer of the Indian track team.

Traditions are also appropriated and touristic images offered to constitute a national identity. The colourful pageantry and pictorial tableaux of cultural stereotypes is metonymic in affirming a national culture and identity. Minstrels singing and elephants trumpeting with chants of ‘*mangal*’ which means ‘auspicious’ forms the frame narrative of *MP*. Religion is ubiquitous – women circumbulating the *tulsi* (sacred basil), *sadhus* (holy men), application of *tilaks* to currency, conches, temple bells and rituals, along with bazaars, fairs, dances, acrobatics, shots of bangles, bullock carts, cock fighting, snake-charmers, fire dancers, wheat fields, Ramlila celebrations, ethnic drinks (*Bhaang* and *lassi*) and the constantly reiterated Holi celebrations. Similarly, *LBS* and *BMB* exhort “*pagadi sambhal*” – look after your turban - and “*Pagadi baandh*” – tie your turban – to signify self-respect as the turban is seen as a symbol of prestige. Images, visual and metaphoric, have meaning potential and the film uses “established *connotators*” to signify pride and nationhood to the audience (Maelin and Mayer 2012, p. 51). Plurality of identity is erased and stereotyped images connote a national specificity.

Individual signs and visual paraphernalia like flags and maps also serve to reaffirm the nation by presenting its geographic and emotional contours. Within five minutes of *Sardar*'s opening we see the map of India on the news montage with the flag superimposed on it and a narrative on cross-border terrorist attacks from Pakistan. The presentation of a nation as under attack serves to evoke the sense of community. Flags and maps are in abundance from the initial introduction of Patel on his release from Yerwada Jail to the iconic photo scene with Mother India in chains superimposed on the map of India – an alteration of the actual photograph. The vastness of India is foregrounded by the practice of naming – Travancore, Cochin, Bhopal, Hyderabad, Chenab as voice-over narration and assertions such as “*Is desh ko ek hi hona hai*” (This country has to become one.) and in press-clippings “Tribal Raids in Kashmir”, “Greater Rajasthan is Born” (*Sardar*). In *BMB*, the climatic race has foreign flags in the backdrop, the last lap shows the Pakistani flag; the enormous Indian flag, a potent cultural symbol, in rich colour and extra deep perspective, is articulated visually as Milkha crosses the finish line in the first place. The set of

symbols which carry wider emotional meanings serve as a system of reference for Indians to think of themselves as members of a group.

Over-lexicalization to reinforce the geographical space shows the operation of ideology in action. The films reiterate the words ‘*hum*’(we/ us), ‘*hamara*’(ours), ‘*Hindustani*’, ‘*desh*’(country) with its near synonyms, and “*aazaadi*” (freedom). Tatiya Tope tells Nana Saheb that the time has come to recapture the “whole of Hindustan”; he pleads for unity “*Hum Hindustani hai*” – “We are Indians” (MP); Mangal Pandey evokes the inevitable union of the country “The whole of Hindustan is watching...We will win even if it takes a hundred years” (MP). Bhagat Singh and his companions sing “*Desh mere meri jaan hai tu*” “My country, you are my life”. The terms used are also those of kinship – the country is referred to as “*ma*” (mother), and nature – “*mitti*” (earth) – something to which one is naturally tied. Linguistic determinism holds that our world is constituted by our language and the lexical choices that connote solidarity, bloodline, and passion are used to convince a ‘national’ populace that they should identify with the nation.

Great Men biopics delve into national cultural discourses to reintegrate hybrid identities into a national consciousness. Nation- building as a thematic concern is predicated by foregrounding the contrast between a rich past and an inferior present. In a country that is riven by fissiparous tendencies and sub-nationalities, biopics link the past lives to present concerns to emphasise unity and sovereignty. A nation that has been perceived as ‘soft’, ‘non-violent’ is re-presented as ‘manly’ and assertive. The biopic foregrounds the hero but celebrates and consecrates the nation.

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