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Visualizing Transformations in History Through The Cinematic Lens

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"India is the cradle of the human race, the birthplace of human speech, the mother of history, the grandmother of legend, and the great grand mother of tradition. Our most valuable and most astrictive materials in the history of man are treasured up in India only!"

-Mark Twain

What is history? History is the study of past events. It is a body of facts that have been accepted by historians as valid and significant. It helps us to understand those processes that enabled the early humans to successfully conquer their environment and develop the present day civilizations. It is not just a study of battles and kings as is normally understood by some. It is an analysis of society, economy and cultural trends over a long period as reflected in available sources. A historian tries to evaluate different situations over a long period and asks questions as to why certain events happened and what was their impact on society at large? Every new evidence or a fresh interpretation of existing evidence by different scholars helps in enriching our knowledge about the past. History is seeing the past through the eyes of today. The main task of the historian is not to record facts, but to interpret and evaluate them. A historian differentiates between fact and fiction. However, myths which are based on oral tradition of a society may contain memories of past happenings. The historian's job is to ascertain the fact through cross checking of different historical evidence. India's ancient past was constructed with the help of large varieties of historical evidence and their interpretation.

India is a land of ancient civilization, but the culture of the country has necessarily changed with time. Studying history is one way of getting to know the past. History is an attempt to understand how and why our ancestors lived as they did; what difficulties they met with and in what manner they overcame them.¹

A look at any school text book of history or at the university syllabi will tell us that Indian history is divided into three phases, Ancient, Medieval and the Modern. The construction of the three phase history carries within it deeper social messages and biases, for there is an inherent assumption that there is an Indian history which can be divided into so many phases. Periodization has had great importance for the construction of the identities of peoples, and has therefore had important political connotations. Historical Films follow this periodization of Indian History to some extent. As our History, they too

¹ History and Culture through the Ages; <http://www.nios.ac.in/media/documents/Sec1CHCour/English/CH.03.pdf>

have certain biases set within the era represented. History is the selection, arrangement, and interpretation of facts for the purpose of telling "how it really was." Like written history, feature films are an interpretation of their society. They too may be considered historical evidence, for they share some properties with written history. Like traditional historical materials such as diaries and newspapers, contemporary films reflect the society that produced them. Films are a record of that time period. Both the filmmaker and historian share some aspects of methodology. Therefore, film evidence, as well as primary documents and journal articles must be evaluated in conjunction with other information on the subject, for a more balanced interpretation of history. However, the focus here is not to establish the credibility between the movie and a "historical fact", but to study the transformations in ways in which history has been shown on screen.

Many argue that film evidence is invalid because filmmakers are not historians. Their primary goal is to entertain and make money, rather than presenting the truth about the past. These elements are most obvious in historical dramas. Nonetheless, it is the historian's task to separate fantasy from fact. Often, in film, episodes from history were taken which could be moulded into spreading a national/patriotic message. Historians have glorified certain rulers; these did not remain remote from the screen either. Popular dynasties or episodes or characters from history have always attracted filmmakers and certain specific films have been chosen for this study to prove it further.

Film – and other 'non-professional' forms of social remembrance in television, journalism, and the popular press – have not been welcomed by the ranks of academic historians, who have often complained about the media's lack of method and training and their tendency to sacrifice truth to drama and emotion. However, the importance of cinema in this social endeavour is undeniable.

How do two different representative systems – written discourse and audiovisual discourse – approach the depiction of history? How do the different mediums of expression – the written language of the historian, the audiovisual language of the filmmaker – shape the representation of historical events? Is written language the only medium for historical narration? Is cinema, history or does it only depict history? Is cinema an appropriate medium for such a representation? Or does cinema impose differences of expression that can nonetheless produce legitimate forms of historical discourse?

The chosen movies below have been approached through traditional historical periods of Ancient, Medieval and Modern. Two films have been taken for each period.

Ancient:

Amrapali (1966)

Medieval:

Asoka (2001)

Mughal-e-Azam (1959)

Modern (1857):

Jodhaa-Akbar (2008)

Shatranj ke Khiladi (1977)

Mangal Pandey (2005)

Each film of the same period, deals with common historical events or characters and what has been focussed on is the depiction of the same history, which goes through a change

due to the time it is being made in. This happens due to the fact that filmmakers add in their own interpretation of the past, which is a subjective process and has to differ from person to person. Also important is the fact that the past is perceived in the light of the present and so the perception of the past by the filmmaker (like a historian) is what he experiences in the present. Thus the study of film too needs an understanding of 'time' and 'space'.

For example, if we take *Amrapali* and *Asoka*, similar features would be the Ancient Indian tradition and Buddhism. In both the films we can see that the women had powerful roles in society then. Both the films end when the main characters give up their worldly life for religion. They see suffering and death after the end of war and realise the pain in life which can be overcome by religious path. In both the films, the men are shown as deeply in love, yet at the same time can become ruthless killers- something that was, at that time, considered to be a necessary skill for maintaining ones territory. Apart from the technical changes not many differences are visible in the two.

Mughal-e-Azam and *Jodhaa Akbar*, have one basic similar point, both deal with the life of Akbar. Where *Mughal-e- Azam* shows Akbaras the great emperor, *Jodhaa Akbar* portrays him as the young Jalal who, through experience, learns enough to rule his own kingdom. In *Jodhaa Akbar*, his marriage with the Hindu Rajput princess is shown both to have increased his tolerant and secular attitude, and leading her to respecting and falling in love with him. He learns from his personal experiences the ways to rule his people and win their affection. Akbar's love for India is more prominent in *Mughal-e-Azam* where he stakes his son for the love of his country- a nationalist element, which was prevalent in the times it was made in. On the other hand, *Jodhaa Akbar* speaks more about the Hindu-Muslim unity and mixing of cultures, in the contemporary times of terrorism and globalization of India. Class hierarchy was visible in *Mughal-e- Azam* unlike in *Jodhaa Akbar*, where the Emperor embraces his people and mixes with them.

Shatranj ke Khiladi and *Mangal Pandey*, both depict the revolt of 1857. The former sees it from the upper (elite) perspective and the latter from below. *Shatranj ke Khiladi* clearly portrayed the incapability of the noble/bourgeois class in India, but also made it clear that the British were the enemy. However, in *Mangal Pandey*, we see that the British and Indians got along in certain cases. The British are not simply enemies, but they try to bring changes in society which though for their selfish reasons, is causing positive effects (a boon in disguise of a curse). *Mangal Pandey* deals with more issues that one studies in Modern Indian History of pre- 1857 periods. Where *Shatranj ke Khiladi* deals with the ignorance of the upper class, (which originally was Munshi Premchand's idea) not only to national issues but even their homes, *Mangal Pandey* raises more social issues and messages. It speaks of farmer sufferings; caste hierarchy and untouchability; prostitution; social evils and how the main protagonists (who are commoners) deal/oppose it. They do not remain aloof from it unlike the nobles of *Shatranj ke Khiladi*. There is a common feature that both the films criticize the upper class, but one does it staying within its structures, while the other does it, staying outside from it (Internal Criticism against External criticism). *Shatranj ke Khiladi* was a sharp comment on the moral cowardice and unpatriotic stance of the elite.

To sum it up one can say, where *Amrapali* was a memory of a time of Buddhism being most important, *Asoka* was a story of a King who was 'Great'. One thing that the 'Greatness' of his reign lay in was religion- Buddhism. It was a big budget film which merely pretended to be history. Even the name, *Asōka* (please note that the symbol is placed on the wrong letter, just to give it an authentic touch when actually it should have been *Aśoka*) was misspelled. From the point of view of history and historiography, the change (between 'history' depictions of *Amrapali* to *Asoka*) is history itself. This can be seen with the other four movies as well. Moving from a vision of truth to an affirmation of commercialisation, movies such as *Asoka*, *Mangal Pandey* and *Jodhaa Akbar*, cater to consumer demands, i.e. big budget and big stars. 'The stars overtake historical reality' so, when the audience sees the star in the historical character, he/she does not relate to the character but to the star. Shah Rukh Khan was *Asoka*, Hrithik Roshan was *Akbar*, and Amir Khan was *Mangal*, not vice versa. This cannot be said of the older films. Pritihviraj Kapoor was *Akbar*, Dilip Kumar was *Salim*, and even if both Bina Rai and Madhubala played *Anarkali*, it is the latter who is remembered as *Anarkali*. When we imagine and hear the tales of the unseen *Āmrāpālī* and *Ajātshatru*, we can only visualise *Vyajanthimala*, and *Ajātshatru* to be as charming as *Sunil Dutt*.

History in film is not that of the past but 'history' as that which signifies the transformations in the present. The presence of history in cinema is understood as being of importance. But it is not the historical accuracy which is sought, but the change of the contemporary society which is seen from each film of the different periods (made on the same era). Cinema as we know it is the mode of representation of the contemporary society.

In the same way that the historian is subjective, when he comprehends his sources to bring out a 'history', so is the film-maker, who cannot remain aloof from his personal biases, his ideologies and the consciousness that surrounds a particular event/person. In a history, the book (written by the historian) is simply a means, where it is left to the audience to imagine the scenario, based on the description, provided. However, the film does not leave that scope, instead it is the film makers' imagination/version of the particular era/person/event which is shown and the audience receives that. Studying film and history does not mean how history is dealt in films instead it refers to the contemporaneity of the society within the given times and space, and also the presentation and perception of the subject by the film maker and the audience.

One can see the influence of the contemporary times in many ways in films, for example in *Amrapali* there is a famous dialogue, "*Yudh sainik ka dharm hota hai*" (war is a soldier's duty). This line is to be understood against the background of the fact that the film came out in 1966 when India had been involved in two wars.

Films were always oriented towards the youth, and how they could become great by doing good deeds for the nation, change social norms and protect it from attackers. Cinema, then and now, has continued to call upon the youth. History is packaged to appeal to the youth, to make them realise how it was then, it should be now. (History as a moral) This packaging has changed over the years (what is to be selected and how it is to

be promoted – thus same historical character or event/period, but change with time, across the years, for the contemporary times – as in the 6 films mentioned above). But despite the change in packaging (selection/presentation) elements remain the same, such as Nationalism; 'Great men' (or Historical heroes – who did some great work in some way or another); and social ethics (how a society should function).

Thus, to look at cinema under the lens of historical themes of 'time and space' and 'continuity and change, it would be something like this:

Time: 50 years.

Space: Hindi films / India

Continuity and change: all the above.

Contemporary films cater to the 'youth culture' of India, and it is this youth culture which also becomes the 'popular culture' of the nation. Earlier films concentrated on the great men when they had already become great; newer films show that these 'great' men were once young, and like any young generation, sought answers, made mistakes and learnt from it all, to become great leaders. This is where/how the history becomes a commercial commodity.

To conclude we can say that the past told in the moving images, doesn't do away with the old forms of history – it adds to the language in which the past can speak. How to begin thinking about this, how to understand that language, how to see where history on films sits in relation to written history, how to understand what film adds to our understanding of the past – the posing of such questions, the problems of dealing with them, and some (very tentative) answers is what the research deals with.

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