# Cinema as a Historical Source - Valid or Invalid?

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**ABSTRACT:** Based on my PhD research on how History, the subject – is represented in Hindi Films. Although my thesis did not cover this topic entirely as I also dealt with culture theory, film theory and historical theories along with how women's representations, nationalism and so on were portrayed in the selected films which I had chosen for research.
Can Hindi cinema be viewed as a source of History? I will say Yes, it can; and this is what I will argue in my paper. One can say that documentaries and art cinema have always been considered important visual sources of History, not just in India but across the globe. We are all aware of *Masala Bollywood* (popular term for a genre of Hindi cinema) films – which are, as most global film scholars put it, film stars dancing around trees and imaginary landscapes in colourful attire – I would say, these can also be seen as a source of history in their own manner. But I will also highlight that the genre of the historical/periodical dramas can also be seen as a source of Indian History – in fact, they are seen as sources of History, by the million viewers out there in and out of India. The paper will attempt to look into these notions.
The paper will not look into the other regional cinemas in India as I believe, they are a topic of study on their own.
Keywords: Bollywood, Film studies, media studies, social patterns, popular culture, Indian society.

## INTRODUCTION

Films and History are poles apart – or are they really? One, a form of entertainment while the other, an academic subject, under the Humanities or Social Sciences stream. So how can two such distinct fields have something in common? Although many conventional academicians (Historians) might feel otherwise, the two have many common attributes. The most important thing that can be highlighted here is that both are works of the imagination. While the former is the creation of the imagination of a filmmaker, the latter is the creation of the imagination of a historian. To argue, we can say that the former is declared as a work of fiction and the latter as non-fiction— yet it is still a work of imagination? Here's how – it is the imagination of a historian who sits with his selected facts after painfully going through levels of criticisms (heuristics), reads them and then 'interprets' the past, through his imagination, understanding (logic) and character – all which have been shaped by his/her personal and current state of affairs. This interpretation is what he/she pens down as a stated 'fact' which becomes a theory, henceforth becomes history. This is why the renowned historian E.H. Carr states, 'History is a continuous dialogue between the *present* and the *past*' (to be noted that the *present* comes before the *past*) (Carr, What is History). The Historian tries to bring out the narrative of the past to the *closest possible truth*, it is not the 'complete' truth; a film based on a historical event or character is also should be seen in the same fashion. The film clearly states that it is 'not' to be seen as History, to enjoy the liberties of being a mass-oriented work rather than an academic one. The film reaches out to a larger audience unlike the subject, which has a limited audience – confined only to the academicians and students.

But is History only confined to that which is in the books? Is 'Academic history' the only form of History? No. History is beyond that which confines in a book. It comprises legendary and mythical elements also, especially in a country like India, it is imbibed with folk culture (read popular culture). Academic or folk, History is the socio-cultural understanding of the past, providing an identity to people of various nationalities, communities, sects and so on. It holds the power to unite the masses – sharing a common past; at the same time, it is also that which can divide the masses – historical conflicts which are still used to arouse masses, creating a divide. Academic history is considered the most authentic and 'nearest to the truth' of what exactly happened in the past, still not the 'complete' truth. There can never be a complete wholesome truth; the documents and sources that a historian uses to write his or her work, cannot always be trusted. There are gaps and blank spaces that leave one no other choice than to use imagination to fill in those gaps. The documents we use for writing the history, that is what we call, in Historical research methodology: 'primary sources'; are themselves faulty and biased, unable to provide the 'real' history in the form of how it actually happened. I see no validity in the academic Historians' (although I am one myself) claim that only they are the advocates of 'history'.

Coming to another point that I wish to argue here, is that 'academic' history, as we know, has a limited audience. It does not reach the masses. The common man does not read the history textbook or published academic history work; those who read for their interest are very few in number and the remaining who read belong to the stream – hence once again, they are 'academic' historians. It can also be argued here that there are two elements that need to be understood here— the 'fictional' history and the 'factual' history. The 'factual' history is that which is limited to the academicians and intelligentsia; rarely comes into contact with the population on a larger scale. Comparatively, the folk and oral traditions or 'fictional' history are more popular. The most popular form of fictional History is the 'Filmic history' or that history which is represented in films. It reaches out to a much larger scale and audience; spreads through the films and is absorbed by the audience. Although 'Filmic history' is not an officially stated type or category of history; which is exactly my point here; it is a version of history that has been spreading rapidly and soon should or will become a classification or a type of History altogether. In contrast to academic or factual history which is dry, informative and tedious, this version of History is filled with emotion; making a common person relate to the historical figure and event, on a personal and emotional level. The former is over informative, with too many factual details while the latter is easier to remember and relate to since it is a visual medium.

In theory, 'Popular culture' or 'mass culture', affects and influences the people it comes across towards these sets of objects or beliefs, ranging from music to dance, movies, literature, and fashion, it encompasses everything that is believed and consumed

by the majority of people in any society. While 'folk culture' is a culture which is traditionally practised by a small, homogenous group or section of society. In India, where we have so many cultural diversities; even then oral and folk customs are imbibed into the Indian culture and ideologies, henceforth an unclear distinction between popular culture and folk culture, in fact, at times they are interwoven. Folk culture is that which can change from community to community, in contrast to popular culture, which is mass culture. But in India, there are very few elements which remain confined in the restraints of a particular society or community; with new age media and technology, the inter-cultural exchange has been happening on a wider scale. Films and cinema play a major role in this. Cinema has been eliminating the discrepancy between folk and popular culture. This is beneficial for a country like India having such a vast diversity among cultures. Today a person from one Indian state can be aware of cultural practices from another state, as he/she has seen in the movie.

Since we are talking about films and cinema, I will like to come to my second part of the paper – a brief understanding of the Indian: Hindi film industry – the very famous *Bollywood*. "The term "Bollywood" owes its origins to film critics and columnists of the city of Bombay in the 1970s and 1980s. Used casually first, by the late 1990s, it became "regular usage" in the trade papers of the time (Vasudevan 2011, 8). Vasudevan believes the term "emerged in the wake of the success of the diaspora-themed films from *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge* ('The Brave Heart Will Take the Bride') (1995) onwards", though more specifically "the term might have been associated with the reinvention of the family film genre to address not only diaspora audiences but to provide a mise-en-scène for the new type of commoditization that had developed around cinema in India" (Vasudevan 2011, 8)."[1] For the non-Indian viewer, Bollywood is all about the stars, who dress up in designer clothes and have music and dance sequences on the streets, in the rain or *around the trees* (very popular in the 90s). Nowadays, locations have shifted to foreign countries, all thanks to globalization.

Bollywood is very famous for its '*masala* (term means spice) films'. A film is usually considered under one of the genres based on its thematic content. There are three main genre categories: narrative, avant-garde, and documentary; that fall under super-genres such as - Action, Crime, Fantasy, Horror, Romance, Science Fiction, Slice of Life, Sports, Thriller, War and Western.[2] But the Indian cinema can have a mix of two or more genres. A 'masala film' is perceived as a genre of Hindi cinema; but although technically not being an independent genre on its own, it is a combination of genres. A movie made with a big budget, under the branding of a reputed production house with big stars, becomes a commercial 'masala' film belonging to any genre. It can be referred to as a sub-genre, as per film studies. Subgenres are often a mixture of two separate genres. Genres can also merge with seemingly dissimilar ones to form hybrid genres; where popular combinations include romantic comedy and action-comedy films. Broader examples include docufiction and docudrama, which merge the basic categories of fiction and non-fiction (documentary).[3]

In the Indian context, one genre or category of film that has not been mentioned in the above list of genres is the 'Historical' also known as the period dramas. I am not referring to documentaries and docudramas, although there is no denying that they too fall under the Historical and Non-fiction genre of cinema. Periodicals or Historical in the context I am referring to is as the 'docufiction'– fictional plots with factual elements. In common parlance, they have been termed - the Periodical or Historical drama. These are big-budget, grand projects which feature superstars of the industry; the most popular and recently in trend among the Indian filmmakers. I come to my third, and the main focus of the paper. There was a time when Indian filmmakers did not want to swim in the seas of historical drama as they were not accepted widely by the audience. When we study the history of the genre, we can see a time-lapse. Films in this genre were made before the 1980s and then a direct jump to the 2000s onwards. However, the genre developed mass scale popularity after 2008, with *Jodhaa Akbar* (directed by Ashutosh Gowariker starring the elegant Aishwarya Rai and handsome hunk – Hrithik Roshan as the main leads). The film was an excellent interweaving of fact and fiction. Focussing on the life of the Mughal Emperor Akbar and his expeditions and administrative history, mixed with fictional romance, his journey from Jalaluddin to becoming Akbar, and the role his lady-love had to play in this transformation. Although the movie had to face objections on the fact whether the real name of Akbar's Hindu wife and the mother of Jahangir was actually Jodhaa bai; or as records mention Harka bai.

With Gowariker's masterpiece, the trend of Historical drama picked up. The next and most notable filmmaker who came with not one but two major docu-fictional movies is Sanjay Leela Bhansali. Although, before we look into the two case study films, it was visible that Bhansali always brought an artistic element and portrayal in his films. Whether it is the novel-based *Devdas* (starring Shah Rukh Khan along with Aishwarya Rai and Madhuri Dixit) or *Ram Leela* (starring Ranveer Singh and Deepika Padukone), are only a few to mention; showcasing the folk culture of Bengal for the former and Gujarat for the latter. Coming to the two films that I wish to take into retrospect are the popular films – *Bajirao Mastani* (2015) and *Padmaavat* (2018). Both starring the main leads Ranveer Singh and Deepika Padukone along with Priyanka Chopra in Bajirao Mastani and Shahid Kapoor in *Padmaavat* as the next main leads. The former is based on the life of the second Peshwa (ruler of Pune then Poona) Baji Rao I (as he is known in History textbooks, aka Bajirao Ballad – full name). He already had a wife (played by Chopra) Kashi bai and his first son (who later becomes the next Peshwa, the most powerful of them all - Peshwa Balaji Baji Rao). Circumstances and his expeditions lead him to come into contact with Mastani (played by Padukone) and they fall in love and decide to unite despite all the opposition as Mastani had a Muslim mother. Love triumphs; but not without difficulty. When she lives with him in his palace, Shaniwarwada, as soon as Bajirao has left for another expedition, she is imprisoned by his first son. The movie ends with the death of the two characters who unite as souls. Once again, here fact and fiction have been intertwined. We will come to that later. The next film of Bhansali is Padmaavat. It is a story about a princess (played by Padukone) from Simhal (Sri Lanka) who meets and falls in love with Rajput king of Chittorgarh, Maharawal Ratan Singh (played by Kapoor) who had visited the island for its pearls

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[1] Keval. J. Kumar, *The 'Bollywoodization' of Popular Indian Visual Culture: A Critical Perspective*. Triple C. 12. 277-285. 10.31269/vol12iss1. 2014, pp 277-285.

[2] From Wikipedia.

[3] Wikipedia

for his first wife. They marry and she arrives with him in Chittorgarh (the famous citadel having centuries of History). Here, the royal priest is awed by her beauty and after being caught, is banished from the kingdom. Seeking revenge, he goes to the court of Sultan Alauddin Khilji (played by Singh) and praises her extraordinary beauty to the extent that Khilji desires to get her for himself. In the opening of the movie, Khilji is shown as shrewd, heartless and a womanizer. He goes to Chittor and camps at the foothill of the citadel, raising concern for Ratan Singh. As nothing bears fruit, as a tactic, Khilji puts forth his desire to meet Ratan Singh before he leaves for Delhi. They meet, eat and play chess. He places forth his wish to meet the queen, which is insulting to the Rajput prestige; however, she decides to show her glimpse to him once, as he was a guest and if his demand was fulfilled, meant he would leave. He catches a glimpse of her and is told to leave. He asks Ratan Singh to join him for festivities but kidnaps him. Queen Padmini (or Padmavati as in the movie) goes to Delhi, takes help from Khilji's wife and rescues her husband and returns. But Khilji, displeased, decides to wage a war on Chittor and in a duel with Ratan Singh, kills him by trick. On hearing the news of the death of their husband, the two queens and other womenfolk decide to commit *Jauhar*[4]. The movie ends with Khilji's attempt to stop her in time, fails and the women sacrificing their lives in the fire pit.

Gowariker and Bhansali, are two filmmakers who have revived the Historical drama genre of Indian cinema. Gowariker also came out next with his movie *Mohenjodaro* (2016) [based on the history of the town of the Indus Valley Civilization] and then *Panipat* (2019) [based on the Third battle of Panipat of 1761]. They are not completely history as fiction has been used where fact has failed. Some other movies by other filmmakers, that can also be mentioned here are – *Tanhaji* by Om Raut (2020), *Manikarnika – the Queen of Jhansi* by Kangana Ranaut and Krish Jagarlamudi (2019), *Mangal Pandey* by Ketan Mehta (2005), *Asoka* by Santosh Sivan (2001). All the films that have been mentioned have highlighted some events of actual history in a fictional manner. The directors of these films have also created other periodical films (and in other Indian languages). Compared to the older ones, such as *Shatranj ke Khiladi* by Satyajit Ray *(The Chess Players)* (1977), *Amrapali* by Lekh Tandon (1966), *Taj Mahal* by M. Sadiq (1963), *Mughal-e-Azam* by K. Asif (1960), *Sikandar* by Sohrab Modi (1941) etc which are not all about factual history but based on legends, a 'periodical' by genre yet they can be considered be as a source of history; we will come to that in the next point. Most (not all) films are based on historical fiction books.

The main argument of this paper, that we now come to, is how are films a source of history? This paper is an attempt to argue that it is not the historical content in the historical drama film that one should focus on, it is the depictions of history going through changes with time, technologically, thematically and ideologically that is how I consider films as a source of history. I agree that the history shown in cinema is distorted. It has to because the filmmaker is not making a history documentary, he is making a film – which is for entertainment purposes. Which he has to sell in a market. After all, it cannot be denied that Bollywood is an industry. For all the films that I have mentioned above, I have stated that fact and fiction were interwoven. If it was all facts, it would become a *documentary* and if it was all fiction – it would become a *periodical*. Looking into it briefly, *Jodhaa Akbar*, as specified earlier focuses on the life of the Mughal Emperor Akbar and his expeditions and administrative history, mixed with fictional romance, his journey to becoming Akbar, and the role his lady-love had to play in this transformation. There is no historical record which states that his Hindu wife was the reason for his secular policies. Similarly, in *Bajirao Mastani*, there have been many issues raised such as Kashi bai (played by Chopra) has been recorded to have been physically handicapped, unable for her to have moved and danced as in the film. Academic historians in India especially Maharashtra (where it all happened) argue about the placement, background and props that have been used in the film as being out of context or period. The architecture that has been shown, did not belong to the period. The most popular agenda of the debate was the 'Sheesh Mahal' (palace of mirrors) shown to be constructed in Shaniwarwada – the mansion palace of Peshwa Bajirao. I hail from the same city and heard these tales and seen the locations (in the modern-day) myself. Although not much of the remnants of the palace remain, except the base. The local people and historians claim that there was no such construction of this sort (as shown in the movie). Coming to *Padmaavat,* it sparked fireworks even before it had been released. To the extent that it was banned in many Indian states. The film was accused of demeaning the dignity and prestige of the Rajput, although personally speaking, I did not feel so when I watched the movie myself. Film scholars criticised how Sultan Allaudin Khilji was depicted as a barbaric psychopath using communal angles. The fact that Rajput women committed Jauhar is true, it is also proven that Khilji followed a policy of expansion, but how true it is that he wished to capture Chittor for a woman, is slightly questionable. It was the fictional work in the form of an epic ballad by Malik Muhammad Jayasi titled *Padmāvati*, written in the 16th century; which is the basis of this tale.

Despite the distortion and elements of fiction being added, these films become a source of history, including all the other ones I have enlisted above. To start with, at the beginning of this paper I argued that 'history is not only that which is confined to the textbook or academic book', it is an ideology, which unites and divides people; each person has his/her own view and perspective about. I also mentioned in the paper earlier that this cinematic history is viewed on a wider scale compared to the academic history book being read. It stays in the minds of the people, with my personal experience, around the time when *Jodhaa Akbar* had released, I was in Delhi and decided to visit one of the many heritage sites. I asked for directions from a pedestrian, who did not know about the site I was asking for (honestly very few do), but he mentioned: a fort built by King Akbar a few kilometres away. He was actually referring to the Delhi Red Fort which actually had nothing to do with Emperor Akbar; as it was constructed by Emperor Shah Jahan- his grandson. There have been times when I have discussions with people, who talk about history on their knowledge derived from some film or novel. That is what I mean to say 'real' or academic history does not reach the mass. Their knowledge and understanding are based on what they see and hear. I see nothing wrong with academic historians trying to teach them the truth either. Awareness should be created but it has its limitations.

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[4] Jauhar, historically was an Indian rite of collective self-immolation, performed by the women, young children, and other dependants (popular amongst the Rajputs) of a besieged fort or town when it was felt that holding out against the enemy was no longer possible and that death appeared the only honourable way out of the impasse – Encyclopaedia Britannica.

Apart from the content, there are other ways how these films can become sources of history. Here I don't mean History as in the subject, but I mean the ideological and thematic changes. They reflect the changes that have occurred in the period that they were made; and with each change, there is a change in ideology and presentation. Technological advancement with time has refined the presentation of the cinematic plot. Using visual effects and graphics, we can now add elements that no longer exist. Making them sources to track the technological advancements – which is also History. They also reflect the ideological (social, political and cultural) changes of their time. That which I have mentioned in my PhD dissertation (as mentioned in the abstract that this paper has been themed around my PhD topic) which I will briefly discuss here. The changes in how History and historical figures are portrayed highlight the ideology that is prevalent during that period. When *Jodhaa Akbar* (2008) was made, it highlights secularism. Whenever Emperor Akbar has been shown in popular culture, he is the representative of secular thoughts. Even when K. Asif portrayed the character of Emperor Akbar in *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960), the India Pakistan wars and tensions were creating communal domestic tensions. The wounds of the Indian partition had not been completely healed. His portrayal of Akbar highlighted how much a Muslim ruler can love India. Similarly, Gowariker's Akbar, also showcases that although he is a Muslim, he's an Indian, not an outsider, and this land belongs to him. Highlighting the communal tensions that were springing then. Asif's Akbar is concerned about family prestige and honour; while Gowariker's Akbar is concerned with good administration and maintaining harmony. The same historical character yet each reflects the thought of their time, such as ideologies of nationalism and secularism. Similarly, in India, inter-caste and inter-religious marriages are still considered a complete no-no; nearly prohibited. Mostly these movies depict a story where the two main leads do not belong to the same community. This plays an impact on the viewer mentally, to make them feel if it could happen why can't it happen now? History is always taught with a moral; something to learn from the past and follow in the present. The same mind-trick is used for this purpose by the filmmaker.

Completely contrary to Sultan Khilji being portrayed in *Padmaavat*. He is also a Muslim king from India but does not show any such sentiments for the land; albeit in reality during the phase of the Delhi Sultanate period, the Khilji dynasty, the real Alauddin Khilji had come up with the most reforms in administrative and fiscal systems during his reign, history books repeatedly mentioning it; very unlike the onscreen Khilji; also, to be noted that Khilji despite having the most screen-time was still the villain and not the hero. It was done as Bhansali wanted to highlight and glorify the Rajputs, for which he has been accused by film critics of religious discrimination, i.e., showing the Hindu king as the good and the Muslim king as the bad – intentional or unintentional, only he can say.

Numerous arguments and points can be made on the roles and depictions of women. I myself have written three papers on it so I won't get into it in detail here. How they have been represented and portrayed in the historical dramas, not representing the position of women in the actual historical period, but inspired and shaped by the time the film was being made for. One case study film that can be highlighted here is *Manikarnika – the Queen of Jhansi.* The Queen of Jhansi was a famous female leader in the Mutiny of 1857, who fought against the British to protect her kingdom of Jhansi which was usurped after the death of her husband – Gangadhar Rao and refusal to accept their adopted son as the next rightful heir to the throne. The film has been famous for how the filmmakers (one of them being Ranaut herself), added the feminist fervour to the plot making it what film critics called 'over exaggerating'. In a scene after she is widowed and has to perform the rituals of widowhood, she refuses on the grounds that she has a country to run; in another scene, she has been symbolized as the Hindu Goddess Kali. We do not know how 'feminist' the actual Queen was, however, in the movie, the character has been depicted from a feminist angle, as it is the thought of the youth.

**Conclusion**

To conclude my argument here is that it is not the 'history' - the subject and its accuracy but how it is modelled to show the past according to one person's idea of the present—it is this that makes a film a source worthy to be studied. They can be a source of history, not replacing the history textbook or academic work, but they are sources of changes in time. The films represent the thought of not the actual historical period, but that period in which they are made. Not only the historical but even the *masala* film which Bollywood is famous for; represents a thought prevalent in its time. The films, and here I mean irrespective of any genre will act as a source of History in the future, they are visual sources of social, cultural and ideological changes. For my concluding remark, all I would like to say is that, to the regular eye, the cinema is just a medium of entertainment, unaware of the impact that it leaves on us and the masses; but the reality is different. Indian cinema is diverse from its contemporaries, as the cinema of this country is filled with flavours, music, dance and a colourful gala of Indian culture; but despite that, they have a hidden meaning and agenda, which highlights the contemporary time, thought, society, culture and ideology.

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