

Reconfiguring India: Narrating the Nation through Great Men Biopics

Preeti Kumar

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 hyper-masculinity, 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 reflects 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*.

Keywords: Cinematic biopic, Bollywood, identity, memory, otherness, gendering, simulation/construction.

Introduction

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 communities. The assumption that “nations are enduring primordial entities” (Hjort & MacKenzie 8) is now perceived as fallacious and the modernist proposition holds that nations emanate from nationalism and not vice versa. The conception, consolidation and representation of a nation imbricate a variety of discourses that communicates a distinct image of a national community.

One of the means of narrating the nation is by recreating the myths of its founding fathers. In cinema, great men biopics have been a method of deploying the passions of patriotism by the chronicling of heroic deeds, sacrifices, and lofty moral virtues, and by fabricating, rediscovering, or authenticating the myths of celebrated men. Presentations of particular versions of historical lives privilege specific ideologies and naturalize an imagery of the nation in the popular psyche. The argument this paper makes is that in presenting a quasi-realistic portrayal of the lives of the protagonists, the Indian biopic constructs and mediates a specific and predominantly masculine image of the nation to the audience. This paper attempts to deconstruct how the ideal of “nation” is simulated and meanings, such as national pride and national idealism, are communicated to the audience in four Indian biopics: *Sardar* (Ketan Mehta, 1993), *The Legend of Bhagat Singh* (Rajkumar Santoshi, 2002), *Mangal Pandey: The Rising* (Ketan Mehta, 2005), and *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag* (Rakeysh Omprakash Mehta, 2013). It 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.

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 classical Great Man biopic pursues the objective of earliest biographical writing: to combine hagiography with edification. Through a selection of the most encomiastic accounts of the subject, the biopic attempts to produce the full explanation of a life that is congruent with the popular myths or collective social memories of the hero. Through “its controlling storytelling devices... beginning in medias res, embedded flashbacks to “primal scenes,” montage sequences that condense the rise (or fall) of the subject, or trial-like scenes where, under pressure, the historical character verbalizes his or her goal” (Vidal 9), the biopic imaginatively recreates a historical moment and produces the hero as an apparatus of history. According to Vidal, in narrating the hero’s life before he achieves greatness, the biopic conflates myth with a sense of historical inevitability and “history becomes no more than a self-fulfilling prophecy” (6). He adds that “this mode of address [the biopic] obscures its ideological bias” (6). The spectator of the great man biopic is thus positioned as a passive recipient of an “icon-memory.”

In India, cinematic biography has enjoyed growing popularity in recent years with the realist strand producing many biopics, notably on the leaders of the Freedom Struggle (Dwyer 68). 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 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 filmmakers have either affirmed or deconstructed the mythology surrounding national leaders.

The earliest films – biographical pictures of mythical heroes – were inspired by Bal Gangadhar Tilak’s call to “*swadeshi*” (from “*swa*” – own, and “*desh*” – country). *Kaliya Mardan*, a 1919 film directed by Dhundiraj Govind Phalke, showed Lord Krishna vanquishing the serpent, Kaliya, to the chorus of “Vande Mataram” (the revolutionary national song of the Indian Freedom Movement). *Bhakta Vidur* (1921) retold the episode from the epic *Mahabharata*, with the protagonist, Vidura, appearing as Gandhi with his characteristic loin cloth and cap. The film also included a song on the *chakra* (the spinning wheel, which Gandhi introduced as a sign of Indian emancipation) and the Indian National Congress. The lives of great men, mythical or historical, have consistently been rallying points of nationalism.

Through the stories of individual achievement, the biopic engages in a form of historical (re)writing where historical events are seen through the subjective prism of the hero’s experiences. The unique national and cultural inflections of the biopic ensure that the representation of the character is mediated through the discourse of the nation. That one of the prime motives of the biopic is constructing the nation can be seen from the fact that the basis of the movie is usually more 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 75).

If it is the “collisions of actualities and dramatic fiction which causes a lot of resistance” (Bingham 14) that makes Western biopics a “flawed genre,” in Indian biopics “dramatic fiction” overwhelms “actualities” – erasing the problematics of a subject’s lives and constructing a larger-than-life hero. Indian biopics have rarely progressed beyond the earliest classical, celebratory melodrama style; many warts-and-all type of biopic like *The Dirty Picture* (based on the life of item-number girl, Silk Smitha) and *Guru* (on the life of renowned industrialist Dhirubhai Ambani) are only poorly disguised cinematic *romans-à-clef*, not biopics proper. In chronicling the lives of the famous, Indian biopics tend to avoid controversial aspects and construct the life as an unfolding of destiny to greatness and achievement. The “idea of a ‘calling,’ with its spiritual connotations” (Bingham 37) informs the Indian biopic, and the hero becomes the embodiment of goodness and virtue; the film, a vehicle for a didactic message. Indian biopics, consequently, embody rhetoric of ideology – purity or patriotism, and films on national heroes are discursively framed to communicate the image of a nation to a public.

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 2000: 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 19). What the biopic does is to create the one and instigate the other. The biopics’ politico-ideological interests resonate with what Friedrich Nietzsche called “‘monumental history’: a monologic discourse that seeks to forge continuities between the present and the past through the tools of narration” (Vidal 11). Allied to a significant moment in the life of a nation, biographical stories of national heroes are pivotal in the process of memory, history and construction of a specific discourse of national self-identity.

Of the biopics chosen for analysis, *Sardar* is a 1993 film on Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, Indian freedom fighter and independent India’s first Home Minister. *The Legend of Bhagat Singh* is a 2002 film on how Bhagat Singh develops his ideals and on his struggle for Indian independence. *Mangal Pandey: The Rising* 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* 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.

Mangal Pandey begins in 1857 with Mangal Pandey, an Indian sepoy of the British East India Company, rescuing his British Commanding Officer, William Gordon, during the Anglo-Afghan war. A friendship which crosses race and rank develops. The pivotal point of the narrative is the mutiny of the soldiers sparked by the introduction of the new Enfield rifle. Loading the musket required the soldiers to bite a cartridge which was rumoured to be coated with beef and pork tallow – anathema to Hindus and Muslims respectively. Revolution breaks out; Gordon and Pandey find themselves in opposite camps; British units are summoned from Rangoon; the Sepoys defeated; and Pandey is captured and executed, despite Gordon’s prophetic protestations that it will only lead to his martyrdom and further uprisings. Pandey marries the prostitute, Heera, in jail; Gordon joins the rebellion against the Company Raj and the film closes on a montage of drawings on the Indian Independence Movement and documentary footage of Gandhi’s campaign that ends colonial rule in India.

The Legend of Bhagat Singh details the forging of Bhagat Singh’s political ideology - his disenchantment with Gandhian non-violence; revolutionary activities; the assassination of the police officer, Saunders, as retaliation for Lala Lajpat Rai’s death; the custodial torture he endures; his rationale and the representation of his bombing the Indian Parliament building; his sixty-three day fast for ameliorating the condition

of Indian prisoners; and his final martyrdom along with his associates, Rajguru and Sukhdev. The film also critiques Gandhi for his failure to help these revolutionaries who rivalled him in popularity.

Sardar commences with a frame narrative of violence and corruption in modern day India from which the narrative flashes back to a magnificent past. The story of Vallabhbhai Patel shows the transmogrification of his politics – his initial ridicule for Gandhian philosophy to his transformation after listening to Gandhi, his renunciation of a lucrative legal practice to become Gandhi's lieutenant, his strategic successes in the Bardoli and Kheda struggles, his executive expertise and shrewd statesmanship, his successful integration of princely states into India, particularly the recalcitrant states of Hyderabad, Junagadh and Kashmir, and his role as Home Minister of Independent India. The film ends with him resting in a village ruminating on the unity of India.

Bhaag Milkha Bhaag is based on *The Race of my Life*, the autobiography of Milkha Singh. The film starts at the 1960 summer Olympics in Rome, where Milkha Singh, the Indian athlete, who leads the 400 m race, drops to the fourth place when he hears his coach shout, “*Bhaag Milkha Bhaag!*” (“Run, Milkha, Run!”). He is overpowered by the traumatic recollection of his father's voice and words as he flees the maundering Pakistani hoards during Partition. The film flashes back to narrate the life of the impoverished refugee of Delhi who survives by stealing, until he joins the Indian Army where he is noticed by the sports coach after he wins a race, in which he competed, enticed solely by the prospect of the top ten winners getting milk and two eggs. He is selected for the service races where he is beaten up by senior players the day before selection of the Indian Olympic team. In spite of his injuries he participates in the race, and wins conclusively by breaking the national record. The night before the Melbourne 1956 Olympics he has a one-night stand and, exhausted, he loses the final race. Overcome by guilt, he sets himself to break the world record and trains obsessively to win in various international events. He is requisitioned by Nehru, the Prime Minister of India, to lead the Indian contingent to Pakistan for the goodwill games, which he does reluctantly. In Pakistan, he relives the murder of his family and his father's desperate last words, “*Bhaag Milkha Bhaag.*” At the games, the Pakistani athlete leads initially, but Milkha overtakes his opponents one by one, winning the race and the appellation, “The Flying Sikh.” It is noteworthy that the film glosses over the greatest triumphs as a montage, the culminating scenes reserved for his victory over the neighbouring country of Pakistan.

These films, nuanced and well researched, are a change from the romanticised and moralistic versions of biographical narratives customary in Indian cinema and were all critically well-acclaimed, though only *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag* was a commercial success. They present historical events and elements accurately, and avoid the exotic settings and exaggerated jingoism and pop patriotism that biopics on the same subjects embodied. They also garnered various national and international film awards: *Sardar* won the National Award for Best Feature film on National Integration, *The Legend of Bhagat Singh* won two national awards – for the Best Regional Film (Hindi) and for the Best Actor and three Filmfare Awards; *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag* won the prestigious National Award 2014 for Best Popular Film Providing Wholesome Entertainment as well as the National Award for Best Choreography, six awards at the 59th Filmfare Awards 2013; *Mangal Pandey: The Rising* won the 2005 Netpec Special

Jury Award at the Locarno International Film Festival “for the great narrative power and emotion flowing through the strength of a rising nation.” The directors are well acclaimed at their craft – national and international award winners, - and their scriptwriters, Vijay Tendulkar, Farrukh Dhondy and Prasoon Joshi, are noted playwrights, writers, poets celebrated in their own fields. However, even though their films are acknowledged as measured and balanced, they are still involved in a post-colonial enterprise: the construction of a national imaginary.

The three films on the political leaders, *Mangal Pandey: The Rising*, *Sardar*, and *The Legend of Bhagat Singh* deal with different stages of the Indian Freedom Struggle and the paradigmatic frame of reference for *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag* is the trauma of Partition. Significantly, these films were produced during a critical time in Indian political and cinematic history. Hindu – Muslim communal riots had threatened to fracture the nation after the demolition of the Babri Masjid at Ayodha in 1992. In 1997, numerous foreign channels – mostly American – were available on cable television which was perceived as an “invasion of foreign values” with the possibility that “Donald Duck will supplant *Ganesh*” – a statement by Joel Farges, the producer and expert on Indian cinema (cited in Thoraval 137). Fears of cultural hybridity, inherent instability and a perceived weakness of the nation in the face of foreign powers that existed through the 90s and the early years of 2000s necessitate a repertoire of patriotic symbols. These films recreate the past as a method of social commentary and resurgence of nationalistic ideals.

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 & MacKenzie 8), but enables the inhabitants of the geo-political space of India to imagine themselves as a distinctive national community. Various signifiers of a nation – space, songs, semiotics – are presented to evoke a nationalist spirit. 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

Traditional Indian society privileged the manliness of the Brahman (the priest/scholar caste) with his cerebral asceticism over the violent and active Kshatriya (the warrior caste). However, with colonial ideals valorising hyper-masculinity and denigrating the English educated natives as devious and feeble, Indian nationalists tried to regain their self-esteem by constructing the ideal of the Kshatriya as the paradigm of “true Indianness” (Kulkarni, 2014: np). Krishnaswamy argues that the idea of Indian effeminateness was “a misreading and distorted recognition of something real in Indian culture” (295). Hindu mysticism posited man as an ideal female devotee contemplating the Divine, and this androgyny was interpreted according to Victorian norms as emasculation. By the end of the nineteenth century, the concept of Oriental effeminacy and consequent mental and moral inferiority became the norm, and Indian men sought to reshape themselves in the image of the superior imperialist who was robust, virile and martial. The credo of belligerent masculinity, therefore, arose as a

counter narrative to the colonial discourse that scorned the native as effete, inferior and passive.

Violent anti-colonial struggle derives from the “appropriation of the colonial rhetoric of emasculation, whereby the native needs to reclaim his power by reclaiming his manhood...” (Nandi 2012: 14), and one means of asserting manhood was by protecting his woman/nation. The hegemonic narrative of India propagated by the nationalists during the Freedom Movement was that of the nation as Divine Mother/Goddess. The national song “*Vande Mataram*” (Hail, Divine Mother) hypostatized India as Durga, the warrior Goddess, who defeats the demonic hordes that the gods were powerless against. Amongst the militant revolutionaries of the Indian Freedom movement, the symbol represented the Holy Land/ Mother, and the Freedom struggle, thus, became an exhortation to male chivalry to liberate the National Goddess whose “virtue and purity must be aggressively defended against alien men who are not sons of the soil” (Alter 114). The gendered ideology of the Freedom Struggle was driven by the sense of subordination and lack of agency of the colonized male who sought to reshape himself in the image of the imperial ideal of muscular manliness.

With the advent of Gandhian non-violence, which invested suffering, self-abasement and self-sacrifice with virtue, the warrior symbolism was elided and the feminine quality of passive resistance glorified. Both Gandhi and Tagore deplored the narrow motive forces of Western nationalism which inspired the “cult of patriotism” (Tagore 450) and called for universalism as a panacea for world ills. Gandhi’s nationalist politics, his veneration of self-control, spinning and *Satyagraha* (“soul force”) went against overt masculinity and undermined the philosophy of aggressive virility of the



Figure 1. Bharat Mata – Mother India

revolutionary forces. His ideology – his emphasis on the therapeutic value of *ahimsa*, prayers and fasts – “lead to the construction of what might be called an androgynous politics” (Alter 50). Even during his lifetime, Gandhian ideals were derogated as unmanly by the Extremists including the revered cultural icon and philosopher, Aurobindo Ghose, who distanced himself from the nationalist movement, “Sri Aurobindo is neither an *impotent* moralist nor a *weak* pacifist...” (Ghose 22, emphasis added). According to Nandy (8), Gandhi strategically subverted the colonial cultural hierarchy of sexual identities which tended to place *purushatva* (the essence of masculinity) above both *naritva*

(the essence of femininity) and *klibatva* (the essence of hermaphroditism). He did this in two ways. First, he “borrowed intact from... traditions of saintliness in India,” by putting androgyny above both *purushatva* and *naritva*. Furthermore:

Gandhi’s second ordering was offered specifically as a methodological justification of the anti-imperialist movement... Naritva > Purushatva > Kapurushatva. That is, the essence of femininity is superior to that of masculinity, which is in turn better than cowardice or... failure of masculinity... the two sets makes available the magical power of the feminine principle... to the man who defied his cowardice by owning to his feminine self (53).

After Independence, Mother India was glorified as the suffering peasant woman who maintains her integrity and honour in the face of terrible hardship as depicted in Mehboob Khan’s 1957 epic melodrama, *Mother India*, “an exemplar allegory of woman as nation” (Desai 3).

With globalization and the threat of economic neo-colonisation, the peril of Maoist insurgency, regional separatism and the rise of Right wing fundamentalism in the 1990s, Indian cinema moved away from the Mother India trope that depicted the nation as the suffering nurturer, to privilege the ideals of hyper-masculinity 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.

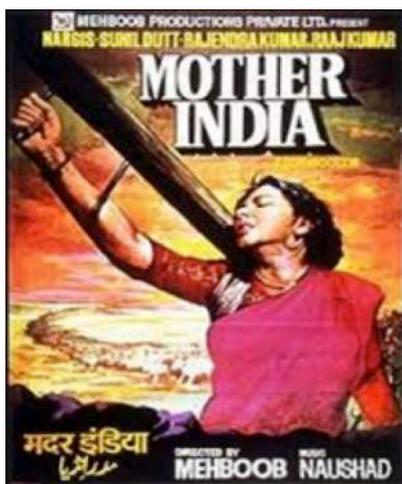


Figure 2. *Mother India* Film Poster

from the Gandhian concept of celibacy that sought to render sex and gender irrelevant in search of truth. In contrast, patriarchal politics postulated “a substantial, incarnate, seminal truth... something that only men can embody by virtue of who they are” (Alter 51, italics added). *The Legend of Bhagat Singh* 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” (*The Legend of Bhagat Singh*). Milkha Singh tells Perizaad, his fellow athlete, that he is in a fight from which he cannot be distracted.

Bhaag Milkha Bhaag also introduces the Karna myth – the underdog who is technically superior being excluded because of jealousy. During Milkha Singh’s 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 Lord Vishnu employs to decimate his enemies (Milkha's competitors). Post-colonial nationalist texts subvert and invert the hierarchy that existed in colonial discourse between the superior masculinity of the colonizer and the barbarism of the native. The subject citizen has to powerfully reassert himself and prove himself against the dominant power.

Finally, the Ahalya myth is sounded in Mangal Pandey's acceptance of Heera, the prostitute, 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 the 90s become a symbol of nationalist resurgence in the hands of the Right wing parties. Biopics of national heroes represent the man as proving his machismo by doing what is expected of him, such as protecting his women. Joseph Alter summarizes Partha Chaterjee views on gendered nationalism:

...the notion of an inner purity of tradition – imputed by colonized men onto the bodies of colonized women – was the product of an alien discourse of power that classified certain aspects of Hindu culture as inherently private and apolitical, thus producing what he calls “the new patriarchy” of modern liberalism (24).

In appropriating the Mother India symbol of Hindu tradition, nationalist discourse transforms the nation into the violated woman who has to be redeemed. “In Hindu discourse, women have been represented as Mother and Nurturer, yet her protectors have always been men” (Sethi 136). Significantly, the Goddess venerated in the national song “Vande Mataram” is Durga – the “domesticated” power of the Divine Female. While Kali is the powerful and destructive Goddess who tramples her *purusha* (man), Durga is the nurturant, transformed by the controlling power of man. The indigenous 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.”



Figure 3. *Mahakali* – Kali stamping her *purusha* (man) (www.kalibhakti.com)



Figure 4. *Durga Mata* – Goddess Durga

Secondly, biopics put up national heroes as *exempla virtutis*, exhibiting public acts of national heroism that are worthy of being emulated. Kohn postulates that modern nationalism took three concepts from Old Testament mythology: “the idea of a chosen people, the emphasis on a common stock of memory of the past and of hopes for the future, and finally, national messianism” (cited in Brennan 59). A crucial epiphanic moment - evocative of the classic biopic trope of “character-shaping trauma” - 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”);” Milkha Singh, when he identifies himself with a cause narrated in terms of identity with the nation: “*Main India Banoonga*” (“I will become India”). 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. When Bhagat Singh picks up the blood-stained earth at Jallianwala Bagh, 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. In the words of Gautam Chakravarty, “...recovering a story of heroism and martyrdom is to give legitimacy to contemporary armed resistance” (2005: 53). Highlighting the repressive measures of colonial masters and glorifying extremist action was part of the process of nationalist mythography. V.D. Savarkar, the revolutionary freedom fighter, suspected of complicity in Gandhi’s assassination, titles Mangal Pandey “*shaheed*” (“martyr”) in his *The Indian War of Independence* (88).

In the biopics selected, the protagonists all show a scant regard for their own lives in the pursuit of their cause. This is seen in Bhagat Singh’s custodial torture during his fast, Milkha Singh’s wound during his first race and the first shot at Mangal Pandey through the noose readied for him. *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag* presents the marginalized subaltern, Milkha Singh, who takes on the authority of the “colonial oppressors,” the reigning sports champion. The violence he endures is the suffering of those who transgress social/political boundaries. He runs barefoot and bleeding, against the remonstrance of his coach, to “become India.” Anderson’s idea of “purity through

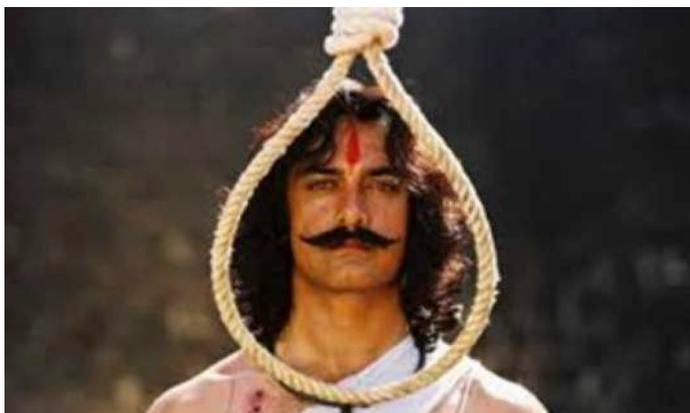


Figure 5. Mangal Pandey. *Mangal Pandey: The Rising*

fatality” – the willingness to die for a cause (145) – is akin to what nationalist writers like Bankim Chandra Chatterjee inscribed as the ideal of masculinity – capable of inflicting violence, enduring pain, and making the ultimate sacrifice.

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, then that Government’s Home Minister does not “wear bangles” (*Sardar*). The reluctance to be violent is seen as contemptible – Chandrashekar Azad in *The Legend of Bhagat Singh* dismisses the non-violent protest of the Congress as the actions of a *napunsak* (“eunuch”). This ideology is reminiscent of Fanon’s imagery of castration which symbolized the emasculation of the native man, and his call to liberate nations through violent action. The spectacle of violence serves to agitate subjects and make them adopt a particular radical ideology. Blood is baptism into manhood and flows freely in third cinema.¹ “As both perpetrators and targets of violence, men’s bloody bodies frequently signify the cruelty of and damage wrought by civil and state violence. Blood becomes a new symbol of socio-political visibility...” (Desai 4). Bhagat Singh’s declaration, “shedding blood is no great deed, whether yours or anyone else’s,” and Milkha Singh’s rigorous training which culminates in blood flow, is the exemplification of a violent and virile Indian masculinity.

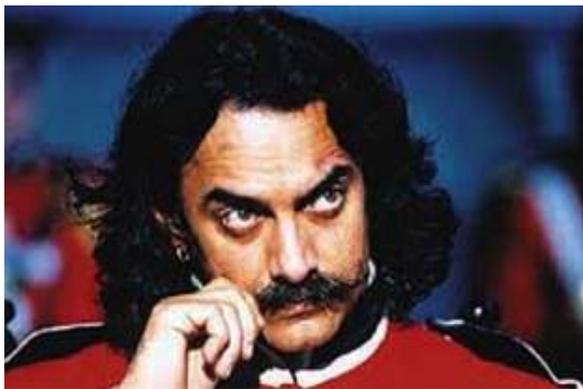


Figure 6. Mangal Pandey during his court martial (*Mangal Pandey*)

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. In India, popular representations of masculinity routinely employ the iconography of curled moustaches.

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, athletic body is fetishized with close-up, low angle and arc shots that exaggerate the importance of the muscular physique, making it an object of desire. Writing on *Hey Ram*, Lalitha Gopalan notes, “...the muscular militant body in the film services the cause of the ideal male image in Hindu nationalism” (385).

¹ A term, loosely defined as a cinema that is in opposition to neo-colonialism and the capitalist system, originally coined by Argentine filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino in their manifesto “Towards a Third Cinema” (1969). The article begins with a reference to Frantz Fanon.

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



Figure 7. Milkha Singh, training in the rain (*Bhaag Milkha Bhaag*)

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. The nation “becomes a masculinised space, the woman or the ‘other’ can enter that space according to the terms set forth by masculinity” (Nandi & Chatterjee 2012: 139). While the ideal man is aggressive, decisive and strong, women are “delicate as glass” and “will break at a turn” (*Bhaag Milkha Bhaag*). Traitors, examples of subservient masculinities, are abused in feminising terms “*nayi dulhan ki tarah sharmata hai*” (“behaving shyly like a bride”) (*The Legend of Bhagat Singh*). Similarly, the contrast between the recreational activities of the sinewy Punjabis, whose game is wrestling, and the lean Englishmen, who are pictured as playing the gentler game of cricket, has gendered overtones. The wrestler, whose tutelary deity is the celibate Hanuman, is “an aggressive Brahmachari” (Alter 99), whose diet – large quantities of almonds, ghee and milk is popularly associated with the production of semen. When challenging the cricket-playing Englishmen to a duel, the Indians rigorously training in the wrestling pit pick their opponents, “I will take on this one who looks like a girl” (*The Legend of Bhagat Singh*). 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.” Potential ruptures are subsumed and a cohesive Indian/Hindu male ipseity imposed amongst groups that do not share a common social or political ideology.

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* (*Mangal Pandey*). It is a Muslim



Figure 8. Sardar Patel’s sister serving tea to Nehru (*Sardar*)

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 wear, 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. This is similar to the radical right wing ideal of a monolithic India – the homogenous ideal of *Akhand Bharat* (“Undivided India”) that attempts to aggressively enforce a cultural uniformity on the pluralism of Indian ethnology.

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: 7). Nations are maintained by transforming cultural boundaries into political perimeters. By representing a mythical past, shared customs, and political and psychological solidarity, films attempt to assert an “‘authentic’ national identity” (Sethi 186).

Structural oppositions are created – between Indian and British, between Indian and Pakistani, between national integration and separatist tendencies to proclaim its “otherness” from other nationalities and identities. 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 are one-sidedly portrayed as morally corrupt – the East India Company trades in opium and uses slave girls for sex; the British soldiers are drunk and lascivious as contrasted with the Spartan restraint of the Indians (*Mangal Pandey*). If the colonial discourse presented the English soldier as disciplined and civilized and the native as “sexually threatening to the white woman’s body” (Nandi & Chatterjee 13), nationalist films reverse the paradigm – Heera is molested by the drunken English soldier and the imperial army engage in mindless and barbaric violence. 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 (*Mangal Pandey* and *The Legend of Bhagat Singh*). In *The Legend of Bhagat Singh*, 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 Bagh, “Bloody Indians,” followed by the British flag that waves before his face. The self-indulgence of the English is contrasted with the gallant sacrifice of the Indian. Voice-over narration in *The Legend of Bhagat Singh* 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” (*The Legend of Bhagat Singh*). The concept of celibacy and superior masculinity is closely connected to the criticism of the libertine. Sin, predatory sexuality and savagery are the coefficients of Westernization.

Crowds and colour evoke the nation – the contrast is between the vibrant, lusty world of the Indians to the claustrophobic discipline of the English. *Mangal Pandey* shows the clamour and companionship in the Indian marketplace followed by the empty silence of the British cantonment. The marketplace – with robust men smoking, drinking, playing and celebrating – is a masculine public sphere. Women are visible only in the security of the native male. In *Sardar*, citizens move out (exteriority) to greet the title character, women open windows and come to apply *tilak* on him while they rush indoors in panic as the British official drives past.

Colonial narratives exoticized the East as feminine – irrational, ignorant and primitive. Biopics of national leaders become counter-narratives to the stereotype – the Orient is “high culture,” wise, progressive and masculine. “India is rich” (*Mangal Pandey*); “Neither my country is poor, nor illiterate. When your forefathers couldn’t speak, our children studied the *Ramayana* 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?” (*The Legend of Bhagat Singh*). Native inferiority is reversed through a kind of xenophobic chauvinism akin to the discourse of the militant nationalists.

The opposition extends to women: English women are mostly depicted as 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. Again, this is part of the rhetoric of “the inner purity of tradition” invoked by the Indian social reformers and nationalists where the native woman can function only as chaste wife or mother. Politically sympathetic English female characters in *The Legend of Bhagat Singh* 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 Pakistanis and supporters of Pakistan. Srivastava states that historians have long considered the history of Muslim rule to be, in part, responsible for the Hindu intelligentsia’s “self-image of effete-ness” (Roselli) and the emasculation of India. The Muslim is recast in the post-colonial narrative in the mould of the colonized male – devious, promiscuous and childish.

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 glances, sideways and down, which is the stereotyped image of a woman’s look – 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. Nandy argues how colonialism drew a parallel between primitivism and childhood (15). Like the childish Indian of the imperial imagination, Jinnah is “ignorant... savage, unpredictably violent... and, thus, incorrigible” (Nandy 16). Jinnah’s threats of *jihad* is followed by shots of burnt streets, dead bodies, paper reports of “thousands 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*).

Likewise, the contrast is stark between the ascetic lifestyle and mature restraint of the widowed and celibate 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. A threat that the Sardar firmly nullifies, pointing out that the Indian army would not stand by and watch. It is the adult male that represses the childish rebellion “ensuring internal peace and providing tough administration and rule of law” (Nandy 16). The concept of *brahmacharya*, as indicated earlier in this paper, signifies “stature and vitality... energy, ardour, intellect, competence, capacity for work, wisdom, success and godliness...” (Sivananda 1984: 10-11). The coordinates of maturity, morality and intrepidity is reserved for the Indian male.

One of the means of celebrating the nation is by evoking differences as the binary opposites in terms of characters 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 spatiotemporal 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 Bagh 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).

Space is a necessary correlative of time, and biopics give an illusion of visualizing national territory with images of rivers, mountains and hamlets evoking the idea of a unique geographic entity. Landscape becomes important, and the emerging consciousness of the nation can be seen in the attention paid to spatial details of a visually infinite panorama. In



Figure 9. Milkha Singh, training (*Bhaag Milkha Bhaag*)

Sardar, the terrain of India is shown in Patel’s travels: the Arabian Sea which opens the narrative, the flatlands, grasslands etc.; the Simla conference begins with a pan shot of Nehru showing Edwina Mountbatten the mountains. If *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag* 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 and harsh terrain of the mountains where he trains. 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*). The physical representation of India – rivers, mountains, states – is more rugged and extensive than beautiful; national space is depicted in the permanent aspects of topography, not the ephemeral facets of nature. In *The Legend of Bhagat Singh*, the Taj Mahal is visible from the rooms where the Lahore conspiracy is hatched. Strikingly, the symbol of an Emperor’s tribute to the woman he loved forms the backdrop, as a group of men volunteer the ultimate renunciation for their Motherland. Depictions of nature and culture cohere to the defined notions of masculinity.

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 insignia of foreign rule, tyranny and native subordination is discarded in a



Figure 10. *Pagadi sambhal* (“Protect your turban”) bhangra dance (*The Legend of Bhagat Singh*)



Figure 11. Mangal Pandey in uniform (*Mangal Pandey: The Rising*)

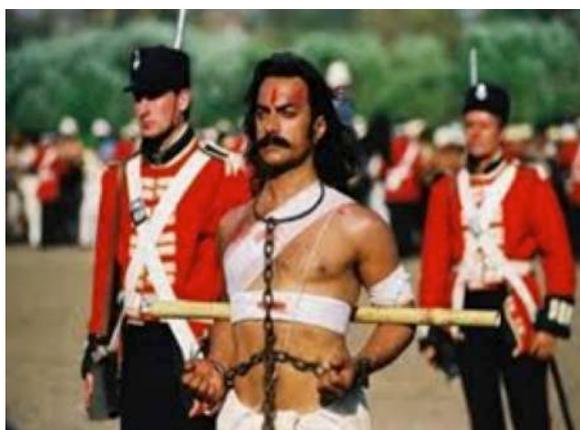


Figure 12. Mangal Pandey lead to execution, his bhramanic sacred thread prominent (*Mangal Pandey: The Rising*).

gesture of cultural nationalism. 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 uniform of the Indian track team. Similarly, *The Legend of Bhagat Singh* and *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag* 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 male prestige.

In biopics, 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 *Mangal Pandey*. Religion is ubiquitous: demure

women – their heads modestly covered – circumambulating the *tulsi* (“sacred basil”); *sadhus* (“holy men”); conches, temple bells and rituals; along with bazaars, fairs, dances, acrobatics, shots of bullock carts, cock fighting, snake-charmers, fire dancers, wheat fields, Ramlila celebrations, ethnic drinks (*bhaang* and *lassi*) drunk from earthen cups and the constantly reiterated Holi celebrations. Images, visual and metaphoric, have meaning potential and the film uses “established *connotators*” to signify undertones of hardiness and vitality to the audience (Machin & Mayr 2012: 51). The stereotyped images that connote a national specificity are all raw, rustic, earthy.

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 under attack and the iconic photo – a scene with Mother India in chains superimposed onto the map of India – is evocative of Nielsen’s study on “patriotic masculinities.” The picture is an alteration of an original photograph of Gandhi, Nehru and Patel under a map of India and showing a manacled peasant whose body forms the contours of the nation. Nielsen’s research argued that American “wartime propaganda depended on the ‘images of threatened motherhood, dependent or ravaged womanhood in its appeal to male citizens to enlist, fight, labour... as acts of male chivalry’” (Satpati and Samiparna, 2012: 131). The exploited, enslaved nation is reclaimed by the man. In *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag*, 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, who becomes the flag, 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 victorious group.



Figure 14. *Jawaharlal Nehru, Mahatma Gandhi and Sardar Vallabhai Patel 1946*. In the background, a peasant’s shackled feet are seen.

Source: Thirty Old and Rare Photos of Pandit Jawaharlal, Nehru Life Archive.

Great men biopics are the prism through which most citizens understand history. The past is recreated through cultures and nations by the re-enactment of historical lives. The memory aesthetics of the biopic that (re)presents a unique life in a specific moment in history promote a sense of shared past and common culture. The

construction of memory and the restructuring of history – elimination of problematic aspects and accentuation of “desirable” behaviours in a biopic – is a result of a value-laden selection and are reflective of the *zeitgeist* of the age in which it is produced. An inherent agenda of the biopic is to 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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