

Article

Shalmali Mali

History on Screen: Bollywood's Misleading Narratives



Padmaavat (2018)

Abstract

Bollywood, as India's most influential film industry, plays a significant role in shaping public perceptions of history. While historical films hold the potential to educate audiences and revitalize historical narratives, they frequently compromise factual accuracy in favour of dramatization, nationalist sentiment, or commercial viability. This convergence of entertainment and historical representation raises critical concerns regarding historiographical integrity, collective memory, and societal impact. A compelling illustration of such distortion is *Jodhaa Akbar* (2008), which constructs a romanticized portrayal of Mughal Emperor Akbar's purported relationship with Rajput princess Jodhaa Bai. Despite its visual grandeur, the film has been widely scrutinized for its tenuous historical foundation, with scholars contesting Jodhaa's actual existence. Similarly, *Padmaavat* (2018) dramatizes the legend of Rani Padmavati, reinforcing Islamophobic tropes through its characterization of Alauddin Khilji as an antagonistic invader. *Tanhaji: The Unsung Warrior* (2020) has similarly faced criticism for exacerbating religious divides, framing Mughal-Maratha conflicts in a manner that aligns with contemporary ideological narratives.

Beyond individual films, Bollywood's approach to historical storytelling frequently employs selective narration, either omitting inconvenient truths or reshaping events to conform

to dominant socio-political ideologies. *Chhaava* (2025), which centres on Chhatrapati Sambhaji Maharaj, encapsulates debates concerning historical fidelity and creative liberty. Films such as *Manikarnika: The Queen of Jhansi* (2019), *Bajirao Mastani* (2015), and *Mangal Pandey: The Rising* (2005) tend to simplify complex historical events or emphasize personal relationships, thereby influencing popular historical consciousness in ways that diverge from academic historiography. Furthermore, films like *Mohenjo Daro* (2016) and *Asoka* (2001) incorporate anachronistic elements that misrepresent the nuances of ancient civilizations. The societal ramifications of these cinematic portrayals are considerable. Historical films contribute to mythmaking, reinforce nationalist perspectives, and shape public discourse on cultural identity and heritage. Audiences lacking access to rigorous historical scholarship may unwittingly internalize distorted narratives, thereby influencing collective memory. Given Bollywood's extensive reach, there exists an imperative for historical accountability and closer collaboration between filmmakers and scholars to ensure nuanced representations. While creative liberties remain an integral component of cinematic storytelling, a more conscientious approach can facilitate historical engagement that is both compelling and truthful.

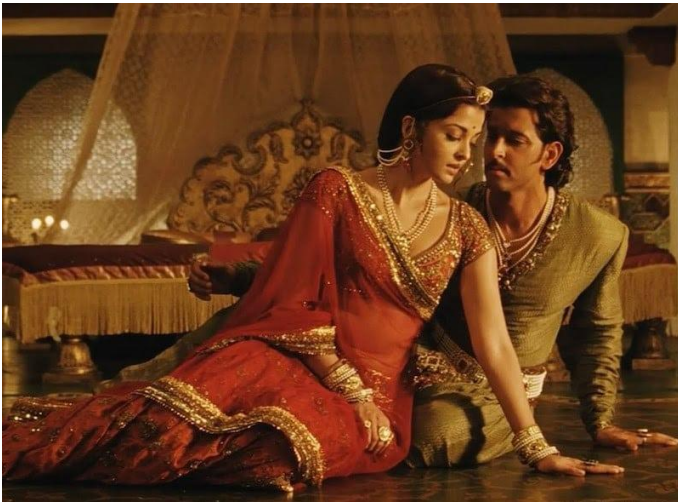
Keywords: Bollywood, Historical Narratives, Selective Storytelling, Misleading, Mythmaking, Distortion.

Introduction

Cinema, with its unparalleled capacity for immersive storytelling and visual grandeur, stands as a formidable and pervasive medium through which historical consciousness and cultural identity are profoundly shaped. In India, Bollywood, the nation's preeminent and most influential film industry, frequently undertakes the ambitious task of reconstructing historical events, presenting them to vast audiences through elaborate visual spectacles, compelling narratives, and often highly dramatized storytelling (Mehta, 2020). While this approach undeniably renders complex historical periods and figures more accessible to mass audiences, democratizing access to the past in a way that academic texts often cannot, it simultaneously engenders significant concerns regarding the preservation of historiographical integrity (Hesling, 2001). The inherent tension between entertainment and education often

results in selective narration, coupled with ideological reinterpretation, leading to widespread public misconceptions, the reinforcement of existing socio-political biases, and ultimately, a palpable distortion of collective memory. (Jenkins, 2020). In a nation like India, where public history is not merely an academic pursuit but is deeply and intricately intertwined with evolving national identity and robust nationalist sentiments, Bollywood's treatment of historical narratives often reflects, and in turn amplifies, prevailing ideological currents (Hogan, 2008). Historical films are frequently produced and released in alignment with politically significant moments or to resonate with current socio-political climates, thereby serving to validate specific perspectives while inadvertently, or sometimes deliberately, marginalizing or entirely omitting alternative interpretations (Siddiqui, 2025). Consequently, the history presented on screen

in Bollywood is shaped as much by artistic considerations and the demands of commercial viability as it is by explicit or implicit political imperatives. This confluence transforms the cinematic portrayal of history into a powerful, yet often problematic, instrument of cultural and ideological dissemination.



Jodhaa Akbar (2008)

This study undertakes a critical examination of Bollywood's pervasive representation of historical events, delving into its profound impact on societal perceptions, its influence on contemporary ideological discourse, and its role in the construction (or deconstruction) of collective memory. Through incisive case studies—including the widely discussed *Jodhaa Akbar* (2008), the controversial *Padmaavat* (2018), and the ideologically charged *Tanhaji: The Unsung Warrior* (2020) (Jenkins, 2020). This paper meticulously evaluates Bollywood's multifaceted engagement with history. Focus will be placed on films that exemplify significant historical inaccuracies or ideological biases, such as *Mohenjo-Daro* (2016), which, despite its epic scale, has faced considerable criticism for its anachronistic

elements and factual liberties. By scrutinizing these cinematic productions, this paper not only interrogates their broader socio-political ramifications but also explores the ethical obligations inherent in the role of filmmakers in preserving historiographical accuracy while navigating the demands of creative storytelling and commercial success. The central argument posits that while creative liberties remain an integral component of cinematic artistry, a more conscientious and historically accountable approach is imperative to foster a collective understanding of the past that is both compelling and fundamentally truthful.

Bollywood's Approach to Historical Storytelling

Bollywood's historical storytelling is often shaped by selective narration, where inconvenient details are omitted, leading to one-sided portrayals that idealize some figures while vilifying others to align with dominant ideologies. This approach influences how audiences perceive historical events, reinforcing certain narratives while disregarding others. Commercial interests further shape historical films, prioritizing grand visuals, elaborate costumes, and dramatic storytelling. While these elements enhance the cinematic appeal, they often compromise historical accuracy, preferring entertainment value over factual representation (Acharya & Jha, 2023). Additionally, many Bollywood films incorporate nationalistic and religious themes, subtly aligning historical narratives with contemporary socio-political currents (Basu, 2023). These ideological undertones influence audience interpretations,

reinforcing present-day political agendas through cinematic storytelling. The researcher has observed that Bollywood films often prioritize entertainment, romance, and spectacle over strict historical accuracy. This approach is influenced by commercial imperatives, the economic cost of production, and sometimes, ideological leanings that align with current political regimes. Many films use historical events as a backdrop for popular narratives, leading to glamorization and a disservice to historical rigor. There's also a noted gap between academic historical discourse and the general public's understanding, with audiences often seeking validation of their existing perceptions rather than factual historical accounts.

The study beginning a comprehensive investigation into how Bollywood films engage with historical narratives, particularly focusing on the tension between creative freedom, commercial demands, and the need for historical accuracy. The study initial approach involves exploring the general academic and critical discourse surrounding historical fidelity in Indian cinema.

Distortion and Its Effects

Jodhaa Akbar (2008): Romanticized Mughal History

Ashutosh Gowariker's *Jodhaa Akbar* constructs an opulent yet historically tenuous depiction of Mughal Emperor Akbar's relationship with Jodhaa Bai. Scholarly critiques contend that Jodhaa Bai's existence remains unverified; despite this, the film articulates an elaborate romance, fostering an idealized portrayal of Mughal-Rajput relations while disregarding political

complexities (Bhaskar, & Allen, 2009 & Basu, 2023).

Padmaavat (2018): Islamophobic Undercurrents

Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Padmaavat* dramatizes the legend of Rani Padmavati, originally a fictionalized narrative by Malik Muhammad Jayasi. The film's characterization of Alauddin Khilji as a barbaric invader neglects historical accounts that depict him as an astute administrator (Shajahan, 2024). This exaggerated portrayal inadvertently reinforces Islamophobic stereotypes, while the glorification of Juhar perpetuates contentious historical traditions (Shajahan, 2024).



Tanhaji: The Unsung Warrior (2020)

Tanhaji: The Unsung Warrior (2020): Nationalist Interpretations

Tanhaji reconstructs the life of Maratha warrior Tanaji Malusare but reshapes Mughal-Maratha conflicts through a reductionist lens. The characterization of Mughal general Udaybhan Rathod as an archetypal antagonist amplifies hyper-nationalistic themes, thereby distorting historical nuance (Avinash, 2020).

Mohenjo-Daro (2016): Misrepresentations of the Indus Valley Civilization Through Speculative Storytelling



Mohenjo-Daro (2016)

Ashutosh Gowariker's Mohenjo-Daro (2016) attempted to bring the grandeur of the Indus Valley Civilization to the big screen, but in doing so, it veered heavily into speculative storytelling, often at the expense of historical accuracy. While visually striking, the film's liberties with archaeological findings and its narrative choices reveal a tendency to impose familiar Bollywood tropes onto an ancient setting rather than authentically reconstructing the civilization. A significant part of my research will centre on the film 'Mohenjo-Daro' as a case study. I'll be looking for specific criticisms regarding its historical accuracy, examining how its narrative aligns with or deviates from established archaeological findings of the Indus Valley Civilization, and investigating any public responses or 'contrite statements' from the filmmakers regarding these inaccuracies. Regarding 'Mohenjo-Daro', The study found significant criticisms pointing to numerous historical inaccuracies. These include confusing the Vedic Age with the Indus Valley Civilization, anachronistic elements

like white Arabian horses and gladiatorial arenas, and the use of an outdated flood hypothesis for the civilization's decline (Priyadarshini, 2022). The film's portrayal of characters, their attire, language (Sanskrit), and even complexions (reflecting a 'fair and lovely' bias) has been criticized for not aligning with archaeological findings and for potentially promoting a Hindutva Vadi interpretation of history, including a racial narrative.

Historical Misrepresentations

One of the major shortcomings of Mohenjo-Daro is its depiction of the social and political structures of the Indus Valley Civilization (IVC). The film introduces a despotic ruler, Maham, whose governance resembles a feudal or monarchical system more in line with later Indian historical settings rather than the relatively egalitarian and decentralized governance structures inferred from archaeological studies (Frazier, 2008). The narrative reduces the complexities of IVC urban planning, trade networks, and social organization to a simplified hero-versus-villain framework, disregarding the nuanced understanding of the civilization's administration. The portrayal of characters and costumes is another point of concern. The film's aesthetic choices appear to draw from a fusion of Middle Eastern and later Indian influences rather than relying on evidence from IVC artifacts. Excavated figurines and seals suggest simpler attire and cultural motifs than the elaborate headdresses and ornate costumes seen in the film (Santosh, 2024). The choice to depict the protagonist as a brave warrior struggling against tyranny reflects a historical revisionism that imposes later

historical ideals onto a civilization that lacked clear evidence of centralized warfare or militarization in the manner depicted.



Mohenjo-Daro (2016)

Speculative Elements and Myths

While historical films naturally require some degree of creative storytelling, *Mohenjo-Daro* often strays into outright fabrication. The film introduces a climactic sequence where the city is destroyed by a massive flood, a dramatic retelling of theories suggesting environmental factors contributed to civilization's decline (Gopinath & Deshmukh, 2023). While some scholars propose that shifts in the Ghaggar-Hakra river system may have influenced the region, the presentation of an apocalyptic flood lacks the nuanced scientific discussion surrounding this hypothesis. Additionally, the romantic plotline between Sarman (Hrithik Roshan) and Chaani (Pooja Hegde) feels artificially inserted, prioritizing a conventional love story over meaningful engagement with the cultural realities of the time. The characterization of Chaani as a "chosen one" with divine status appears to reflect later Hindu mythological influences, diverging from the socio-religious beliefs inferred from Indus Valley artifacts, which emphasize symbolic representations like the Pashupati

seal rather than hierarchical divinity centre narratives (Ashwini, 2016).

Impact on Collective Memory

Mohenjo-Daro ultimately reinforces the ongoing issue of Bollywood's historical reinterpretation, where speculative storytelling often replaces academically sound reconstructions. While the film brings awareness to one of India's earliest urban civilizations, it simultaneously misleads audiences about its complexities, creating a distorted historical memory (Singh, 2018). Rather than engaging with archaeological scholarship on trade, urban planning, and socio-cultural development, the film prioritizes action-packed sequences and dramatic confrontations, moulding IVC into a spectacle instead of a serious exploration of its historical significance (Lal, 2024). This reinforces a broader trend in Indian cinema, where history is frequently reimagined through contemporary lenses to fit popular entertainment narratives.

Beyond the specific film, I'm also interested in the broader implications of historical inaccuracies in cinema. This includes understanding the ethical responsibilities of filmmakers and how such portrayals might influence public understanding of history, posing challenges to historiographical integrity. The study has noted that the filmmakers of '*Mohenjo-Daro*', particularly director Ashutosh Gowariker and actor Hrithik Roshan, have defended their creative choices by emphasizing that the Indus Valley Civilization is 'proto history' with limited written records. They argue that this necessitates a significant degree of imagination (up to 90% of the work) to

construct the world of the film. While they claim to have consulted archaeologists and adhered to some known facts, their primary focus was on weaving a compelling love story, rather than creating a historical documentary (Jain, Suman, Gupta & Tiwari, 2022). The study hasn't found any explicit 'contrite statements' from them regarding the inaccuracies; their responses are largely defensive, highlighting creative liberty.

The impact of such historical inaccuracies in cinema is a key concern. While some argue that these films can stimulate public interest in the past, there's a strong counterargument that they can reinforce existing societal biases and contribute to a distorted public understanding of history (Joshi, 2022 & Kumar, 2024). This makes it challenging for rigorous historical inquiry to take root, as audiences may prioritize entertainment and preconceived notions over factual accuracy. The debate between artistic freedom and historical responsibility remains a contentious one in Indian cinema.

References

- Acharya, A., & Jha, S. (2023). Weaponizing History: Watching Panipat in Post-Truth Times. *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 1-22.
- Avinash, R., (2020). Tanhaji-The Unsung Warrior' review: A jingoistic history lesson that boasts path-breaking visuals. *E-News*. The New Indian Express.
- Basu, A. (2023). Islam and the Orientalist Vision in Padmaavat. *Journal of Muslim Philanthropy & Civil Society*, 7(2).
- Basu, A. (2023). Orientalism's Hinduism, Orientalism's Islam, and the Twilight of the Subcontinental Imagination. *Religions*, 14(8), 1034.
- Bhaskar, I., & Allen, R. (2009). *Islamicate cultures of Bombay cinema*. Tulika Books.
- Bhopatkar, T., (2025). The evolution of Historical period dramas in Indian Cinema. Hindi Movie News- Times of India.
- Frazier, J. (2008). Jodhaa Akbar. *Journal of Religion & Film*, 12(1), 9.

Conclusion

Bollywood's engagement with history remains deeply enmeshed with commercial imperatives and ideological influences. While historical films contribute to cultural discourse, their distortions pose considerable challenges for historiographical integrity. Achieving equilibrium between artistic freedom and responsible historiography is imperative for fostering informed historical engagement (Bhopatkar, 2025). Whereas in the movie reviews *Mohenjo-Daro* succeeds in creating a visually engaging cinematic experience, it falls short in providing an accurate representation of the Indus Valley Civilization. Its speculative approach results in a reimagined version of history that prioritizes dramatic storytelling over scholarly inquiry. For audiences interested in the true depth of Mohenjo-Daro's legacy, archaeological research and academic discussions offer a far richer understanding than the film's embellishments.

- Gopinath, S., & Deshmukh, R. (Eds.). (2023). *Historicizing Myths in Contemporary India: Cinematic Representations and Nationalist Agendas in Hindi Cinema*. Taylor & Francis.
- Hesling, W. (2001). The past as story: The narrative structure of historical films. *European journal of cultural studies*, 4(2), 189-205.
- Hogan, P. C. (2008). *Understanding Indian movies: culture, cognition, and cinematic imagination*. University of Texas Press.
- Jain, G., Suman, S., Gupta, S., & Tiwari, A. A. (2022). Media bias and Bollywood: an untold story. In *Causes and Symptoms of Socio-Cultural Polarization: Role of Information and Communication Technologies* (pp. 211-229). Singapore: Springer Singapore.
- Jenkins, K. A. (2020). The reel truth: the importance of historical accuracy in film.
- Joshi, P. (2022). Cinema as a Historical Source-Valid or Invalid?
- Kumar, S., (2024). Why do Indian Historical films fail to re-tell History Authentically? Feminism in India.
- Lal, N., (2024). A period drama is not a documentary. *The role of historical films: balancing facts and drama*. Times of India.
- Mehta, R. B. (2020). *Unruly cinema: History, politics, and Bollywood*. University of Illinois Press.
- Priyadarshini, A. (2022, December). History Written in Lightning. In *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* (Vol. 81, pp. 1202-1210). Indian History Congress.
- Shajahan, M. S. (2024). 'Distorting the history': Padmaavat and the performative production of history in Indian popular culture. *National Identities*, 26(3), 289-304.
- Siddiqui, M. A. (2025). *Muslim Identity in Hindi Cinema: Poetics and Politics of Genre and Representation*. Taylor & Francis.
- Singh, K. (2018). Current scenario of Bollywood films and its impact on society and culture. *Asian Journal of Multidimensional Research (AJMR)*, 7(8), 170-183.
- Umanath, S., Butler, A. C., & Marsh, E. J. (2012). Positive and negative effects of monitoring popular films for historical inaccuracies. *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, 26(4), 556-567.

Shalmali Mali, Asst. Professor, History, Amity Institute of Liberal Arts, Amity University, Mumbai.