

# **Of Nationalism and Sexism: A Close Analysis of Indian Sports Biopics**

Dissertation submitted to Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam in partial fulfillment  
of the requirement for the award of the degree of Master of Arts in English

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2020

## **Declaration**

I, Jishnu K Jayaraj, hereby affirm that the dissertation titled *Of Nationalism and Sexism: A Close Analysis of Indian Sports Biopics* is a genuine record of work done by me under the guidance of Ms. Merin Jose and Ms. Lissy Kachappilly of the Post Graduate Department of English, Bharata Mata College, Thrikkakara and has not been submitted previously for the award of any masters or degree.

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## **Certificate**

Certified that this is a bonafide report of the project entitled *Of Nationalism and Sexism: A Close Analysis of Indian Sports Biopics* done by Jishnu K Jayaraj (Register No. 180011002135) in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts in English under Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam during the year 2018-2020.

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**Acknowledgement**

I take this opportunity to acknowledge the valuable guidance and assistance extended to me from various quarters during the preparation of this dissertation entitled *Of Nationalism and Sexism: A Close Analysis of Indian Sports Biopics*.

I thank God Almighty for enabling me to complete this dissertation successfully.

I consider myself extremely fortunate to have Ms. Merin Jose as my dissertation guide.

I record my deepest gratitude to her for the timely advices and valuable guidance, for constant supervision as well as providing necessary information regarding the project and relentless encouragement in completing the thesis.

I would also like to express my thanks to all those who have influenced and supported me in the task of preparing this dissertation.

I convey my gratitude to my dear family for their generous encouragement and co-operation throughout this process.

Finally, I express my gratitude to other faculty members of the Department of English, Bharata Mata College, Thrikkakkara, and all my classmates and friends for their kind support and co-operation.

Jishnu K Jayaraj

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

India is one of the largest producers of movies in the world with as many as 2000 films produced in various languages every year. Indian cinema produces more films watched by more people than any other country. The history of Indian cinema traces back to the beginning of the film era. Beginning with *Raja Harishchandra* (1913) a silent film in Marathi, the Indian cinema has grown into a global phenomenon, with its films having a following throughout all the major continents and reaching in over 90 countries. Cinema remains the most powerful medium of mass communication in the country, with its ability to combine entertainment with the communication of ideas. The masses of the country even today watch movies with the same wonder and interest that they exhibited a century back, even with the tremendous changes in the lifestyle and living conditions. Cinema still strikes awe in them and influences them beyond their own knowledge. Indian cinema has undergone drastic changes in recent years, by not restricting itself into just being a source of entertainment, but by experimenting in its stride towards being a social and responsible cinema, owing to the millions it has its impact upon.

Indian cinema, especially Bollywood has proved to have a very strong hold on its millions of followers both on and off the screen. The huge number of fan following that the Indian movie celebrities have is a perfect example of this. The medium has so large a social acceptance and social influence that it can set new trends, impart and successfully implement ideas that are novel to the society, and point out the disparities in the society fruitfully. The Indian cinema viewers do not just watch a movie and leave it at that. They attribute the qualities of the characters to the actors who portrayed them

and hold them high for the attributes that their characters possess. For this very reason, the medium has been made use of by many a number of skilled directors and filmmakers to convey their ideas to the society thus gradually shaping a culture and social structure of their interest. Many a number of mannerisms that we see in the daily Indian life can be traced back to the movies produced during the respective periods. A striking example of this is the clothing style of the Indian people. Bollywood has, since its beginning, been setting trends for the dress sense of an average Indian. The Bell-bottom pants of the '70s and the bright coloured organza sarees all found their way into the common man's life from the most celebrated Bollywood movies.

Similarly, cinema has also played a central role in forging a national identity among the people, through its careful portrayal, and often construction, of history, the depiction of the valiant lives of its great men, and celebration of its traditional cultures. They attempt to create a sense of commonality among the people by evoking a sense of shared past, and also by establishing a sense of rupture with the "others". This sense of collective belonging is often brought about through the picturisation of a shared myth or legend, taking to the screen the lives of great men often based on biographies, and also, most importantly through the sports movies, be it biopics or fictionalised narratives. Sports have been, and it remains, an arena where the Indians feel united despite the differences in their social, cultural, and economic backgrounds. India is a country where its sports stars are celebrated and held high as much as any other great men. From old people to kids, sports inject a sense of nationalism in the people which is why even today, we see huge crowds gathered to celebrate the victories of Indian sports teams or to collectively mourn their loss, the latter often considered a national tragedy. It is also no wonder that, like in the common fields of life, there exists a gender disparity in sports as well. In the highly patriarchal Indian culture, while men are

celebrated and even worshipped for bringing glory and eminence to their country by competing in international sports events, women often find it much harder to find their way through, and even when they do amidst the struggles, they are not received with an equal appreciation.

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. The narration about a common past in the cinema has been a method of propagating the idea of the nation to the public, a means by which people can build a picture of themselves as individuals and also as a community. The assumption that it is nationalism that creates and holds together a nation is now proving to be fallacious and the modernist proposition holds that nation emanate from nationalism and not vice versa. One of the very effective means of narrating a nation is through the celebration of the great men it has given birth to. In cinema, the biopics of great men have been a method of deploying the passions of patriotism by chronicling of heroic deeds, sacrifices, and lofty moral values, and by fabricating, rediscovering, or authenticating the myths of celebrated men. The presentation of well-crafted versions of heroic lives has proven to privilege specific ideologies and also naturalise imagery of the nation in the psyche of the common man. In presenting a quasi-realistic portrayal of the lives of such heroes, the Indian biopics construct and propagate a specific, predominantly masculine representation of the nation. But this tendency, heavily rooted in a patriarchal society has undergone many changes in the recent times with the celebration of the great women the country has had, through their biopics like *Neerja*, the biopic about Neerja Bhanot, the brave air-hostess who gave her life to save the passengers from terrorists, and movies like *Manikarnika* and *Padmaavat*, which narrate the story of legendary women of India.



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. Critical writing on Indian cinema frequently dwells on how Indian films are continually concerned with the questions of national identity and history. Through the stories of individual achievements, biopics engage in a kind of historical rewriting where the historical incidents are seen or narrated from the subjective perspective of the protagonist. Even in the sports biopics, many a time, historical incidents form a background for the protagonist to draw inspiration from and thrive. The hero in the sports biopics often becomes a symbol of the entire nation and his or her victory or failure is often considered as that of the nation. That one of the prime motives of the biopics is constructing the nation can be perceived from the fact that biopics are usually fictionalised or dramatised than the actual historical or factual incident. It is also interesting to note that the Indian biopics tend to avoid controversial aspects and construct the life as an unfolding destiny to greatness and achievement. They have also rarely progressed beyond the earliest classical, celebratory melodrama style. To maintain the illusions of a culturally and socially connected community, a nation desperately needs narratives, a collection of memories of a shared past, heroic adventures, and brave victories. Indian biopics embody rhetoric of ideology- purity or patriotism, and films on national heroes are discursively framed to communicate the image of a nation to the public. Allied to the specific moments 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.

This project aims at analysing how biopics, specifically, sports biopics successfully act as narratives that embody and propagate nationalism and helps in the creation of national identity among the people. It also attempts to trace the gender disparity in the

portrayal of sports biopics and scrutinise the changes that have come over time. Through a critical understanding of four selected movies, namely *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag*, *M. S. Dhoni: The Untold Story*, *Dangal*, and *Mary Kom*, the project investigates the role of sports biopics in the construction of the national identity and the gender disparity that is showcased within them. The second chapter traces the history and characteristics of sports biopics in India, addresses their role in forging a sense of nationality, and discusses the gender differences that exist both in the medium of cinema and also in the sports. The third chapter considers the movies *M.S Dhoni: The Untold Story* and *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag* and analyses their role in the creation and upheaval of the national identity. The fourth chapter analyses the female-centred movies *Dangal* and *Mary Kom* to discuss the changing trends in the biopics and considers how gender disparity prevails equally in cinema and sports, and the need for a changing attitude to the women in sports. The project concludes with the note that the sports biopics play a vital role in forging the picture and sense of a nation in the audience and that the modern world demands a changing attitude towards the portrayal of women in cinema.

## Chapter 2

### Analysing the Tropes of Nationalism and Gender Bias in Sports Biopics

Sports have always been an integral part of human civilization from its very beginning. It must have started sometime in the early days of human history when men realized that their physical strength and wit could be put to use for things more than merely hunting and farming. In *The Anthropology of Sport*, Kendall Blanchard notes the sports historians Denise Palmer and Maxwell Howell who have argued that the "earliest archaeological evidence of sports and games is found in the Early Dynastic Period of the Sumerian Civilization (3000-1500 B.C)." (Blanchard, 99) On the stone slabs that were recovered from civilization, various representations of wrestlers have been found. Other instances that prove that sports were an integral part of many of the ancient human civilizations have been found from texts that survived the test of time. For instance, *Iliad* includes a number of descriptions of funeral games held in honour of deceased warriors. Also, it is interesting to note that engaging in sports was restricted to the noble and the wealthy since they did not have to engage themselves in menial jobs and hence had plenty of time for leisure. In *Odyssey*, king Odysseus of Ithaca proves his royal status to king Alkinoos by showing his proficiency in throwing the javelin.

It is understood that Greece was a centre of sporting events and that sports were first instituted formally here, with the first Olympic Games being recorded in 776 BC in Olympia. These games took place every four years. Initially an event where a single sprinting event was conducted, it grew to include more events like boxing, wrestling, chariot racing, long jump etcetera. Some historians note that the sports that we know as of today are primarily an invention of western culture. European colonialism helped spread particular games across the world especially cricket and hockey. The sports

today has grown much wider to include events from different parts of the world and is given much of an importance in human society. Today, different countries from across the world compete in different sporting events and sports have been internalised into the lives of men.

The functions of sports are not just restricted to entertainment or leisure activities. Sports stays an important factor in keeping the unity between men and countries and train men to be both competitive and group workers. It integrates and coordinates individuals and social groups, and help the nations to develop while having a significant impact on the socio-economic and political process. Team sports teach important lessons of cooperation and sustenance through group work while individual sports helps in the grown of self, both physically and mentally.

The history of sports in India dates back to the Vedic era. The traditional Olympic oath, "For the Honour of my Country and the Glory of Sport" holds the same sentiments as the mantra in the Atharvaveda which says "Duty is in my right hand and the fruits of victory in my left". Games like chess, and snakes and ladders originated from the ancient Indian games of chaturanga and gyan chauper. The colonial period saw a shift in the history of the sport of the country with new games being introduced to the land from the colonizers. A lot many games that are popular around the globe today have their origins in British India, like snooker, polo etcetera. After independence, India gave focus to and has worked in developing its sports. The country hosted Asian Games in New Delhi in 1951 and 1982. Today, India is among the top participants and competitors in world sporting events.

Biographical films or biopics are a fertile genre, which has set up new trends in the film industry worldwide. When we trace back to its origins, biographical movies have

always been underrated since its very beginning and questions have always been raised upon its credibility. Dramatising a non-fictional or historically-based personage or group from the past or present era are always a long haul to deal with. "Biography first became a prestige item when Adolph Zukor presented Sarah Bernhardt as Queen Elizabeth as a movie bait for middle-class audiences in 1912." (Bingham, 21). The film that is generally considered to be the first-ever biopic is Alfred E Green's *Disraeli*. It depicts the story of the British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli. The making of biopics has always been a very challenging area. The adaptation of the real into reel was at the same time easy and challenging. Easy, because there already was a set story and events. But then, the makers had to make sure that the matter that they portrayed on the screen did justice to reality. As the plot is about a real person, the scope of imagination and fantasy is always limited. Concerning biopics, an entire movie is proposed, planned, and executed based on how far the particular person has made an impact on society. The popularity of the person becomes a defining part of the film and hence biopics are made on the lives of those people who are widely regarded for their contributions to different areas of their excellence. The lives of Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Pele, Mohammed Ali, and so on have been reflected in the movies whereas the lives of the common man go unnoticed, shadowed under the banner of little commercial value as well as social acceptability.

Professor Rick Altman in his book *Film/Genre* (1999) opines that a biopic is occupied with its own style or genre. One need not contribute anything new to it, but it contains the required elements in proportion in itself. A simple, but highly defined narrative arc is the peculiarity of a movie based on life history. Biopic, in its entirety, has undergone drastic changes over its years of development. The conventional biopic was just a historical literal document dealing with a true story. In the modern era, the

double-halo effect also places a key role in the success of a biopic with the film hitting the markets both with the popularity of the actor who has portrayed the role as well as the famous persona about whom the movie is.

A major classification that has occurred in the genre of biopics is the sports biopic. As the name suggests, these are movies with sports and sports stars as a major theme. Sports biopics attract filmmakers as it provides a platform for new content. They give the scope for a change from traditional movie patterns. Movies on sportsmen allow the filmmakers to combine three essential ingredients that boost the success of a film: drama, euphoria, and action. The recent years have shown much interest in sports biopics owing to both their popularity and a chance for greater success.

The Indian cinema industry is one of the world's most reputed and respected entertainment industry in the world, owing mostly to its glamour and glitz and the amazing movies it has produced. The industry covers every area from dramas to horror movies and has the highest production of movies in the world. Adding to this large group is the biopic, which has gained momentum in the recent decade. Indian biopics have rarely grown beyond the classical early melodrama style. Movies like *Dirty Picture* and *Guru* are only poorly disguised cinematic melodramas, not biopics as such. Sports biopics in India gained momentum from the production of *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag* in 2013. The emergence of internationally recognised stars like Saina Nehwal, Abhinav Bindra, Sania Mirza, and Mary Kom has spurred interest among the people and has led to the shifted focus on the lives of sports stars. With a bit of fiction and drama added to the originally eventful lives of these sportsmen, sports biopics have become popular and commercial hits. Though many critics accuse that the addition of the fictional elements takes away the authenticity of the story, it has in fact helped in the social acceptance of these movies.

Throughout the history of cinema, it can be noted that portraying the lives of great men on screen has always been an effective means to invoke the feelings of nationalism and patriotism in the audience. Much use has been made of this effect of the movies to create a feeling of togetherness among the people of a nation, while at the same time evoking a kind of enmity onwards other nations. Through the stories of individual achievement, biopics ensure that the much-celebrated historical events are portrayed from the perspective of a single person. The fact that biopics are usually more dramatic than historical or factual reinforces the idea that one of the prime motives of biopics is evoking nationalism. "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)

It is important that to maintain the feeling of a cultural and social community, a nation needs narratives, a collection and remembrance of memoirs of a shared past, heroic endeavours and a feeling of one, which must be constantly and carefully retold. The biographical stories of the national heroes thus become a memoir of a significant moment in the life of a nation. Various signifier of a nation is presented in the biographical films to produce a nationalist feeling among the audience, which include unique cultural features of the country. Sports biopics are the most effective in this manner because they reinforce and multiply the already existing patriotism and nationalism attributed to sports. It can be noted that in India especially, sports evoke a sense of being one with the nation. Cricket has played a major role in this. For years, the only major sport that was being celebrated nationwide was cricket. The joy and excitement of watching the Indian team play against other countries might be the most striking example of nationalism that sports evoke in the people. In a country where

sports is given such importance and honour, sports biopics are the most useful way of instilling feelings of patriotism in the people. In witnessing an account of the life of sportsmen on the screen, the people are looking into moments vital in the history of the country as a whole. Through watching the struggles and hardships that the hero has to go through to reach success and bring glory to the nation, the audience feels one with him and a surge of national pride.

Like many other areas, sports is one territory where gender bias is apparently visible. The issue of gender inequality that exists in the area of sports can be considered to be more psychological than any other possibility. The notion that men are physically superior and stronger than women has for long been imprinted into the minds of the societies, that a general feeling arises as to women are not suitable for physically challenging events like sports. Although the circumstances that existed a thousand years ago have changed and though women make up half of the world populace, it is unfortunate that they still suffer injustice. Men are still viewed as better sex, especially in India where much of the population are yet to recognise the changing gender norms. This is the reason why India is yet to deliver a female sports star who is worshipped like Sachin Tendulkar or Milkha Singh. Even when a woman after much struggles and toil manage to fulfil her dream of becoming a sports person, she still has to face humiliation and bias throughout her career until she decides to quit and fade into the tides of time. While men in sports get to concentrate fully on their career, women are expected to manage many things along with her passion, like her family, and all the duties that she is supposed to perform.

This gender bias is also evident when it comes to the sports biopics that are produced in India. Not many movies are produced in the country based on the lives of female sports stars, both due to the lack of exemplary female stars and also due to a



lack of approval from the audience. In portraying a male star, the makers of the movie see scope for more action and more entertaining elements that would ensure appeal to the masses. It is only during the recent years that stories of women who overcame the hurdles of life to reach sports have been taken to the screen, and only a very few of them were commercial successes. While most of the movies with a male centred approach talk about their struggles to reach success overcoming many difficulties, the stories of women are almost always about how they had to prove their worth as a woman to earn respect. Their womanhood becomes the first hurdle that they have to surpass in the road to their dreams. In recent years, much change has come over both sports and the sports biopics. The changing times have demanded an equal treatment of both sexes even in the area of sports. The success of movies like *Dangal* and *Mary Kom* are stepping stones towards an era where the victories of women are given equal respect as that of men. A deeper look into some of the commercially successful movies from the last few years is essential for further understanding of these issues and would also provide a deeper insight into the discussed themes.

## Chapter 3

### Examining Patriotic/ Nationalistic Motifs in Indian Sports Biopics

In an interview with *Film Companion* in 2019, Bollywood's leading actress Deepika Padukone commented that two factors which have the most influence on the youth of the nation are cricket and cinema. This comment has been proved to be true from the country's huge cricket fan base and religious adoration with which the masses of the nation view cricket and watch their favourite stars' movies with awe. The cricket stars of the country are respected and adored as much as the politicians and film stars. This tremendous impact that cricket has on the lives of the people is not always contributing to the growth of it. While victories are celebrated throughout the country, failures are more than often not treated with care and respect. The stars are held responsible for the failures that they sometimes have to face and during times like that they are targeted and attacked, mentally, and sometimes physically. The claim that cricket parallels to the nationalistic feelings for the nation have no stronger example than this. This patriotic emotions that sports evoke in the minds of the people has been made much use by the filmmakers of recent times. The increased number of sports biopics that are being produced is supposed to have its backdrops in the love of the country for sports, and the celebrity status that sportsmen enjoy.

Sports movies started their appearance on the big screen during the 1980s. the earlier films did not witness much success because sports was used as a mere tool in these movies to promote a social, personal, or political cause, and sports in itself was not given much importance. The first sports drama to mark a change to this trend was *Lagaan* which was released in 2001. The movie successfully combined the feeling of nationalism while focusing on cricket with equal importance. The next successful film

to convey the feeling of nationalism was *Chak De! India*, which was a story of patriotism and women empowerment. From then, many movies have made their way to the big screen, either as a fictitious sports story or as sports biopics. All these films were rich in elements that boosted nationalism in the audience, be it the Indian flag that made its appearance during victorious times or the sacrifices that the protagonist had to make to represent and bring glory to his nation.

Mahendra Singh Dhoni, the Indian international cricketer who captained the Indian national team for nine years, from 2007 to 2016, is regarded by many as one of the best wicket keepers and captains in modern international cricket. This 'captain cool' is the only captain in the history of cricket to win all ICC trophies. Being a player who has contributed much to Indian cricket both as a player and as a captain, Dhoni's life was promised to bring success on the reel as well. *M.S Dhoni: The Untold Story* hit the screens on 30 September 2016 and was a box office blockbuster. Written and directed by Neeraj Pandey the movie stars Sushant Singh Rajput as Dhoni. The film begins in Ranchi with the birth of Mahendra. Dhoni's father is a pump operator who waters the practice ground. Fourteen years later, while goalkeeping in a football game, Dhoni is spotted by a cricket coach. Being invited by the coach to try out as a wicketkeeper for the school cricket team, Dhoni gradually improves his batting and becomes a regular member of the team. After achieving much fame through inter-school matches, he is selected for the Ranji Trophy, but he is late in reaching Kolkata.

To please his father, he joins the Kharagpur Station as a ticket collector. After a while, Dhoni is depressed with his job and decides to play cricket alongside his work. But as this does not work out fine for him, he leaves his job and admits to his father that cricket is his only ambition. Dhoni works hard and makes his way into the national team. He meets Priyanka Jha, his first love interest soon after this, but she dies in a car

accident. The rest of the movie depicts his journey in the world of cricket and his growth as a much-celebrated cricketer. In 2010, Dhoni meets Sakshi Rawat, whom he later marries. The movie ends with the final match of the 2011 World Cup where Dhoni hits his much-acclaimed six and India wins the World Cup, after 28 years. Although many critics commented that many of the important events and controversies of the player's life were omitted in the movie, it was a box office hit. The film has become one of the most successful movies in the sports biopic genre of the country.

The most usual narrative that the sports biopics follow is the tracing of the struggles that the protagonist has to undergo to achieve his ultimate goal: represent his country. No sports star is acclaimed or noted worthy unless he plays for his country, represents it in international matches, and brings glory to it. Representing the nation is thus the ultimate priority of every sports star. Along with personal growth, it also comes with the pride and patriotism that one feels while representing his home nation. While portraying this in the movies, extra emphases are given on the struggles that the character undergoes which gives greater value to the goal he has to achieve. The movies depict how, after many failures and hardships, the hero still works hard to attain his glory. This way, the nation itself is given the highest value which evokes nationalistic feelings in the audience. In *M.S Dhoni: The Untold Story* Dhoni has to go through a lot of hardships to secure his place in the Indian team. He has to work as a ticket collector for a while to make his father happy. But eventually, he discovers that the only thing that interests him is cricket, and leaves his job to find his way to the team.

Another important factor that underlies sports biopics is the nationalistic feelings that the protagonist himself possesses and makes felt at times. When the hero says that his nation comes before everything as far as he is concerned, much like the words of a

soldier, the audience surges with national pride, feeling one with the hero. In the biopic of Dhoni, there are many such instances where nationalism underlies his words. When he speaks to his first lover Priyanka Jha, before he leaves for Pakistan for the ODI series, he speaks indirectly about his priority being the nation.

“Will you miss me?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“Missing you will distract me. And you cannot afford to have a distraction when you’re playing for your country” (*M.S Dhoni: The Untold Story*)

Here, Dhoni's words emphasise that nothing can be given more priority, not even his personal life when the nation's honour is at stake. This high value for the country when exhibited by the protagonist, evokes similar feelings in the audience as well.

Similarly, during the World Cup finals, Dhoni is seen making a critical decision for the sake of his nation. He decides to go in to play in the position of Yuvaraj Singh, who has been in a very good form, although Dhoni himself has been out of form during the World Cup. In doing so, he lifts the burden of victory from the shoulders of another and puts himself in a risky situation, but for the honour of the country. The decision would have proved disastrous for the Indian team, had he failed. But he considered the country's honour above his honour and took the high risk. This tendency of Dhoni to take up personal risks for what he considers the betterment of the team is given much emphasis in the movie. He takes a tough call as a captain and asks the selectors to replace three senior players of the team. He believes that the team requires younger, stronger players for an increased probability of winning, and this victory that they could

achieve is the only thing that he is concerned about. He could face serious personal problems for making such an audacious decision (and he does), but he is not bothered about that. He believes that in the end, the only thing that matters is the victory of the country and the honour and pride that comes with it.

A staple in the sports dramas that is promised to bring about feelings of nationalism and patriotism is an India versus Pakistan match. Just like in real life, gaining victory over Pakistan is the ultimate moment of triumph and national pride. India and Pakistan are even considered enemy countries when it comes to sports fanatics. This feeling of an enmity towards Pakistan which in reflex creates national pride is made use of in sports biopics. A match with and a victory over Pakistan is one of the key moments in the life of the sportsman. It is even considered greater than winning any other international match. This is put to use in *M.S Dhoni: The Untold Story*. The moment in the biopic when Dhoni calls his father from Pakistan where the team has just won a match marks a striking point in their relationship.

“Hello”

“Dad, it’s Mahi”

“Yes, Mahi. You played really well today. Everyone was praising your game today. Did Musharraf say anything else?”

“No Dad. Are you happy?”

“Yes, I’m very happy. I’m happy to be proven wrong. Just keep playing well. Make your country proud. And don’t let all this go to your head” (*M.S Dhoni:*

*The Untold Story*)

It is clear from the movie that Dhoni's father was never happy about his son choosing cricket as a career. He always wanted Dhoni to get a job, and it is due to his pressure that Dhoni even worked as a ticket collector for a while. This conversation is a turning point in the relationship between Dhoni and his father, where the latter realises for the first time that his son is destined to reach great heights. It is interesting how it took a victory over Pakistan for his father to finally accept his choice. This instance from the movie is a striking example of the patriotism and national pride that both the characters of the movie as well as the audience feels after a victory over Pakistan.

One of the earliest box office hits in the sports biopic genre of Bollywood was *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag*. Directed by Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra, the movie is based on the life of Milkha Singh, the Indian athlete who was a national champion runner and an Olympian. Starring Farhan Akhtar, the movie was inspired from Milkha Singh's autobiography titled *The Race of My Life*. The film starts in the 1960 Summer Olympics in Rome, where Milkha Singh drops to the fourth position after the haunting memories of his childhood occur to him. The partition of India in 1947 resulted in mass religious violence in Punjab in British India, killing the parents of Milkha Singh. He reaches Delhi and later meets his sister there. He makes friends and survives by stealing with them, but quits on request of Biro, the woman he falls in love with. The story is narrated by Milkha's coach. Milkha makes his way into the army, where he is noticed by a sergeant after he wins a race.

He gets selected for service commission, where he is beaten up by senior players on the day before the selection for Olympic Games. In spite of being injured, he participates in the game and wins the race, breaking the national record. During the 1956 Melbourne Olympics, he loses the final match after being distracted due to his relationship with the granddaughter of his Australian technical coach. Suffering from

guilt, he trains hard and breaks the previous record for 400m race. Jawaharlal Nehru, the then Prime Minister convinces him to lead the Indian team in Pakistan for a friendly race. Milkha revisits his village and remembers his horrible childhood incident, where he also meets his childhood friend Sampreet. In the games, Milkha wins the race and respect of the two nations. The president of Pakistan gives him the title 'The Flying Sikh'. The movie ends with Milkha finally being able to let go of the terrors from his past after revisiting his village and winning the match.

Sports biopics do not count among the most frequently produced genre of films in the country. But when they are made, they usually view sports through a nationalistic lens. The narrative of the sportsman, as it unfolds on the screen through various challenges and obstacles he has to face, and the victory he gains right after is often portrayed as the products of furious patriotic desires. In *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag*, the entire focus of the film's narrative is closely connected with Milkha Singh's own traumatic experiences of partition. One almost feels that the narrative of the film gives more focus to these horrible instances of partition and the psychological impact it has on Milkha Singh than his sports career and achievements.

The haunting memories of partition that Singh has, is made much use in the movie. One such striking incident is at the beginning of the movie, where he loses the finals of the 1960 Olympic race. Singh loses his focus when the coach shouts "Bhaag Milkha bhaag" (run Milkha run), which brings to him the memory of his father shouting the same words just before he was killed. This is a factual error because this incident did never actually happen. Gurbachan Singh Randhawa, who was a part of the Indian team at Rome Olympics mentions that Milkha Singh never was leading the race and that he lost it as he looked back is an error. This scene must have been purposefully incorporated into the movie to make felt the terrors of partition and then, through the



victory that Singh achieves in the last scene, uphold the love that he holds for his nation.

At the end of the film, the audience feels that for Singh, winning in Pakistan is in a sense redemptive and therefore, a race with the horribly portrayed Pakistani player turns out to be the most important race of his life. As Tanushree Bhasin explains in her article in *The Sunday Guardian*, "Singh goes to Pakistan not only to win, but also to win over Pakistan. Singh too is cheered on by the Pakistani crowd. The emotional excess of scenes such as these are carefully crafted to ensure that the viewers enters an escapist fantasy where opposition between two sides, in this case, India and Pakistan, collapse to celebrate the true victor- Milkha Singh."(Bhasin) Here, the victory although seemingly belongs to Singh, could actually be pictured as the victory of India.

Like in most of the sports movies, a victory over Pakistan is incorporated into the movie to amplify the nationalistic surge and to provide a powerful culmination to the narrative. The race that happens in Pakistan is portrayed with more importance than many other events of his life. Through his victory, Milkha Singh not only overpowers his fears of partition but also stands as a symbol of the nation's pride. The victory is shown as the peak of his achievements, having extra significance because it is against Pakistan, with Milkha's coach shouting "Bharat Mata Ki Jai!" as he is celebrating.

There are also several other instances in the story which has an underlying tinge of nationalistic elements attached to it. Milkha Singh accepts the Prime Minister's proposal to lead the team for a friendly match in Pakistan only because he feels that he has to bring honour to his country. Although he dreads a journey back to his roots which has horrible memories in store for him, he accepts the offer only due to his patriotic feeling. While he returns victorious over Pakistan, the Prime Minister even

declares a national holiday. The victory over Pakistan is much valued because it boosts the patriotism in the players as well as the viewers. Another instance is when Milkha Singh tries out the coat of his senior with the national emblem and gets beaten up for that. His coach advises him that he has to "earn it" and that it does not come without hard work. He makes it clear in these scenes that nothing values more than the chance to represent his nation, and be a spokesperson for it. The nation is pictured with high glory here where the viewers feel that it is indeed a high honour to represent the nation. When he finally can acquire his own coat, it is interesting to see how he wears it around and wears it to his village. He is respected among his friends and his family.

Another event where Singh puts out his priority for his country is during the Olympics in Rome. There, he gets into a short-lived relationship with the granddaughter of his Australian technical coach and is distracted from the race. He loses in the final round due to this, and he realises the price he had to pay for the slightest of distraction. Rather than the fact that he feels a personal failure, it hurts him to think that he has let down the hopes and expectations of the people of his nation. In the succeeding scenes, we can see Singh even hurting himself in guilt. He decides that nothing matters more than victories he gains for his country.

Sports biopics have proved to be a very effective way of propagating nationalistic and patriotic feelings. As sports in itself brings about a feeling of unity and togetherness, the narratives of famous sportsmen are sure to impress and inspire the masses. More than the lives of the stars, nationalism is the element that works behind the success of the movies of this genre. Subtle elements that are incorporated into these films, like the national anthem that is being played during the time of the victory and the proud people on screen, the Indian flag that makes its appearance at times of importance are all factors that contribute to the nationalistic appeal of the movie. The struggles that the

stars in the film undergo to overcome hardships, all for the glory of the nation moves people. Like movies that depict the stories of soldiers, sports stars are also portrayed as fighters who strive for the victory of the nation.

It is also interesting to note that all the most celebrated sports biopics and sports, in general, tend to provide a masculine nationalism to the viewers. Women are more than often absent from the scenarios both on the screen and in real lives. Although it is always the Mother India that we portray through our stories and images associated with it, sports and sports biopics tend to give an impression of masculine nationalism. There have been many changes in this matter during recent times, and more narratives about women in sports are coming up, which demand critical analyses.

## Chapter 4

### A Scrutiny of Gender Bias in Indian Sports Biopics

The discussions about gender and gender disparity have become a political, public phenomenon only in recent times. Movements for the equal treatment of genders swept across the country only during the contemporary years on a big scale, and much later than its counterparts in western nations. India has always been and still is, highly patriarchal culturally and socially. Throughout their stages of growth, and regardless of their geographical locations within the country, girls and boys see gender inequality in their homes and communities daily, be it in textbooks, movies, in media, and all around them. It is disheartening fact that the women of the country still have to fight for basic rights and have to endure tremendous struggles to survive on their own. Gender discrimination in the country begins even before the child is born. An estimated 230,999 girls under the age of five die in India every year, due to neglect linked to gender discrimination. The prejudice based on gender is most pronounced in the rural areas of the country although in the urban areas, the bigotry only changes its forms.

The social set up of the nation is so deep-rooted in the patriarchal system that even media is corrupted by it. Media has a huge role to play in promoting the existing gender bias, and the Indian cinema world has ensured that the role of women must always be that of the submissive. The Indian cinema, which is the largest producer of movies in the world must also be the largest propagator of gender discrimination. Women centred movies have started appearing only during recent times, and even then, they are not received with much appreciation. Gender bias, like in every other realm of society, has also crept into art. Even in the recently popular genre of biopics that have made a wave in Indian cinema, this gender divide is evident. Looking into sports biopics, there are

not many biopics on women. This could also be a result of the fact that even in sports, women are discriminated against and have not succeeded in producing a national celebrity like Sachin Tendulkar or Milkha Singh. Even when women themselves have managed to excel in their fields, not much attention is given to them, nor are they celebrated like their male counterparts.

The main difference between the Indian male and female sports stars is that while the former is able to give himself fully into the respective sporting event, the latter, even after surpassing all the hurdles to reach a position, has to make a balance between her domestic life and sports life. This is exactly the reason why the sports arena does not witness a female sports star competing or still pursuing her dreams after getting married and having a family of her own. Even when her partner does not demand this retirement from her, the social stress and imbibed conditioning make her do it. On the other hand, there are rare instances of a sportsman quitting his dream after getting married, because it is not expected of him.

This must be the reason why the filmmakers have not often found it economically productive to make a film on the life of a female sportsperson. Even with sports-related movies like *Chak De! India* which spoke of women empowerment, the central role had to be played by a male superstar to ensure its economic profit. No biopics of female sports stars have succeeded in the box office like that of the male. Even with all these difficulties and culturally inhibited hurdles, a few films have attempted to bring into the big screen the lives of a few female sports stars. Some of these movies, along with the narrative about the life of the protagonist, have also attempted picturing the gender divide that exists in sports and society. They try to give a message of raising the women of the country strong and self-dependent if they are to survive the highly discriminative society they have to grow up in. While fictional movies have given a message on

raising the girls strong, biopics give a stronger impact in that they are the real stories of women who aimed high to break free of the stereotypes. Among the few stories, *Mary Kom*, and *Dangal* stands out in that they have presented a completely different approach to the genre of sports biopics.

*Mary Kom*, the sports biopic, is based on the life of the Indian Olympic boxer, Mangte Chungneijang Mary Kom. Nicknamed 'Magnificent Mary', she is the only woman to become the World Amateur Boxing champion for a record six times. Born in rural Manipur, Kom came from a poor family. Her parents were tenant framers and Kom grew up in humble surroundings. She learned athletics initially and later boxing. *Mary Kom* was developed by writer Saiwyn Quadras, who suggested the storyline to Omung Kumar when Kom was not a familiar name in India despite her numerous achievements. With the permission from Kom, the film hit screens in 2014, two years after Kom's victory at the 2012 Summer Olympics. Directed by Omung Kumar, and produced by Viacom 18 Motion Pictures and Sanjay Leela Bhansali, the movie starred Priyanka Chopra in the lead role. The film was a box office success and is also ranked among the highest-grossing Indian films led by a female actor.

The movie begins from the childhood of Mangte Chungneijang Kom, daughter of a rice farmer, who finds a boxing glove in the remains of an air crash in 1991 in Kangatheh and is fascinated by it. Growing up, during a fight, Kom finds herself in a boxing gym and finds Dingko Singh, to whom she tells about her boxing aspirations. Due to her dedication and stubbornness, Singh starts training her. She challenges a local wrestler for money, where she meets the football player Onler Kom. After winning the state-level championship, her family gets to know about her boxing, and her father confronts her about keeping it a secret. When he asks Kom to choose between him and boxing, she reluctantly chooses the latter. Her father recognises and comes in terms

with her only after he watches her victorious 2002 Women's World Amateur Boxing Championship on television. After the second victory in the World Championship, she gets married to Onler, gets pregnant, and gives up her career to look after her family.

The absence from the career slowly makes her uncomfortable and she is devastated to know that people no longer recognise her. With strong support from her husband, Kom restarts her boxing training and makes a comeback in the National Boxing Championship. Despite performing better, she loses the match due to the apparent partiality of the judges. Kom bursts out in anger and receives a ban and later writes an apology letter. Kom convinces her coach to train her and wins the 2008 AIBA Women's World Boxing Championships, even amid mental pressure for her sick child. She is given the nickname 'Magnificent Mary' and the movie ends with the Indian flag waving and the Indian national anthem playing in the background.

The movie addresses many issues apart from the apparent gender divide. Racism within the country is evident from the national championship scenes where Kom yells that judges have been partial because she was a Manipuri. The movie also has all the elements that invoke nationalism in the audience like the Indian flag and national anthem in the end. However, the most evident theme which is relevant at any point in time is the gender bias that is being portrayed in the movie, which is an absolute reflection of the Indian household and society. *Mary Kom* shows that gender bias begins from a very young age and that too from homes. The movie portrays it with double the credibility because these events and hardships were the ones that Mary Kom had to surpass in real life. The instances of discrimination that Kom had to face from her childhood is a story that most girls in the country can relate with. Both evident and subtle details of this divide are narrated throughout the story which explains to the

audience how hard it is to survive as a woman in India, and all the hurdles that she has to overcome if she is to achieve her goals.

Being a fighter and being able to express her opinions, Kom had her initial disagreements with her father. Being a part of a heavily patriarchal system, her father believed that boxing ring was not a place for a woman to be. He was also deeply concerned about the bruises and deformities the sport could cause on his daughter's face which would be a problem in her marriage. In the initial scene of the play, we see Kom's father expressing himself on finding something in his little daughter's hands. "What are you hiding behind? Show it. You picked this up from there? This is no girl's toy." (*Mary Kom*) Her father is surprised to find a boxing glove which he believes is not a thing that a girl is supposed to possess. Later, when she gets into street fights with other boys and tells her father that she is not interested in athletics, he scolds her.

"I have been borrowing from people for the last two years to pay for her and now she says she doesn't like athletics!"

"Appa, she wants to become a boxer"

"Shut up!"

"Who will marry you once your nose and face is broken. I should have burnt the gloves instead of throwing them. From the time you picked them up, you have begun acting like a boy."

"Call me anything you want but don't call me a boy" (*Mary Kom*)

Kom's father here expresses his strong belief that anything that has to do with fighting and using physical strength is a boy's business and girls are expected to keep their manners and face clean to get ready for marriages. It is also striking to see that



though brought up in the patriarchal society, Kom has strong disapproval of calling her a boy. She is proud as a girl and she wants to exercise her strength and rage as a girl. She has to make the very tough decision of choosing between the love of her father and the love that she has for boxing. When she chooses boxing reluctantly, it is also a challenge to the set standards. It takes many several games and a world championship for her father to be convinced that what his daughter did was the right thing.

The hurdles of gender-based discrimination keep on happening throughout her career as a boxer, from the very first fight she gets into. Her first fight as a boxer, with a local boxer, is amidst a huge male crowd, all of them betting over her failure. When she reveals that she is a woman, she is met with shouts that the boxer, Lalboi, does not fight with weaklings like women, which implicates that his reputations would suffer if he as to fight against the supposedly weak gender.

“Girl!”

“You think this is a kitchen?”

“Someone make her understand”

“Lalboi doesn’t fight with women. Get lost.” (*Mary Kom*)

This scene from the movie is a clear depiction of the average mentality of Indian society. The belief that women are best fit for kitchen, or that domestic chores are what a woman should be good at is prevalent in even the most modern Indian societies. It is into this strong belief system that Mary Kom smashes in with her question "Is he afraid?" Although she struggles and receives punches, she makes sure that she does not give way to fear or sexist comments. Instead, she lasts in the ring longer than anyone had expected her to.

Even when she surpasses all the social, physical challenges that tried to stop her and she won the State level championship, we can see that the people are not happy that a girl has dared to participate in something like boxing.

“There is a new champion from our village and that too a girl”

“What is wrong with parents these days?”

“Allowing their daughters to indulge in such fights.”

“Who is this girl anyway?” (*Mary Kom*)

This conversation, that happens between a few men in the teashop also includes Kom's father. Although he himself was a wrestler during his younger age, he cannot accept the fact that women can go into boxing. His belief is reinforced in the scene by the other people in the teashop, who shares his opinion. Instead of being proud of a daughter who has won a great achievement, Kom's father is ashamed of the realization that his daughter is a boxer.

The movie also points out the injustice and partiality that the women's team has to face even from the concerned authorities. From state-level championships to world championships, the movie points out how the players have to fight for their survival. In the interview she gives right after her first World Championship, Kom points out her disapproval for this, for which she has to face serious consequences.

“Girls just have to get the chance and opportunity and they will top every field, not only sports.”

“If the federation gives us just the basic facilities and a little respect for our work, then there will be a champion coming out of every corner of the country” (*Mary Kom*)

Kom often gets reprimanded for her audacious words and actions which even gets a ban. But she never stops standing up against injustices and discrimination against her and urges her team members to do the same. She proves her worth inside the boxing ring and makes sure that the world does not discriminate against her for being a woman.

Another striking element that makes this film stand out in the misogynistic film world is the male characters who are the propagators of women's rights. The two most important men in her life, her 'Coach Sir' Dinko Singh, and her husband Onler are clear examples of how men can champion the cause of feminism. Throughout her boxing career, her coach has been there, training her hard to be strong and providing necessary advice. Living in a patriarchal society, he took up a girl's dream of becoming a boxer and made it a reality. He has been sceptical about the marriage she had with Onler because he believed that a family would mean the end of her boxing career. He had a deep belief in the calibre of Kom and did not want anything to put a restrain on her skills in boxing.

“I will continue to box even after marriage. Onler and I have agreed on that.”

“This is what you feel today Mary. Do you even know how much your life is going to change after marriage? Love, traditions, rituals, you will be entangled in all of them Mary. And your gloves will be gathering dust in some corner wall of your house” (*Mary Kom*)

When her coach tells this, he does not do it out of his dislike for Onler. Rather, he knows that it is almost impossible for Mary Kom to make a comeback once she is settled in. But Kom proves this wrong with her strong comeback will all the support from her husband.

Onler is portrayed to be that husband whom most of the women in the country need to make their dreams come true. From their very first meeting, it is amazing to see the mutual respect Onler and Mary have for each other. He knows the love Kom has for boxing and supports her fully in it. He promises her that she will still be able to play after they get married, and he does keep his promise. Even when Mary Kom herself gives up all the hope for coming back into boxing, it is Onler who pushes her to do it and gives her the courage. When Mary tries hard to adjust with family life, Onler makes her understand that marriage and having a family is not a barrier that stops her from making a comeback.

"I mean, why can't you box again?"

"Onler, how can I box again? No one has ever managed that"

"A rice farmer's daughter coming from a small village of Manipur, fighting all the odds and becomes a three-time world champion. No one has ever done that too."

"But I wasn't a mother of two then. Do you know how much a woman's body changes after pregnancy?"

"It is difficult. But if there is anyone in this world who can make this happen, it is you."

"And what about the kids?"

"Leave them to me" (*Mary Kom*)

Onler instils courage in Mary taking away all her insecurities. He is ready to take up the household activities and look after both the children in a society where domestic chores are considered that of a woman. He believes in her and makes her do the same. During a time when sports biopics were celebrated for their male superstars, Mary Kom hit the screens with the narrative of a woman who fought all the odds and marked history. She overcame all the hurdles that the male-centred society threw at her and proved her worth. Mary Kom stands out as the movie that chronicled the life of a woman successfully onto the screens with no leading heroes and still made a box office hit with strong messages for the society.

Two years after the release of Mary Kom, another movie hit the screens which dealt with the issues of gender bias in the country and in sports more fiercely. Loosely based on the Phogat family, the movie was a daring attempt at portraying the gender inequalities that prevailed in the country. Geeta Phogat and her sister Babitha Kumari are commonwealth gold medalists. Their father Mahavir Singh Phogat was a former wrestler himself and a Dronacharya Award recipient. Her other sisters and cousin are also into wrestling. The movie revolves around the struggles of Mahavir Singh and his two elder daughters in gaining a stance in the wrestling world. Geeta Phogat is India's first-ever gold medal winner in wrestling at the Commonwealth Games. She is also the first Indian female wrestler to have qualified for the Olympic Summer Games. Babitha Kumar, her sister is also a winner of gold medal in the 2014 Commonwealth Games and a bronze medal at the 2012 World wrestling championships.

Directed by Nitesh Tiwari, the movie starred Aamir Khan in the central role, with equal focus on Fatima Sana Shaikh and Sanya Malhotra. The film was a

record-breaking commercial success, becoming the highest-grossing Indian film ever and the highest-grossing sports film worldwide. The movie begins as the story of Mahavir Singh Phogat, a former amateur wrestler and a national wrestling champion, who was forced to give up sports to obtain gainful employment. He hopes to fulfil his dream of winning a medal for the country through his unborn son. Eventually, he gives up, disappointed upon having four daughters, until one day, his older daughters Geetha and Babita come home after beating up two boys for derogatory comments. He realises their potential to become wrestlers and begins training them hard. Despite facing backlashes from the villagers, he goes ahead with the training. Initially, though the girls resent it, they soon realise that he cares for their future. They participate in local wrestling competitions with boys amidst the disapproval of the villagers. Geeta goes on to win the junior and senior championships at the state and national level before heading to the National Sports Academy in Patiala to train for the forthcoming Commonwealth Games. Once in the academy, Geeta disregards the discipline taught by her father, following the training techniques of the new coach, which are relaxing. As a result, she loses every match at the international level. During a visit home, she mocks her father, and the relationship between them is affected. Soon after, Babitha wins the national championship and follows Geeta into the academy. After an emotional conversation between the two sisters, Geeta makes peace with her father. Before the commonwealth games, Mahavir Singh goes to Delhi to personally train Geeta and gets into a dispute with her coach. With a warning from the Sports Academy, they continue the training via phone calls. At the game, Geeta eases her way into the finals and eventually becomes the first Indian female wrestler to win a gold at the game.

From the very beginning, the movie has successfully and beautifully portrayed how gender bias underlies even the protagonists. The movie narrated by Omkar, the cousin

of Geeta and Babita, begins with Mahavir Singh dreaming of a day when he would make his dream come true through his son. A son is vital to his dreams as far as he is concerned because a thought never occurs to him that a daughter could make it come true as well. There are instances where almost everyone in the village gives the couple advises on giving birth to a boy child. But all the plans fail as the couple has four daughters and Mahavir gives up on his dreams. As he explains, it is not that he does not love his daughters, but for his dream to come true, he must have a son. Hope returns to him however, when he finds that his older daughters fought with a boy and hurt him badly for calling them mean words. It is his moment of realization that his girls are no less than boys. Although his priority is winning a medal for the nation, he finally succeeds in looking beyond the stereotypes. His wife and the villagers, however, are not very fond of Mahavir's idea, just like Geeta and Babita.

“Wrestling is for boys”

“You think our girls are any lesser than boys?”

“I’ve never seen girls wrestle. What will the villagers say?”

“For how long will they talk?” (*Dangal*)

Mahavir is no longer concerned about what the society is going to think of his choices.

When Mahavir starts training the girls, the villagers let out all their frustration. For them, girls are only meant for domestic chores and Mahavir is ruining their life by training them for wrestling.

“Girls are suited for the kitchen not for wrestling”

“He’s getting the girls to wear shorts and fight boys”

“Since you all started wrestling, your walk has become very manly” (*Dangal*)

Along with the villagers, Mahavir’s wife is also worried that what everyone around them speaks about might come to truth.

“The entire village is laughing at us. Who will marry our girls?”

“I will make our girls so capable that boys will not choose them they will choose boys” (*Dangal*)

In his struggle to win a medal for the country, Mahavir pulls out the strands of stereotypes from his daughters and makes them believe in themselves and that there are far greater things to be achieved than spending an entire life inside a household.

Initially, though the girls resent their father's decision, during a conversation with their friend who is about their age, and who is about to get married, they finally realise that what their father is doing is for their best future. In the scene between the sisters and their friend, the filmmakers also have thrown light into the horrors of child marriage that are still prevailing in the country despite legal barricades. The society's belief that girls are a burden and that they are to be married off as soon as possible is clearly portrayed in the picture.

“May God never give anyone such a father”

“I wish God had given me such a father. At least your father thinks about you. Otherwise, our reality is the moment a girl is born, teach her to cook and clean, make her do all the household chores and. And once she turns 14, marry her off. Get rid of the burden and hand her over to a man, whom she has never met. Make her bear children and raise them. That’s all she is good for. At least your father considers you his child. He is fighting against the



whole world. He is silently tolerating their taunts. Why? So that the two of you can have a future... a life." (*Dangal*)

Through this conversation, the movie precisely defines the situation of an average Indian girl. This conversation is also crucial in the sense that the two girls finally understand that they have to fight all through their way against society if they are to reach great heights. And they realize that they are lucky to have a father like theirs in a world where daughters are considered a burden.

Although they find confidence and trust in themselves and their father, sports do not offer them an easy path towards success. Throughout the journey of the girls, one can see the stigmatised society that is not happy with women coming into the forefronts of what was till then considered men's reign. In the first local match that Geeta participates in, it takes a great deal of struggle for her and Mahavir Singh to even be a part of the game. "Sir, the day I organize a cooking competition, that day bring Geeta. This is a wrestling competition" (*Dangal*). And when the authorities finally agree to it, it is only because they want to reap profit out of all the people who will gather to watch the girl. "Think about it. In a town that has never seen a girl wrestle, when a girl wrestles a boy, how many people do you think will come to watch? Our competition will go through the roof." (*Dangal*)

While Mahavir struggles for economic support, even the authorities treat him with humiliation. For them, it is not a big deal that a girl has reached the state level. They write her off the book in the expectation that she is not going to last in the field because she is a girl. He fights hard, and almost every time, the people around him treat him as if his two daughters are a heavy burden. When he asks for leave from his office to accompany Geeta for the national tournament, his senior officer taunts him and says

that had it been her wedding, he would have considered granting him the leave. He means to say that there is nothing greater than a marriage that could happen in a girl's life. Mahavir even has to give up his job to support his dream that has been taken up by his daughters.

During the local wrestling match with the boys, Geeta says to her opponent, "Don't fight by considering me a girl" This statement that the girl makes is a direct challenge to the patriarchal regime. When for years, a girl for the society was almost equal to vulnerability and softness, Geeta is declaring not to think the same about her. Her statement goes against how girls have been typecast in a male-dominated society. It is also important to note that Mahavir did not want to turn the girls into boys but instils in them enough strength to fight as whomever they were. Mahavir takes on the ridicule of the same patriarchal set up that he is a part of. He even gives up his job to enable his daughters to do something that bends gender norms.

In a cinema world where masculinities are attributed power and glory and are celebrated, it takes a great deal of courage to produce a film like *Dangal* where women take up the central stage. The final scene of the movie is a picturization of the women attaining freedom and glory when Geeta in the absence of her father not only achieves victory but also manifests the recognition of her self. Her victory is a challenge to the blindness which denies seeing a woman as an equal human being in the existing social domain. *Dangal* is not just a movie about sports, but a movement against the regressive mentality which states that women are inferior to men and that their world is limited to their homes. It marks a milestone in the genre of sports biopics and has triggered the change that has to happen in the outlook of both the society and the cinema audience.

## Chapter 5

### Conclusion

Movies take up an important position in the conduct of society not just as a means of entertainment, but also as an important influencing factor. Far from its role as a medium of entertainment and pleasure, movies also play a great part in the presentation and distribution of ideas, ideologies, novel trends and whatnot. This influencing capability that cinema has been put to much use by movie makers to propagate their ideas and communicate their thoughts to the world. It has also proved to be a very effective means to declare the protest against or support to current systems. With its far and wide reach than any other medium of art, movies are excellent means of spreading awareness, influencing people, and setting trends. This might also be the reason why deep and critical studies are done about movies and their impact on societies and individuals.

People, more than often following the mob culture, are not really aware of the hidden propaganda that comes with movies, be it intentional or not. When their favourite star appears on the screen, they blindly believe what their character tries to proclaim and follow it up in society. The mob does not pause and check the reality behind the notions that certain characters from movies promote. More than often, what the character communicates might not have any actual resemblance to the ideologies of the star playing that role. But the very fine line between a character and the film star who portrays it on screen is often blurred and is enough to boost the audience. This is also the reason why certain critics opine that the film star, to an extent, is responsible for the ideologies that his or her character spreads. It is also because of this same reason why movies need to be made with social responsibilities. A great film and a great actor

can influence society to a very huge extent and this power should be used wisely to bring about positive changes to the cultural, social set up. It should also be used to speak out against the injustices that prevail in society.

It has been made clear from the analyses of the sports biopics *M. S. Dhoni: The Untold Story* and *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag* that sports-biopics have undercurrents of patriotic elements in them. Hence, it is important to be taken into consideration the kind of impact it leaves in the minds of people. While the movies have the power to integrate the people into a unified feeling of nationalism, it could also lead to hatred toward other communities and countries, which will not be of a positive outcome in the farther future. Too much of a nationalistic feeling could also lead to imposed nationalism on other individuals of the society, and could also deeply affect the democratic system of the country. The patriotic feeling which is integrated into the sports biopics could contribute to the betterment of the country in that the national pride that these movies emit could bring people together and make them work towards the betterment of the society.

But the danger that hides beneath these facts is that too much of these nationalistic feelings will eventually turn into hatred towards other nations and anything which even slightly oppresses these feelings. The years of strife between India and Pakistan have much to owe towards the rivalry that still stays afresh in sports, especially in cricket. This blind adherence towards the nationalistic feeling turns the society against anything that would question their belief, even if it is sensible. Also, the blind patriotism acts as factors that enable communities or even political parties to put into action their divisive politics. These divisive politics, in turn, fuel people to turn against one another, merely based on their preferences in sports. Hence, it is important to keep a constant check on the ideologies and nationalistic elements that are being propagated through movies. A

keener check should be done in the case of sports biopics as sports and movies together could influence people in ways unknown to any other media.

Another important issue that needs addressing is the clear gender disparity that exists in movies and in sports even during modern times which has been deeply analysed through an examination of movies like *Mary Kom* and *Dangal*. While movements for women empowerment struggle to bring about gender equality in all realms of life, it is striking to see the level of struggles that a woman has to undergo to reach her dreams in a democracy like India. Though there are gender differentiation in every realm of society, it is much more pronounced in the area of sports because of the general notion that physically demanding arenas are not meant for women. The Bollywood movies in general also have a trend of stereotyping and objectifying women. It is only during recent times that women-centred movies began to be accepted in society. Even so, a very limited number of such movies are produced, and even fewer among them become commercial successes. It is clear from this very ratio that gender disparity is a very happening phenomenon in the country. Filmmakers do not come forward to chronicle the lives of the few sportswomen in the country owing to the economic crisis it could create for them. Even when they choose to do it against all odds, more than often, they make a safe play by casting a male superstar in the leading role to ensure the success of the film.

But more movies must be made about the limited number of lady sports stars that the country has produced. It would be wrong to say that they were produced by the country because behind each of their stories of success, one can find a long saga of hardships, struggles, and differentiations based on gender that they had to ensure. The stories of these women who successfully crossed all these struggles and fought hard against the existing systems to make their dreams come true should be spread far and

wide. Their lives will inspire many more young girls and women to not give up on their lives and fight on, in the hope of a better future.

The gender struggles that prevail in the country are not to be treated lightly. More studies are to be done on the matter and more attention is given to improve the chances and opportunities of the future generation. Sports biopics and other women-centred movies should hit the screens and made into huge successes to narrate the stories of successful women from around the nation. These stories and narratives would remind the future generation that they are not alone in their fights and that women before them fought very hard to ensure that the future of the country was forged in gender equality. With their fascinating power over millions of people, sports and movies can accomplish this task.

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