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Original Research Article

Indian sports biopics

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ABSTRACT

For decades, filmmakers all over the world have got influenced from great personalities, sports celebrities, iconic figures and literature and transcribed it into movies. Adaptation of biography into cinema is nothing new for the Indian film industry too and the impact of great personalities and literature on our films is almost as old as filmmaking itself. From *Raja Harishchandra* to Milkha Singh and Kapil Dev, Indian cinema has been inspired and adapted many legends, sportspersons and literary figures. Since then, Indian filmmakers have directly or indirectly taken references from various mythological characters, biographies, auto-biographies and social stories in order to make their films. Through the biopics – Mary Kom, Dhangra, Bhag Milkha Bhag – the sports icons become the torch-bearers and pave a way for budding wrestlers and boxers who are striving hard and putting their best endeavour to emerge as a winner in their life and to win glory for her beloved nation, Mother India. The aim of the present paper is to depict and delineate the endless struggles and the indomitable will in the lives of sports legends generally and the amazing success of Mary Kom and Phogat sisters (Geeta Kumari and Babita Kumari) become the historic monumental for women liberation in the sports arena, specifically. The prime aim is to break the aged-old dogmas and trifle tradition of the society and to sing the song of women liberation. It is also main motive to promote sports culture and sportsmanship in India especially for girls. Moreover, it is a burning question to find out the impact of biopics on the viewers and the society.

In the last ten years of 21st century, we have seen many biopics on great sports personalities, i.e. Milkha Singh [1], Merry Com [2], Budhia Singh [3], Mohd. Azharuddin [4], Sachin Tendulkar [5], Mahender Singh Dhoni [6], Saina Nehwal [7] and on Kapil Dev [8] and their impact on the viewers and the society. The fundamental aim of these motivational and inspirational biopics is not only to promote sports and sportsmanship in India but to underline their endless struggle as sports icons also. Before it, numerous beautiful and life-changing films have been adapted and screened on the novels by authors such as Rabindranath Tagore, Prem Chand, Mulk Raj Anand, Salman Rushdie, Manju Kapur, Amitav Ghosh, Rohinton Mistry, Chetan Bhagat and watch a selection of films by directors like Satyajit Ray and Mani Ratnam.

In this paper, I have listed down some of the most brilliant biopics based on sports personalities that we have seen in Bollywood. Not all of these movies were the best reflections on the lives of their subjects, but every movie had one standout feature that made it worth a watch.

The blockbuster movie, Dhangra which is, regarded Geeta Kumari Phogat as a modern day “Harbinger of Women Wrestling” or “Cyclone in Dhangra”, a motivational and life-changing saga of women wrestlers and always attracts the masses to admire and appreciate the caliber and capabilities of “Herald of Women Wrestling” in India. Nitesh Tiwari’s direction lives a permanent mark directly, on the minds of the viewers and indirectly on the society. The film is a landmark in many ways. Its well-knit-plot, rural area setting, using of Haryanvi twang (dialect), beautiful characterization and above

all, the role played by Amir Khan as Mahavir Singh Phogat (father), Sakshi Tanwar as Daya (mother), Fatima Sana Shaikh as Geeta Phogat, Sanya Malhotra as Babita Phogat – is exceptionally unforgettable. Jim Jarmusch says,

“Nothing is original. Steal from anywhere that resonates with inspiration or fuels your imagination.”

The Indian Express comments on the movie, ‘Dhangra’:

“What keep the film together are the performances. The first-timers — as little girls, and young women learning to gauge their opponent and beating all comers; no silver medals, only gold — all come off well. Tanwar, as Khan’s wife, is a good choice, just familiar enough, and yet new enough. But this is clearly Aamir’s film. It wouldn’t have been made if he hadn’t green-lit it, and he brings to it the sincerity of purpose which makes it not just a starry vehicle, but a film which is about something, which has meaning, with a message which doesn’t overwhelm the telling.”

The plot is, indeed, beautifully woven which underlines the incredible struggle of Mahavir Phogat in the name of kusti and unbeatable spirits of his loving daughters. It seems that to win the gold for India is the sole mission of Mahavir Phogat in his life. But, when he fails to do so, he trains tirelessly, day and



night his own daughters and enabled them to win the Gold Medal for his beloved country.

“Maarichhoriyan chhoron se kamhaike”

(“Are my girls any less than boys”?)

What a striking line! If one line can transform lives, then it has to be this line which summarizes the core of this inspiring story. It is this belief of Mahavir Singh Phogat, the erstwhile wrestler that changes the destiny of Phogat daughters and of future generations of women wrestlers. This is such a powerful line and shows through movie the potential of outcomes when girls are believed to be equal to boys. The movie, Dangal which is a biopic on women wrestling champion - Geeta and Babita Phogat is special because it depicts an inspiring journey of a father and his girls who dare to dream and make that dream come true even when all odds were stacked up against them.

The movies points out various striking issues of Indian societies and the outlook of people towards women wrestling. To begin with, the Phogat Family lives in socially regressive Haryana, infamous for skewed sex ratio, female feticide and khap-panchyats. In addition to this, the lower-middle-class family with limited resources and is more vulnerable to societal pressure as ‘what people will say’ matters in that world. Moreover, choosing an unconventional career which is unfavorable to women – wrestling is a revolutionary change. Traditionally wrestling has been a male domain and when you imagine a wrestler, you imagine a man. It was akin to imagining the unimaginable, doing the undoable.

The narrator, Omkar (Mahavir Singh Phogat’s nephew) delineates and depicts the whole story in a very amusing and interesting way. The story moves as follows:

Mahavir Phogat (Aamir Khan) is an amateur wrestler who lives in a village namely Balali (Bhiwani) Haryana with his wife Daya (Sakshi). As an amateur wrestler, he has not only won several local championships but name and fame also. However, he was forced to give up wrestling in order to obtain gainful employment or we can say he takes up a job to feed his family. He was unable to win a gold medal for India and vows that his son will. However, wrestling never really leaves him. Mahavir dreams of the day when he will sire a son who will bring a gold medal for India. Unfortunately, He is dejected and disappointed when his wife gives birth to consecutive four daughters, the first two of Geeta (Fatima) and Babita (Sanya). He gives up his dream thinking that girls cannot wrestle and should only be taught household chores. But, when the incident of thrashing a boy happened, it changed the mind-set of Mahavir and he eventually realised that his daughters have the potential to become wrestlers.

He suddenly realises that he doesn't need a son to train in wrestling. Even a girl can fulfil his life-longed dream. He starts thinking of his lost mission. Mahavir begins coaching Geeta and Babita in wrestling. His methods seem harsh, including gruelling early morning workouts and short haircuts to avoid lice. Even his daughters can do Dangal. As the narrator describes:

“Main hameshayosochakichhorahota to kusti me gold lekaraata.Par ye baatmerisamjhnanaaiki gold to gold hovhain ,chhoralavaeyachhori.”

(All along, I was desperate for a son, so he could win gold for the country.)

But what didn't occur to me is that gold is gold, whether a boy wins it or a girl.)

As pictured in the movie, Mahavir, first of all, won battle of his own conservative and aged-old superstitions and social taboo regarding female wrestling. After winning his self-battle and visualized his lost dream, he embarks on the path of glory and heralds a long struggle for female wrestling. He fights for his girls with his wife, his brother, his villagers and everyone who is against the women liberation i.e. women kusti. When he went to the village akhara- coach and requests him to train his daughters then, the coach says:

“Yo ke baat karrahyasae, Mahavir. Chhoriya nau rakha demae. Is umar me paap karaavgake?”

(How utterly absurd, Mahavi. Girls are in the wrestling arena? Will you have me sin at this age?)

Despite of all adversities, Mahavir starts to train her daughters in his own field after cutting premature harvest. He nurtures them and inculcates true discipline and instructions of kusti as:

“Apni maati ki hamesha izzat karo. Kyoki jitni izzat tam maati ki karogi ,utni hi maati se tumne milaegi.”

(Always respect Mother Earth. The more you respect it, the more respect you will get in return.)

One day Geeta and Babita attend a school mate's wedding without telling their father. When they tell their friend who is getting married how they hate their father for making them going through the wrestling training, she replies that it was nice of their father to at least give them some training, unlike her who was being forced to marry at the age of 14. When Geeta says, “May God never gives anyone such a father.” (*Esa baap bhagwan kisi konae de*). Then, the best and life-changing message comes from Sunita, a class-mate of hers:

“Kash! Bhagwan ne esa baap hame diya hota. Thara baap thare bare mae kuchh sochta to hain.

Warnayahan to haal yo hain ke chhori paidahui ... sikha do usako chulha-chauka... karalo jhadu-pochha... aur jab 14 ki ho jaye to kar do usake haath peele...chhuda lo pichha... kardo sirf ese mard keha wale...jise usane kabhidekha hi nahi... karne do paida bachche ... palane do unhe.

Thara baap thare tae kum se kumaula dkadarja to de rahya hain ... puri duniya se lar raj yahain ...sabki jali- katti sun kaechuphain ...kyun...taki tum donno kuchh bun sako...esme galti ke karaerayahain.”

(I wish God had given me such a father! Otherwise our reality is –the moment a girl is born, teach her to

cook and clean, make her do all the household chores. And once, she turns 14 merry her off. Get rid of the burden! And hand over to a man, whom she has never seen before. Make her bear children and raise them. That's all she's 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. What is he doing wrong?)

After getting this practical and pragmatic piece of advice, the girls learn to appreciate their dad. The next morning, they set off for training and from then on, they train real hard. Mahavir allows them to wear shorts for the training and he even allows them to eat chicken. Once he thinks they are ready, he gets Geeta to participate in her first Dangal at Rohtak where she loses the bout from a local pehelwan (wrestler) but wins hearts of the spectators/ onlookers. She wins Rs. 50 (more than the winner Rs. 20) after losing the bout. Mahavir preserves this 50 rupees note in an album as a token of regard. After this Geeta, never looks back, wins several tournaments and even wins a Gold Medal. When she grows up she goes to the National Sports Academy in Patiala and participates in several international tournaments. In the meantime, Babita also becomes a professional wrestler and wins local championships. Babita also qualifies to go to the NSA. Here she sees how her older sister has lost her way. She gets her sister to come back on track by patching up with her father, who has moved to Patiala with their cousin, Omkar. While the sports coach trains them at the Academy, their father gives them lessons outside.

When it is time for the Commonwealth Games, Geeta beats World Champion in the Semi- final and has to wrestle with Angela Watson (in the final) to whom she had lost earlier. Eventually, she beats her and emerges as a Gold Medallist in 55 k. g. women category and her sister Babita won Silver Medal. The Times of India comments on film Dangal:

"It is to the film's credit that though Geeta and Babita's wins are documented, it still manages to engage the viewer with the wrestling tournaments and bring patriotic emotions to the fore. Most importantly, Dangal scores with its first-rate performances. An ungainly Aamir (22 kilos heavier) with grey hair is pitch-perfect as the ziddi yet sensitive parent. The 51-year-old actor should be complimented for experimenting with his roles, unlike his contemporaries who prefer to play safe. Sakshi as his wife is restrained, yet effective. And, the debutants Fatima and Sanya are easily this year's best finds. Demonetisation will be damned, watch Dangal."

Another movie that benefitted greatly from the efforts of its lead – Omung Kumar's Mary Kom was a Priyanka Chopra show all the way. Mary Kom is the only woman to win the 'World Amateur Boxing Championship' six times, the only female boxer to have won a in each one of the first seven 'World Championship', and the only boxer (male or female) to win eight 'World Championship' medals. Priyanka Chopra's physical efforts at learning boxing and putting on muscle was impressive but better still was the grace and restraint she

brought to her performance. She played both a mother and a boxer equally. The various shades of her role seemed so authentic only because PC was in top form in this film. Director, Omung Kumar swears that Priyanka Chopra was his first and only choice for the biopic. In an interview with a leading daily, he said,

"In our industry, you can count the actresses who can actually perform on your fingers. Yes, other names were thrown in but I wanted her. In fact, Priyanka too was sceptical at first. She loved the script but after the narration when I was on my way home, she called and said, 'Do you think I can do this?' I replied that if someone can do this, it's only you and no one else. Priyanka was my only choice."

Talking of physical transformations, no other actor managed a better impact for their role, than Farhan Akhtar in 'Bhaag Milkha Bhaag'. The muscles he put on for this performance were intense, but the best part was Farhan's overall athletic look that seemed a perfect reflection of the real Milkha Singh. The sprinting scenes in particular were top notch. Both Director Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra's and Farhan's efforts made 'Bhaag Milkha Bhaag' one of the best and unforgettable sports biopics in Bollywood. Milkha Singh sold the rights for his biopic to Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra for 'a mere sum of 1 rupee'. He turned down the 8 figure offer since he felt that if like Rang De Basanti, Bhaag Milkha Bhaag also went on to be a hit then it can inspire our young people and result in India's first Olympic track gold, which was enough of a reward for him. In an interview with a leading daily, he mentioned the reason he wasn't bothered about the money was that the movie can inspire the country to win gold again in track events. He said,

"This is the year of the Commonwealth Games. I feel sad to say that 52 years after I won gold in the Cardiff Games, India hasn't been able to win gold in track events. I want Indian youth to understand what determination and purpose can achieve. If a Milkha, who didn't have access to even basic necessities of life, can aim for the skies, why not others who've been provided the best of facilities?"

The cricket field being invaded by hundreds of fans, with the players running for cover, when the final boundary hits the rope, 83 is a time-travel capsule. A throwback to that landmark month of June in 1983, when one man's conviction witnessed his team script a story which is, perhaps even now, the greatest of all underdog sport triumphs. 83 is, on many levels, a staggering film. It's a film that seamlessly melds the real with the reel, illustrates the power of the human spirit and takes us into the heart of a landmark moment. A moment that is not only etched in the annals of the sport and which changed the course of world cricket, but also became an unbelievable win that united a country that was at that time — very much like it is now — divided by socio-religious schisms.

Many a record was created and broken in that World Cup. Kapil Dev's historic innings against Zimbabwe at Tunbridge Wells is, till today, described as "one of the greatest knocks in

the history of the beautiful game”. But what it actually did was infuse belief into a team — and in a nation — that nothing was impossible. This was a team playing as much for pride, as it was playing to hold that silver trophy in their hands.

At the heart of 83 — and he is, more than once, described as the ‘jigar’ of ’83’s Team India — is a man called Kapil Dev. Bursting into Indian cricket in the ’70s as an all-rounder, Kapil was a true son of the soil whose English may have tottered on more than one occasion, but whose confidence in himself, and his team, didn’t. Take for instance that moment in the film when Kapil (played by Ranveer Singh), accompanied by Team India manager Man Singh (Pankaj Tripathi), in the initial days of their World Cup campaign with no one giving them a chance, are in a press conference with about three-odd journalists in attendance. It’s a moment that also forms an integral part of the film’s trailer. Smiling that half-smile and looking straight ahead, Kapil nonchalantly says in his broken English, “*We here to win*”. A few seconds of stony silence are followed by the snigger-tinged query, “*You mean the World Cup?*” Kapil, smile intact but eyes even more steely, quips, “*Then what else we here for?*” It’s a scene that truly encapsulates both the man and the film.

Over 152 minutes, director Kabir Khan keeps going back to Kapil’s unwavering conviction (Man Singh, played by Pankaj Tripathi in the way only he can, refers to the man as “a freedom fighter” more than once), but makes his compelling story of hope and hopelessness, win and loss, dejection and resurgence, an inspiring tale that quickly envelopes the viewer and makes 83 a truly immersive experience.

We know how it’s going to finally play out. We know how Mohinder ‘Jimmy’ Amarnath will trap Michael Holding leg-before-wicket to script history, much like how we hold our breath, even after umpteen viewings, willing Vidya to look at Kabir in the final moments of *Chak De! India* or egg on Sanju to kick the gear on his cycle to brace past the finish line in *Jo Jeeta Wohi Sikandar*. It’s the attention to the stories, individual and collective and the humorous and heartwarming personal nuggets in the run-up to that final triumph that make 83 the film that it.

In conclusion, biopics are in vogue in Bollywood and these unforgettable and anthologizable biopics leave various lessons to learn as: children’s (especially girls) destiny lies in hands of parents to a larger extent. In addition to this, the social barriers, stereotypes and glass ceilings have to be broken once and they remain broken for all. Moreover, the conviction, focus on goals, self-belief, hard-work, sacrifices & trade-offs are determined in life. Above all, success changes everyone’s negative attitude into positive. As it is highlighted in the movie, Dangal that night before the final bout of

Commonwealth Games 2010, the father tells Geeta that this fight is not only with the opponent but with the “mindset” that girls are not equal to boys and this mindset is the root-cause for gender inequality, denying girls opportunities to life, career and choices.

Dangal, Mary Kom, Saina’s biopics offer various surprises because their historic win at world level and following championships paved a way to the women sportsmanship. Since these biopics encapsulate the historic win of the sportsman who brought India’s glory, and also bound to inspire more women to seriously consider kushti, boxing and badminton as a sport specifically in Haryana and generally in India. All the taboos regarding female wrestling and boxing or female as a sportsperson had been battered, tattered, and shattered. The present movies arise many questions as our obsession with the male child (prevalent since the dark ages), myopic stand on bringing up our daughters and the administration’s pathetic disposition towards sports, are loud and crystal clear. But the ultimate message which is universal is Geeta, Babita, and Mary Kom’s life changing saga which will remain immortal forever in pages of history as women sports icon forever.

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