

SPORTS BIOPICS AND EMOTIONAL NARRATIVES IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN CINEMA: CONSTRUCTING NATIONAL IDENTITY THROUGH CINEMATIC STORYTELLING

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Abstract

Sports biopics have occupied an unexpectedly powerful place in Indian cinema over the past two decades, migrating from commercial marginality to something approaching cultural indispensability generating public debates, shaping school curricula and accruing a reverence previously reserved for religious and mythological epics. The global earnings of *Dangal*, exceeding two thousand crore rupees, signalled not merely box-office success but a broader cultural reconfiguration of what popular cinema may be permitted to do to history.

This paper examines what these films accomplish ideologically and affectively, beyond their motivational or pedagogical functions. It is argued that these films convert individual athletic histories into vehicles for national feeling, manage and ultimately contain the political dimensions of caste, gender, regional identity and produce, through the spectatorial experience, a particular and consequential relationship to historical memory one whose costs deserve critical examination.

The study analyses fifteen Hindi-language sports biopics released between 2001 and 2024, drawing on theories of collective memory (Halbwachs), affect (Ahmed, Massumi), cultural hegemony (Gramsci) and performative documentary (Bruzzi). Five films *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag*, *Mary Kom*, *Dangal*, *83* and *Maidaan* receive extended analysis; the remaining ten inform comparative interpretation.

The central argument concerns a recurring narrative structure termed in this paper the trauma-triumph pipeline through which personal suffering (Partition, poverty, caste discrimination, regional exclusion) is converted into the precondition for national achievement. It is contended that these films generate national identification sustained primarily through shared cinematic feeling rather than engagement with historical complexity. While they bring marginalized identities into public visibility, that visibility is shown to operate within consistently controlled parameters: difference is acknowledged in order to be absorbed; structural critique is raised in order to be defused. The paper proposes the concept of mnemonic nationalism to name this ideological mode a form of national identification produced and sustained through affective experience rather than historical argument.

Keywords: sports biopics; collective memory; nationalism; affect theory; Indian cinema; historiography; identity politics

1. INTRODUCTION

Consider the opening sequence of *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag*. Before the film presents a single athletic image before a track, a starting pistol, a competition it presents fire and screaming. The Partition massacre that orphaned Milkha Singh arrives before his sprint career does, rendered at full emotional volume. The formal choice is deliberate if unobvious: the film instructs its audience in how everything that follows is to be understood. Athletic achievement, it is implied, is inseparable from historical wound. To watch this man run is to watch a figure who is, in some fundamental sense, outrunning history itself.

It is that relationship between historical trauma and national triumph that this paper investigates. Indian sports biopics have made the conversion of suffering into glory their governing narrative logic and in doing so, they have become something considerably more than entertainment. It is argued here that these films function as affective memory **institutions**: cultural forms through which audiences come to experience themselves as participants in a shared national past whose defining moments they did not personally witness. When Ranveer Singh's Kapil Dev lifts the 1983 World Cup trophy in *83*, audiences born decades after the event reportedly feel, with apparent sincerity, that they remember it. This constitutes a considerable cultural achievement and, it will be argued, a considerable ideological one as well. The two aspects, it is suggested, are inseparable.

Existing scholarship on Indian sports cinema has not adequately attended to this dimension. Much critical writing has focused either on historical accuracy whether *Dangal* misrepresents Geeta Phogat, whether *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag* distorts Milkha Singh's career or on representational politics, examining whether these films treat gender, caste and region equitably. These are legitimate scholarly concerns. However, they treat films as documents to be verified rather than as emotional experiences whose political work is performed through

feeling rather than argument. It is observed that a film may be factually imprecise and ideologically potent simultaneously; indeed, these qualities not only coexist but frequently reinforce each other.

Four questions structure the inquiry: How do these films convert personal trauma into national sentiment at the narrative level? What role does affect through music, editing and the material conditions of cinema spectatorship play in producing the sense that emotionally heightened fiction is historically true? How do they negotiate identities structured around caste, gender, religion and to what extent does that negotiation remain politically constrained? And what is the cumulative relationship between the cinematic experience and the formation of shared public memory?

2. EXISTING LITERATURE REVIEW: GAPS AND OPPORTUNITIES

2.1 Biopics and Historical Performance

Pramod K. Nayar's (2018) work on the Indian biopic provides the most theoretically productive starting point available, partly on account of its considerable ambition. Nayar's central insight that biopics use theatricalization as the mechanism of their truth-claim rather than as a concession to it draws productively on Stella Bruzzi's (2000) account of performative documentary. The dramatization, it is argued, is precisely how the film asserts emotional authority over the historical record. This insight deserves serious critical engagement.

It is noted, however, that Nayar's framework describes the phenomenon more fully than it explains it: how the performance of authenticity achieves psychological traction and why audiences find it persuasive rather than merely recognizing it as constructed, receives less sustained attention than the phenomenon would seem to warrant.

Kumar's (2013) typological work is useful for different reasons. By cataloguing the genre's recurring formal conventions adversity arcs, symbolic training sequences, moments of public vindication Kumar demonstrates that the sports biopic's narrative grammar is considerably more stable than its surface variety might suggest. It is argued, however, that the stability of structure does not explain the consistency of affect and affect, in these films, does the ideological work. Identifying the convention does not, in itself, account for its force.

A broader problem persists in the literature: existing scholarship tends to treat these films as inspirational content motivational narratives organized around athletic achievement rather than as culturally significant formations whose popular reach is itself the primary phenomenon requiring explanation. It is observed that when a Hindi-language film about a wrestler from Haryana becomes the highest-grossing Indian film in Chinese cinematic history, something beyond entertainment is evidently occurring. The political work performed by the genre's emotional architecture has, to date, received insufficient sustained analysis.

2.2 Nationalism, Sport and the Body

Benedict Anderson's foundational argument in *Imagined Communities* (1983) that nations are constituted through shared symbolic practices rather than given by nature remains essential to this inquiry, not because it is novel (it has by now become a commonplace of cultural studies) but because cinema tests it with particular and productive clarity. The simultaneous, mass, emotionally immersive experience of watching a film in a darkened hall functions as an almost direct demonstration of Anderson's thesis. Sports cinema intensifies this effect further: the athlete competes visibly and bodily on behalf of an abstraction called the nation and sporting victory becomes a sensory, legible instantiation of collective dignity.

What the sports biopic adds to live sport is retrospection and retrospection is argued to transform the affective stakes considerably. The original event (India's 1983 World Cup victory, Milkha Singh's near-miss in Rome) occurred in real time, uncertainly, without narrative coherence or predetermined meaning. The biopic reconstructs it as destiny: the outcome is known, the suffering that preceded it is rendered visible and victory arrives charged with a significance it could not have carried in the original moment. This retrospective organization of emotion is held to be considerably more powerful than the original event as a mechanism of national identification because it is organized, calibrated and emotionally saturated in ways that historical events, as they unfold, cannot be.

Feminist scholarship has tracked a persistent asymmetry in how this nationalist framing treats gender. Rohman (2019) and Hemalatha and Sandeep (2024) both observe that in films such as *Mary Kom* and *Dangal*, female athletic achievement achieves narrative legibility primarily through mediation by male authority figures fathers, coaches and selectors whose vision authorizes and frames female success. The woman achieves; however, the film is seen to frame her achievement as validation of male vision. This dynamic is identified as structural rather than incidental, with significant consequences for what the films ultimately claim about female agency and its sources.

These films are not hostile to women's sport clearly, commercially, they are not but the narrative architecture through which they represent it is argued to tell a particular and limiting, story about where agency properly resides.

Postcolonial scholars have made a parallel argument about regional and ethnic identities: political implications are acknowledged at the level of surface representation, then absorbed into a homogenizing national narrative. It is contended that what neither feminist nor postcolonial scholarship has adequately

addressed, however, is the mechanism of this absorption specifically, how the emotional experience of spectatorship produces nationalist readings of marginalized experience that feel, from the inside, like celebration rather than co-optation.

2.3 Affect and Memory as Social Processes

Sara Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004) is identified as the most productive framework for addressing this question. Ahmed argues that emotions are not private psychological states but social forces circulating between bodies, attaching to objects and narratives and organizing collective orientations toward the world. This formulation cuts against the common-sense understanding of cinema spectatorship as passive reception or individual emotional response. In the context of sports biopics, her framework is held to explain something that purely textual analysis cannot: why audiences experience these films as emotionally true even when they are fully aware of watching fictionalized accounts of historical events. The affect generated is understood to attach to and amplify pre-existing structures of national identification that the films' formal properties activate and direct.

Brian Massumi's account of affect as pre-cognitive intensity (2002) merits engagement here, though with some caution regarding its application. His argument that affect operates below the threshold of conscious thought felt in the body before being registered as named emotion or deliberate interpretation is considered useful for thinking about what takes place in a cinema hall during a climactic sequence. The collective intake of breath before a decisive moment, involuntary tears, spontaneous applause: these responses are understood to be not products of deliberate interpretive effort but of formal choices music, editing rhythm, camera placement, scale that act on audiences before analysis becomes possible. Ideological criticism of these films tends to operate at the interpretive level. The ideology, however, is argued to do its work at the affective level and this gap is identified as precisely what makes these films so persuasive and so persistently under analyzed.

Maurice Halbwachs' theory of collective memory, developed in the French original of 1950 and available in English translation since 1980, is held to add a third essential dimension. Memory is not, in this account, an individual archive but a socially organized process: what is remembered, how it is framed and what significance it carries depend on the collective frameworks available to a given community at a given historical moment. Cinema is identified as among the most influential institutions through which those frameworks are constructed and renewed. When a film reconstructs a historical event with emotional precision and narrative coherence, it is not depicting something that happened, it is producing a version of it, a version that will, for many audiences, become the memory. The historical accuracy of that version is held to be, from the perspective of memory formation, largely beside the point. What matters is whether it is emotionally compelling enough to displace or subsume alternative versions.

These three theoretical strands, Ahmed on the social circulation of affect, Massumi on pre-cognitive intensity, Halbwachs on the social organization of memory are noted to have rarely been brought into sustained dialogue in analyses of Indian sports cinema. That theoretical opportunity constitutes the primary motivation of the present paper.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Four theoretical orientations underpin the analysis, each addressing a dimension of the sports biopic that the others cannot fully account for and their combination is argued to be more than additive.

Collective memory is treated here not as a reservoir of preserved experience but as an active, ongoing social process. Halbwachs established this in foundational work that predated cinema's dominance as a memory-making technology; the sports biopic is understood to extend his insight into an era his framework could not anticipate. These films are treated as cultural technologies through which societies perform the ongoing work of memory selecting what is worth feeling about the past and organizing how those feelings are structured, inherited and renewed. They are understood not merely to represent history but to produce a particular emotional relationship to it, with consequences that extend well beyond the cinema hall.

Affect theory, drawing primarily on Ahmed and Massumi, provides the framework for understanding why that production is so effective and why its effectiveness so consistently escapes critical notice. The films are understood to work through the social circulation of feeling attaching affect to images, sounds, bodies and narrative sequences in ways that feel self-evidently true rather than constructed. National identification, in this account, is not a conclusion reached through deliberation but an experience produced through participation and participation that feels, in the moment, like recognition.

Cultural hegemony, in Gramsci's sense, accounts for the ideological dimension of that experience without reducing it to conspiracy or false consciousness. Hegemony is understood to operate through normalization rather than coercion: it makes particular accounts of social reality feel like common sense rather than ideological positions. Sports biopics are held to achieve this by embedding specific understandings of national success, legitimate suffering and worthy identity within emotionally compelling narrative structures. The nationalism they produce does not announce itself as ideology; it functions as the emotional atmosphere in which everything else in the film is experienced.

Performative documentary, as theorized by Bruzzi (2000), is understood to explain the specific epistemological status these films claim for themselves. It is observed that they do not deny their

dramatizations; rather, they use dramatization to assert a different kind of truth emotional, experiential, affective truth that operates independently of factual accuracy and, the films implicitly suggest, is superior to it. This claim is rarely articulated explicitly within the films, but it is argued to structure the viewing experience throughout. The spectator is, in effect, invited to experience the film's emotional architecture as a more authentic access to historical truth than the archive could provide and most spectators, most of the time, are seen to accept that invitation.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Study Approach

This study employs a qualitative interpretive approach. The aim is not to measure audience responses or advance generalizable statistical claims about the genre but to develop a theoretically grounded account of how sports biopics produce meaning and to trace the mechanisms through which that meaning acquires ideological force. Interpretive research of this kind is sometimes criticized for sacrificing empirical rigor in favour of speculative reading. It is maintained, however, that the phenomena under analysis affect, ideological normalization, the production of collective memory are not measurable by methods designed to generate empirical generalizations. They require different and more patient, modes of attention.

A purposive sample of fifteen Hindi-language sports biopics released between 2001 and 2024 was selected on three criteria: cultural impact (sustained public presence, critical and commercial reception); representational diversity across gender, region, sport and community; and historical range the ability of individual films to illuminate different moments in the genre's development and different strategies for managing the relationship between personal narrative and national mythology. The selection is not exhaustive; films in regional languages are not included, a limitation addressed in the conclusion.

4.2 Research Objectives:

Three objectives were selected for the research study:

1. To analyze how individual athletic histories are narratively transformed into resources for collective national memory;
2. To examine how affect and emotional address function to legitimate hagiographic representations of sports figures;
3. To assess how gender, regional identity, caste and nationalism interact in the films' representational choices and their constraints.

4.3 Research Questions

RQ1: How do narrative structures in Indian sports biopics use personal trauma Partition, poverty, social exclusion to generate nationalist sentiment?

RQ2: To what extent does the genre's investment in emotional truth come at the cost of historical complexity?

4.4 Procedure

The analysis proceeded through four overlapping stages. Thematic coding identified recurring narrative motifs struggle, sacrifice, social obstacle, redemption and tracked how their distribution and variation produced different affective effects across the corpus. Narrative analysis examined structural patterns: flashback sequences, montage assemblies and the management of temporal relationships between past suffering and present achievement. Visual semiotic reading attended to the symbolic dimensions of mise-en-scène colour, framing and the iconography of national spaces.

Ideological reading then connected the textual patterns identified in these stages to the broader theoretical frameworks outlined here. The findings are interpretive and theoretical; the aim is a framework that is analytically productive for understanding the genre, not a comprehensive census of its formal properties.

5. ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

5.1 The Film Corpus

Table 1 presents the fifteen films comprising the analytical corpus, organized to foreground key variables that each case contributes to the study's arguments about narrative, affect and identity.

Table 1: Corpus of Indian Sports Biopics, 2001-2024

Film Title	Year	Sport	Core Affect	Identity Axis	National Memory Construct
Lagaan	2001	Cricket	Colonial Defiance	Caste & Religion	Anti-colonial Unity
Chak De! India	2007	Hockey	Religious Marginalization	Religion & Gender	Secular Nationalism
Paan Singh Tomar	2012	Steeplechase	State Betrayal	Caste & Rurality	The Broken National Contract
Bhaag Milkha Bhaag	2013	Sprinting	Partition Trauma	Religion & Nation	Overcoming the Ghost of History
Mary Kom	2014	Boxing	Motherhood vs.	Gender & Region	North-East as Integral

			Ambition		India
Dangal	2016	Wrestling	Paternal Redemption	Gender & Rural Class	Modernizing Tradition
M.S. Dhoni: The Untold Story	2016	Cricket	Small-town Aspiration	Class & Region	Neoliberal Success
Sachin: A Billion Dreams	2017	Cricket	Collective Worship	Pan-national Identification	Sports as Civil Religion
Gold	2018	Hockey	Post-Independence Pride	National Origin	The Birth of the Nation
Soorma	2018	Hockey	Physical Trauma & Recovery	Disability & Region	Resurrecting the Fallen Hero
83	2021	Cricket	Underdog Triumph	Class & Post-coloniality	Post-Colonial Confidence
Saina	2021	Badminton	Middle-class Grit	Gender & Class	The New India Spirit
Toofaan	2021	Boxing	Social Reform	Caste & Religion	Sports as Moral Cleansing
Jersey	2022	Cricket	Late-age Redemption	Ageing & Class	The Never-Too-Late Mythos
Maidaan	2024	Football	Golden Era Nostalgia	Erasure of the Past	Reclaiming Lost Glory

5.2 From Wound to Victory: A Recurring Structure

Across all fifteen films in the corpus, a structural pattern is held to be consistent enough to constitute a genuine generic convention. Personal suffering historical in *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag*, social in *Toofaan*, regional in *Mary Kom*, familial in *Dangal* is narratively converted into the necessary precondition for national achievement. The individual's wound is not merely a biographical fact that the film records; it is understood to function as the engine that drives achievement and achievement is what retrospectively gives the wound its meaning. Without Partition, it is implied, there would be no Milkha Singh worth making a film about. Without caste discrimination, there would be no *Toofaan*.

This recurring structure is termed here the trauma-triumph pipeline. The label is deliberately reductive: no generic term can capture the variation across fifteen films and it is intended as an analytical handle rather than a description of the films' full complexity. What it names, however, is a pressure consistent enough across the corpus to constitute genuine generic convention and convention with ideological consequences that merit direct analytical attention. The label draws implicitly on Lauren Berlant's work on cruel optimism, in which structural obstacles are reframed as developmental opportunities though Berlant's framework concerns contemporary neoliberalism more than nationalist cinema and the parallel is offered as suggestive rather than exact.

This conversion of suffering into precondition is understood to naturalize a particular account of how national achievement is produced. The question these films raise and then emphatically answer is not whether the system is just but whether the individual possesses sufficient resilience to transcend it. Hardship, in this narrative economy, functions not as an indictment of social structures but as a developmental stage. The pipeline runs from wound to triumph and its completion is presented as evidence that the system is capable of rewarding those with sufficient determination.

The pipeline's effectiveness is held to depend on careful emotional calibration. These films invest heavily in the initial wound: humiliation, loss and exclusion are rendered with considerable affective care. Audiences are made to feel the weight of suffering before the reversal is staged. This investment ensures that when triumph arrives, it does so charged with accumulated emotional energy. The relief that audiences are seen to experience is not simply pleasure at a satisfactory outcome; it is understood as the release of tension deliberately built across two hours of screen time. The triumph redeems the suffering, rendering it meaningful rather than merely unjust.

One question the analysis raises but cannot definitively answer concerns the extent to which audiences are fully conscious of this emotional management. Research into actual reception audience studies, focus groups, empirical work that this paper's methodology does not attempt would be required to assess how visible the pipeline's ideological implications are to viewers in practice.

What textual analysis can establish is that the pipeline is present, that it is consistent and that its ideological implications are considerable. Whether viewers experience it as ideology or simply as storytelling remains an open and important question.

5.3 Narrative Time and the Organization of Memory

Non-linear narrative is identified as the sports biopic's dominant temporal strategy and its function is held to extend well beyond exposition management. The flashback sequences present in nearly every film in the corpus are understood not as devices for providing backstory but as mechanisms through which personal and national histories are aligned, made to illuminate each other and ultimately fused.

Bhaag Milkha Bhaag is held to provide the most sustained example of this technique in the corpus. The film does not narrate Milkha Singh's story chronologically; it returns repeatedly to the traumatic scene of his parents' murder during Partition, reactivating that memory at moments of athletic crisis. The structural effect is to render the race as historical resolution: the athlete runs not simply for a medal but in an effort to outrun a history that has never quite relinquished its grip on him. Partition in this reading is not background. It is identified as the film's structural engine.

What Halbwachs would recognize in this structure is the organization of collective memory through narrative form. The film is understood to produce an emotionally structured version of Partition personalized, dramatized, affectively heightened that is made available to contemporary audiences as shared memory, regardless of whether they have any personal connection to 1947. The Partition that viewers of Bhaag Milkha Bhaag carry away is not the Partition of historical scholarship. It is a Partition organized around a sprint, saturated with particular emotional meaning and calibrated to produce a specific affective residue: the sense that national achievement redeems historical loss.

This is identified as significant cultural production whose significance is not diminished by historical imprecision. What matters for memory formation is not whether the film's version of Partition is accurate but whether it is emotionally compelling enough to become the version audiences carry with them. The available evidence cultural saturation, sustained critical discussion, the film's continued presence in educational contexts suggests that it has achieved precisely this.

5.4 Visibility and Its Terms

The representational gains of the sports biopic genre are genuine and should not be dismissed. Before Dangal, women's wrestling barely registered in mainstream Hindi popular culture. Before Mary Kom, North-Eastern identity had not been accorded this kind of sustained, commercially successful representation. These are identified as real expansions of visibility, whose effects on public perception are considered to have been real.

It is contended, however, that the terms on which visibility is granted are consistently constrained and that the constraint follows a recognizable pattern. In Dangal, the film's central figures are two female wrestlers Geeta and Babita Phogat who achieve genuine athletic distinction.

Yet the film's narrative architecture is observed to consistently relocate agency in the figure of the father, Mahavir Singh Phogat. His ambition organizes the film, his discipline structures the training sequences and his vindication is what the climax ultimately delivers.

When Geeta wins gold at the Commonwealth Games, the emotional force of the moment is directed toward her father. Female achievement, in this account, achieves legibility as the realization of paternal vision. The film is not hostile to women's sport; it is argued to be structurally incapable of imagining female athletic achievement as something other than a gift to male ambition. Whether this reflects an inevitable feature of Hindi commercial cinema's gender politics or a specific choice made by director Nitesh Tiwari is difficult to determine from textual analysis alone. Production histories and interviews with the Phogat sisters themselves suggest a more complicated story one in which the real Geeta Phogat's relationship to her father's authority was considerably more ambivalent than the film permits.

Mary Kom is understood to perform a parallel operation on regional identity. The film acknowledges Manipur's cultural distinctiveness and the marginalization of North-Eastern communities within mainstream national consciousness. These acknowledgments are genuine: the film does not present itself as though no tension exists. However, they are observed to function at the level of characterization rather than politics. By the film's conclusion, Manipur's complexity the region's contested relationship with the Indian state, its history of insurgency and counter-insurgency, the particular conditions of exclusion from which Mary Kom's achievement is extracted has been dissolved into a narrative of national integration. She enters as a Manipuri boxer; she emerges as an Indian champion. The political gap between those two identities is filled with feeling rather than argument.

Caste is observed to operate differently, but according to the same structural logic. In Paan Singh Tomar and Toofaan, caste is framed as an obstacle that athletic achievement transcends rather than a structural condition that demands critique. Success is presented as evidence that the system can be overcome but this is a very different claim from the claim that the system requires structural change. The individual's triumph is understood to be deployed to absorb rather than sustain the structural critique that the film itself has raised.

This dynamic is termed here controlled visibility a phrase intended descriptively rather than conspiratorially. What is being described is less a conscious gatekeeping strategy than a generic constraint that has become naturalized: mainstream Hindi cinema is held to have developed conventions for incorporating marginalized identities that require those identities to achieve legibility within pre-existing frameworks of national belonging. The visibility is genuine; its conditions are consistently limiting.

5.5 Affect and the Conditions of Watching

The ideological work of sports biopics is not accomplished at the level of narrative or representation alone. It is understood to take place in the lived experience of watching in the cinema hall's particular configuration of darkness, scale, immersion and social presence. Christian Metz (1975) identified this

configuration as a precondition for a specific form of emotional engagement, though his framework predates both the multiplex environment and the social media conversations that now surround theatrical releases and extend their affective reach considerably.

What watching together is held to produce, in practical terms, is amplification. Individual emotional responses are intensified by awareness that they are shared. The collective applause that erupts at a moment of triumph, the shared silence during a scene of loss: these are understood not as expressions of individual emotion but as social confirmations of national feeling, enacted collectively in the dark. Audiences are not observed to process these films as arguments about national identity; they are seen to feel them as expressions of national belonging. That feeling registered in the body and confirmed by the bodies around them is not readily subjected to critical interrogation after the lights come up.

This is offered as description rather than criticism of audiences. It is a description of how affect operates and of why the affective dimension of these films deserves the analytical attention it has too rarely received.

6. FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

Three findings emerge from the analysis, whose collective significance is held to be greater than that of any individually.

First: the scale and consistency of sports biopics as memory-producing institutions. These films are understood not to achieve cultural power through narrative originality the trauma-triumph pipeline is, as the corpus demonstrates, remarkably stable but through their capacity to produce emotionally coherent experiences that audiences receive as genuine contact with the national past. Ahmed's account of the social circulation of affect is held to explain why this works: the feelings these films generate attach to and amplify pre-existing structures of national identification, using cinema's formal properties music, editing, management of physical and emotional tension to render those structures not merely visible but experiential.

Second: what this paper has termed controlled visibility. The genre's representational range has undeniably expanded women wrestlers, North-Eastern boxers, lower-caste athletes and Muslim cricketers have all been accorded mainstream visibility they did not previously possess. It is contended, however, that the conditions of that visibility are consistently constrained. The films are understood to bring marginalized identities into focus in order to incorporate them into the national story rather than to interrogate the conditions that produced their marginalization. A significant political difference is identified between a film that shows a woman succeeding despite patriarchal structures and a film that interrogates those structures. The sports biopic, with exceptions rare enough to prove the rule, is held consistently to do the former. Emotional engagement with female or lower-caste achievement is argued to tend to obscure this distinction rather than illuminate it.

Third: the relationship between emotional investment and historical complexity. The most powerful effects in these films are held to be achieved precisely at the cost of historical precision. Non-linear narratives, emotional amplification and the compression of complex social processes into individual-biographical terms produce films that are considerably more accessible than academic history and that, in being accessible, necessarily simplify and in some cases distort what they represent. Directors are not obligated to produce documentaries. It is observed, however, that as Fontanel (2020) has argued, the genre's formal conventions create systematic pressures toward hagiography, away from complexity and the cumulative effect of this on public historical consciousness is held to merit serious attention.

The concept proposed here mnemonic nationalism ties these three findings together. The sports biopic is understood to generate national identification through affective experience. Audiences emerge having felt their national belonging in ways that are, in the immediate term, more persuasive than any analytical engagement with the films' historical or political simplifications could be. The nation is not argued for; it is felt. And feeling, once established, is remarkably resistant to subsequent critical revision.

The term draws on Michael Billig's notion of 'banal nationalism' (1995) but shifts the emphasis from the unremarkable daily reproduction of national identity through flags, currency and news discourse toward the more intense, periodic and emotionally saturating reproduction of national feeling through cinematic spectatorship. Where banal nationalism describes the cognitive habits of national life, mnemonic nationalism is held to name a mode of national feeling produced through immersive affective experience. Whether the concept fully captures what these films do, or whether it risks overstating their ideological coherence, is a question to which this paper does not claim to have offered a definitive resolution but it is advanced as a productive analytical starting point for future work in this field.

7. CONCLUSION

Indian sports biopics have become among the most culturally significant forms through which nationalism, historical memory and social identity are publicly negotiated in contemporary India. The films examined here are held to share a set of narrative and affective strategies the trauma-triumph pipeline, the retrospective organization of historical time, controlled visibility of marginalized identities and the immersive affective environment of theatrical spectatorship that together produce mnemonic nationalism: a mode of national identification generated and sustained by cinematic feeling rather than historical argument.

Three theoretical contributions are offered. By integrating affect theory, collective memory studies, cultural hegemony theory and performative documentary theory into a unified interpretive framework, this paper provides what is argued to be a more comprehensive account of how sports biopics achieve their ideological effects than previous scholarship has offered. The concept of the trauma-triumph pipeline identifies a structural pattern held to be stable enough across the corpus to constitute a genuine generic convention one with significant consequences for how personal suffering and national achievement are publicly understood. The concept of controlled visibility names a dynamic argued to be characteristic of mainstream Indian popular cinema more broadly: the capacity to acknowledge difference while neutralizing its political implications.

It is worth naming, briefly, the situatedness of this analysis. Writing from within an Indian university, with sustained engagement with the cultural context these films inhabit, carries both advantages and constraints proximity to the material, but also proximity to the ideological formations the analysis seeks to examine critically. That position is not a disqualification; it is part of the interpretive ground on which the argument stands.

Several questions remain genuinely open. How audiences in different regional and social contexts receive and resist the nationalist frameworks these films construct remains to be established through empirical work that the present study is not designed to provide. What occurs when the genre operates under the changed conditions of streaming distribution, where the collective affective environment of the cinema hall is absent and viewing becomes individualized, has yet to be systematically examined.

How sports biopics in regional-language cinemas Tamil, Malayalam, Telugu handle the relationship between regional identity and national belonging differently from their Hindi counterparts and what those differences might reveal about the genre's structural assumptions, constitutes a significant avenue for future research. And what the cumulative effect of a sustained cultural diet of mnemonic nationalism may be on the ways Indian publics understand and misunderstand their history remains a question of considerable consequence.

The commercial success of the sports biopic shows no sign of diminishing. The expansion of streaming platforms has extended the genre's reach while altering the conditions of its reception. The cultural work these films perform producing emotional relationships to history, managing the representation of marginalized identities, organizing national feeling will continue, with or without analytical scrutiny. Scholars of Indian cinema, media studies and nationalism have good reasons to give that work the sustained attention it deserves: not to diminish the films' considerable artistic achievements, but to understand, with appropriate rigor, what they are doing in the world beyond the cinema hall.

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