

Article summary -

The return of the historical epic to Hindi cinema has brought with it questions about accuracy and intent. With *Padmaavat*, *Kesari* and *Manikarnika* courting controversy and bringing in large audiences, and *Panipat* and *Tanhaji* set for release, we look at the ways in which history is being reimagined by recent historical films.

How Bollywood is rewriting history



Kangana Ranaut in 'Manikarnika'

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In 1953, Sohrab Modi made *Jhansi Ki Rani*, a Hindi film about Lakshmibai, one of the leaders of the 1857 rebellion. As the British forces start bombarding her fort, the queen asks her general, Ghaus Khan, why Jhansi's cannons aren't returning fire. He replies that the British guns are positioned behind a Hindu temple and that he doesn't want to risk destroying it. Lakshmibai orders him to fire back, then starts to pray. The temple survives the bombardment.

The same incident is restaged in Kangana Ranaut and Radha Krishna Jagarlamudi's *Manikarnika*, another film about Lakshmibai, with Ranaut in the lead. The 2019 film has the queen riding out with a few men, somehow not getting shot by an entire standing army, and personally destroying the cannons. This sequence, though ridiculous, is in keeping with the genre's recent muscular stance—the temple must be protected at all costs.

There has been an explosion of Hindi historical films in the last couple of years. Some are set in the distant past, others in relatively recent times of turmoil. Most of them place on the nation's screens, and in the public's imagination, a version of the past that's obscured by legend and skewed towards certain narratives.

The blockbuster success of Baahubali (2015), a lavish Telugu action film set in unspecified ancient times, sent the Hindi film industry scurrying for similar epic material. Though the film was not a historical, it would, along with its 2017 sequel (which grossed over ₹1,700 crore worldwide), have a huge influence on the genre, which adopted its grandiose production values and overtly Hindu iconography. However, instead of inventing its own legends, Hindi cinema turned to history.

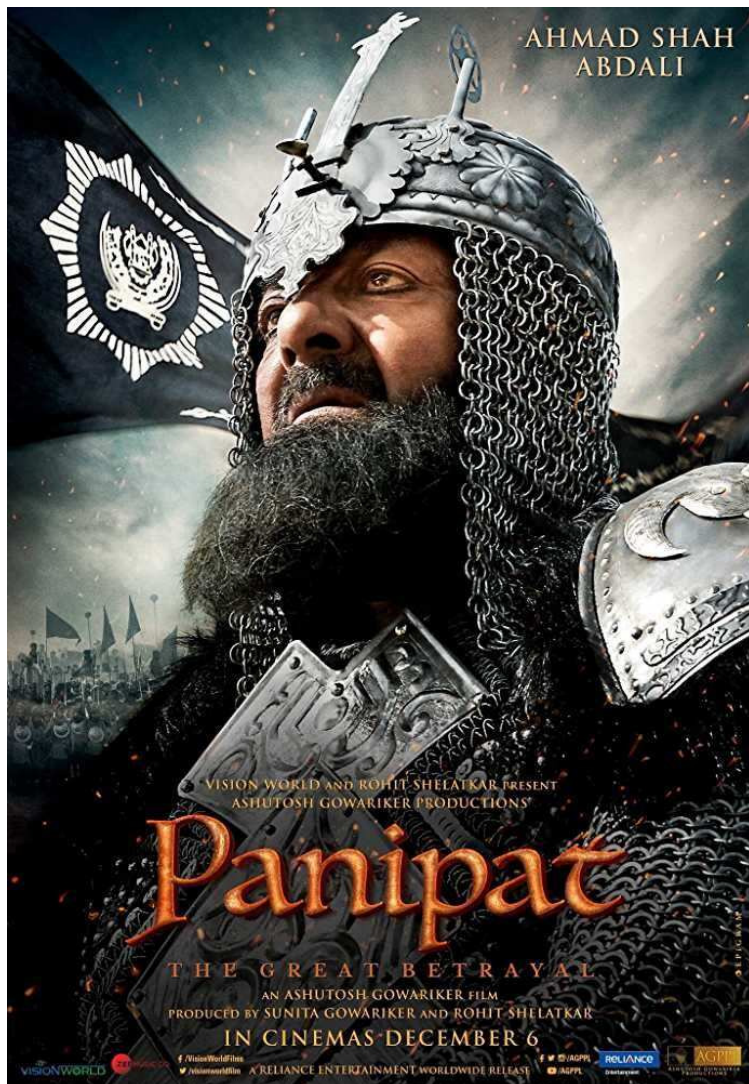


Shahid Kapoor and Deepika Padukone in 'Padmaavat'

Bajirao Mastani arrived at the end of 2015, Raag Desh in 2017. In 2018, Padmaavat brought controversy—and box-office credibility—to the genre; it was followed later that year by Gold and Manto. This year, there's been Manikarnika and Kesari. Two films about the Marathas are coming up: Ashutosh Gowariker's Panipat releases next weekend, and Om Raut's Tanhaji: The Unsung Warrior in January. There have also been several works of historical fiction in the last couple of years, with invented characters but based on real events: Begum Jaan, Rangoon and Firangi in 2017, Thugs Of Hindostan in 2018, and Kalank and Laal Kaptaan in 2019. (For the purposes of this piece, 1947 is the broad cut-off point for what qualifies as historical.)

Why is the historical—a genre out of favour for years—suddenly back in Hindi cinema? It may have something to do with the box-office success of Sanjay Leela Bhansali's Padmaavat, a flamboyant look at the 13th century Delhi Sultanate ruler Alauddin Khilji and his obsession with (the possibly fictional) Rani Padmavati, wife of the Rajput king of Mewar. With Hollywood making alarming inroads into the Indian market and streaming platforms drawing audiences away from theatres, Hindi cinema now needs its own big-budget offerings—and history is a ready source. Despite the controversies before its release—or because of them—Padmaavat earned ₹572 crore worldwide, making it one of the highest-grossing Indian films ever. Kesari, about an 1897 battle between Sikhs in the British Indian army and Pashtun tribesmen, also earned an impressive ₹207 crore.

There's another reason. Historical films allow directors to play up present-day beliefs while evoking past legends. On email, Katherine Schofield, senior lecturer in South Asian music and history at King's College London, says these films are useful for understanding modern values. "Film scholars talk about the historical film as providing a 'heterotopia'—literally 'another place'—in which to play out the political and social issues of the present day. We should be reading these films not for what they tell us about the past—even the most factually accurate films have to make enormous concessions to telling an entertaining story—but what they tell us about us, now, in the present day."



Sanjay Dutt in 'Panipat'

Take Panipat, a reimagining of the storied 1761 battle—regarded as one the biggest clashes of two armies in the 18th century—between Afghan ruler Ahmad Shah Abdali (Sanjay Dutt) and the Marathas under Sadashiv Rao (Arjun Kapoor). The trailer, released on 4 November, comes with an intriguing tag line: “The great betrayal”. A clue might lie in historian T.S. Shejwalkar’s 1946 monograph on the battle, which Gowariker has confirmed is the source material for his film. His study says that although the Marathas lost, “on the moral side their record is very clean”, and that the “ultimate result of Panipat was to make the way smooth and clear for the English”. It seems likely that the “betrayal” will be of India itself—possibly the decision by ex-Mughal serviceman Najib-ud-Daulah to side with Abdali. It’s also a good bet that the Marathas will come out looking saintly, defeat conferring martyrdom on them as it did on the Rajputs in Padmaavat, the Sikhs in Kesari and the rebels in Manikarnika.

What does a battle fought over 250 years ago have to do with the present day? More than you might expect. In January, Amit Shah, Union home minister and president of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), declared that the forthcoming general election would be “a decisive contest, like the third battle of Panipat”. “The Marathas had won 131 battles,” he said, “but lost one decisive battle, which led to 200 years of colonial slavery.” While referencing one of the greatest “Hindu” defeats, Shah also spoke of the BJP’s commitment to building a Ram temple in Ayodhya. Less than a year later, with the road to the temple’s construction now clear after the Supreme Court verdict, Panipat is set to release on 6 December, the day of the Babri Masjid’s destruction in 1992.

Every generation makes historical films in its own image. In the years before independence, stories about Indian kings (mostly Hindu) fighting foreign powers (mostly Muslim) were seen as an allegory for protest against British rule. Today, in a time of similarly heightened nationalism but no occupying force or officially declared wars, the same stories take on a more troubling patina. Earlier this month, The Caravan quoted Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh joint general secretary Krishna Gopal as telling an audience of Muslim professionals a day before the Ayodhya verdict: “There came a phase in our history when outsiders destroyed this country’s temples.” Fuelling the idea of Muslims as historic outsiders on the big screen may just strengthen this narrative.



Akshay Kumar in 'Kesari'

NATIONALISM SELLS

Padmaavat and Kesari are set several centuries apart, but in each the protagonists are brave patriots, and the antagonists barbaric Muslims. It remains to be seen how Abdali and his people are portrayed in Panipat but the Afghanistan embassy to India has already expressed concerns about “insensitive/distorted depiction of (Abdali’s) character”. The trailer shows the Afghan king with a blood-streaked face, ranting about conquering Hindustan, while Arjun Kapoor’s smooth-cheeked Maratha general talks about defending his land—a juxtaposition reminiscent of Padmaavat, in which Ranveer Singh’s psychotic sultan faced off against Shahid Kapoor’s bland patriot.

Panipat director Gowariker has suggested that the “Indian” army in the film would be an inclusive force. “By the time (the Maratha army) reached Panipat, there were 50,000 soldiers,” he said at a press conference earlier this month. “There were Hindus and Muslims. It was a cooperative kind of army, I felt it was important to bring that to the screen.” It should be intriguing to see how the Lagaan director’s pet theme of different clans and creeds coming together in the service of the nation plays out.

“Movies are made for the market,” says Rana Safvi, an author and historian documenting India’s syncretic culture. “You are catering to what you think is going to sell.” What is being sold, by nearly every Hindi film in 2019, is national pride. So much so that patriotism has become just another ingredient, to be inserted at regular intervals like one would a fight sequence or a comic track.

Patriotism is especially prominent in recent historical films. From Padmaavat to Tanhaji, nothing is more important than protecting the motherland. In Manikarnika, the queen’s all-consuming love for her country gives rise to a slur that’s common today, points out historian and Lounge columnist Manu S. Pillai. “There’s a scene where she calls Scindia deshdrohi (traitor to the nation). This is not the kind of vocabulary that existed in that time.”

The weight of nation-love has hobbled otherwise sensible films, like Reema Kagti’s Gold, about the building of independent India’s first hockey team. It stars, as the team’s architect, Akshay Kumar, Hindi cinema’s patriot-in-chief in the last couple of years (Hum India ko dekhega—I will look out for India—he says at one point). If you ignore the flag-waving and anthem-playing

and assertions that winning the 1948 Olympic hockey final against England would be “revenge for 200 years of slavery”, Gold is a good test case for debating what bits of history can and cannot be altered. Is it all right, for instance, to show the score in the final as 4-3 in India’s favour, when in reality it was a one-sided, cinematically unappetizing 4-0?

I ask Rajesh Devraj, credited with the film’s story, about the rules he set for historical invention. Devraj, who stresses he isn’t responsible for the final screenplay, says he wouldn’t have changed the final scoreline. As an example of the sort of thing he would change, he pointed to the scene where the Indian players take off their shoes to counter wet conditions. This might well have taken place; 1948 star Balbir Singh recalls it happening, though other accounts are silent. Even if it didn’t, Devraj says, there’s enough historical precedent for barefoot Indian athletes for this to work as a narrative device. “It’s really a metaphor. When they take off the shoes, they are rejecting colonialism. It’s them saying, this is how I played back in my village, I need to feel that contact with the soil.”

Gold offers up a soft vision of Indian glory, achieved by a mix of classes and creeds. Other historical films, however, are dialling up patriotism into a clash-of-civilizations rhetoric.

DEEPENING DIVIDE

In the trailer for Om Raut’s *Tanhaji*, Ajay Devgn’s titular Maratha general tells a young boy they will defeat the Mughals just as the Pandavas won against the Kauravas (a similar comparison is made in *Padmaavat*). It goes on to describe the 1670 Battle of Sinhagad as “the surgical strike that shook the Mughal empire”. The term “surgical strike” entered the public lexicon after Indian military action against Pakistan in 2016, and was cemented by the success of the film *Uri* this January (several BJP leaders adopted its famous line, “How’s the josh?”). That a film promo would associate the Mughals with the uber-villains of Indian mythology and then with Pakistan tells you a lot about the nation and its cinema in 2019.

“You can see a change,” Safvi says about the *Panipat* and *Tanhaji* trailers. “It’s becoming slightly more Islamophobic. It’s a more aggressive tone.”

In recent historical films, Hindus are more visibly Hindu. The *Tanhaji* trailer shows Devgn sitting beside a fluttering bhagwa dhwaja—the saffron standard of the Marathas. But there’s an addition: the Om symbol. This is almost certainly a leap of imagination; the Maratha flag had nothing printed on it. Muslims have also seemed more Muslim on screens in 2019: Kohl-lined eyes followed viewers from *Gully Boy* to *Uri* to *Kalank* to *Panipat*.

The most partisan contrast was in Anurag Singh’s *Kesari*, a violent war film in which Akshay Kumar plays the leader of 21 Sikh soldiers who died fighting an army of thousands of Afridi and Orakzai Pashtun tribesmen. The battle took place in 1897 in Sarhagarhi, in the North-West Frontier Province, then part of India. As soldiers in the British Indian army, the Sikhs were fighting other Indians for the British. The film, though, deliberately paints the tribesmen as marauders and the Sikhs as patriots fighting only in name for the British. In one particularly insidious scene, the film’s chief antagonist, a fanatical religious leader named Khan Masud, orders the beheading of a woman who tries to run from her abusive husband. As the execution is about to be carried out, he recites surah Al-Fatiha—a common prayer in praise of Allah. At the last moment, Kumar saves her.

Singh isn’t done labouring the point. He has Masud call for jihad (holy war) and repeatedly take Allah’s name while discussing battle plans. Then he restages the beheading with the same woman, and again the prayer is recited—only this time she’s killed. One of the last scenes, as the last of the Sikhs are dying, is of the tribesmen looting their supplies.

Throughout *Padmaavat*, we are told of the amazing things Rajputs can do, from walking on burning embers to sacrificing their life to uphold truth and freedom. There are no songs of praise for the Khiljis, even though Amir Khusro, the pre-eminent poet of his age, is in their ranks. They have a reputation for pillaging and raping; they are wild and dusty and dressed in dirty robes, while the Rajputs are perfectly attired. It’s unfortunate that Ranveer Singh’s turn as Khilji is the one spark in a dull film, for his unhinged performance only draws attention to a characterization that leans far too heavily on Muslim invader tropes. The real Alauddin was certainly a tyrant, but the Alauddin of *Padmaavat* is a sadist, a psychopath and a rapist who stages an eight-month-long siege so he can enslave one woman. The image that seems to have stuck with everyone most is of him biting into hunks of meat (“It seemed very barbaric,” Safvi says).



Ranveer Singh in 'Padmaavat'

The one thing that Bhansali doesn't do is link Khilji with any personal religiosity—though in the world of this film, a person who doesn't believe in God is to be suspected. Alauddin's object of desire, though, is compared to a goddess several times in the film. By the end, she's a literal deity; "Today, she's worshipped as a goddess, destroyer of evil," read the credits. This is similar to Manikarnika, which also elevates its Hindu queen to divine status. As she slashes through British soldiers on the battlefield, her face smeared with blood, she is Durga's wrath incarnate—which is why we hear a few lines from Aigiri Nandini, a Sanskrit song in praise of Durga, being chanted.

HISTORY AT THE BOX OFFICE

Historical films have
mostly been profitable in
the last few years

2015

BAJIRAO MASTANI

355.61 cr

2018

PADMAAVAT

571.98 cr

GOLD

154.48 cr

2019

KESARI

207.09 cr

MANIKARNIKA

132.95 cr

Source: Worldwide gross figures from
Bollywoodhungama.com (all figures in rupees)

TIED TO TRADITION

Padmaavat's fraught production is an extreme example of the kind of problems that can accompany the making of historical films in India today. During the film's shooting in 2017, the Karni Sena, a fringe group in Rajasthan, alleged that the director was shooting a dream sequence with Khilji and Padmavati. They vandalized the sets and later threatened to cut off actor Deepika Padukone's nose. Release dates were announced and deferred. The Central Board of Film Certification showed the film to a panel of historians, who passed it. The final film was as deferential to Rajput pride as the Karni Sena could have hoped for, but the threat lingered on. Every historical film since has inspired claims of "hurt sentiments".

One can only speculate if the attacks had a role in moving Bhansali towards safe, "respectful" ground, and whether the film might have ended up differently if there weren't any threats. Between 2015's *Bajirao Mastani* and 2018's *Padmaavat*, you can feel the genre ossify. The earlier Bhansali film seemed open to possibilities—of poetry; of a certain syncretic tradition of cinema; of love between a Hindu king and a Muslim queen; even the idea that king, queen and new queen might coexist in a respectful, impossibly good-looking triangular relationship. *Padmaavat*, on the other hand, seems stifled by tradition, dulled by duty, with nothing more to offer than centuries-old ideas of honour and sacrifice.

If service of the nation is the top priority of the modern Hindi historical, upholding traditional values comes a close second. The *Tanhaji* trailer has an unusually specific shout-out, with actor Kajol saying, "When Shivaji wields his sword, the honour of women and janeu (sacred thread) of Brahmins remain intact." It's curious that a film about Shivaji's general (of Koli caste) would make this pointed a reference to Brahmin dignity—and deem it important enough to include in the trailer.

An earlier evocation of the caste system was in *Baahubali 2* (2017)—not a historical, but a template in many ways for the genre—when prince Amarendra Baahubali says: "God creates life, the Vaidya (physician) saves it, and the Kshatriya (warrior) protects it." "Kshatriya" turns up twice in *Manikarnika*, both times to specify that the future Rani of Jhansi, though not herself of the warrior caste, possesses its best qualities. *Padmaavat* treated jauhar—ritual self-immolation by women so they wouldn't be captured by the enemy—with reverence. The climactic scenes, with hundreds of stoic women led by Padmavati running towards the fire, are drawn-out and disturbingly triumphant.

Conservative ideas of sexuality hold sway. In both *Padmaavat* and *Kesari*, the top soldier in the Muslim army is gay. The sniper in *Kesari* has long nails with red polish and rouge on his cheeks. In *Padmaavat*, the character is a historical figure—Malik Kafur, a eunuch presented to Alauddin as a slave, who, incredibly, rose from there to attain the rank of general. Several accounts of the time suggest that Alauddin and Kafur were lovers. In the film, Kafur dresses his king (as Padmavati dresses hers), rubs his feet in a bathtub. The *Binte Dil* song sequence, where Kafur

serenades Alauddin and his female companion for the night, might be the first openly bisexual love ballad in Hindi cinema.

Normally, queer texts turning up in historical dramas would be welcome. But by ascribing feminine traits to the deadliest soldier in the enemy camp, the films seem to be inviting a contrast to the manly Rajputs and Sikhs on the opposing side. Moreover, the three queer characters (if you include Alauddin) are shown as sadists and betrayers—a worrying conflation of deviation from the sexual majority with moral deviance. The sniper gleefully shoots a fallen Sikh soldier in the leg. Alauddin stabs his king in the back; Kafur shoots Ratan Singh in the back. “Alauddin’s implied relationship with Kafur is portrayed as yet another sign of his untrustworthiness—a stigma many bisexual men have to contend with in modern life,” Schofield says. “In their own time, close romantic, erotic, and even sexual relationships between men of different social statuses were not only commonplace, but often held up as the ideal, as in the beautiful poetry written about the relationship between Mahmud of Ghazni and his slave Ayaz.”

FUTURE HISTORIES

Though it’s beyond the ambit of this piece, Hindi cinema has also been scanning recent history for source material. The subjects chosen are, unsurprisingly, either concerned with national pride (Mission Mangal, Pad Man—both with Akshay Kumar) or focused on events that show the present administration in a good light (PM Narendra Modi) or the opposition in a bad one (Indu Sarkar, about the Emergency; The Accidental Prime Minister, about the UPA government). Or the military: After Uri’s success, two period war films are in the works—Bhuj: The Pride Of India, about the 1971 war with Pakistan, and a Sam Manekshaw biopic starring Vicky Kaushal as the Field Marshal.

History is amended all the time. This is a necessary churn, allowing suppressed voices to enter the conversation, but it can also give rise to exclusionary narratives. If Karnataka chief minister B.S. Yediyurappa has his way, a key figure like Tipu Sultan might not appear at all in school textbooks. In October, speaking at a seminar at Banaras Hindu University, Amit Shah said: “There is a need to rewrite the Indian history from India’s point of view, but without blaming anyone.” His 30-minute talk presents India’s ancient history as a long string of Hindu achievements, with a stray mention of Sikh gurus and mentions of “hundreds of years of slavery”.

This particular vision of history may well match what we see on our screens in the immediate future. Next year there’s Tanhaji, and a Marathi film about Tanaji Malusare’s king, Chhatrapati Shivaji, starring Riteish Deshmukh. There’s a biopic on Prithviraj Chauhan, another Hindu king who fought Muslim invaders, with Akshay Kumar in the lead. Few of these are likely to treat their subjects like flesh-and-blood humans. “Deification clouds a mature historical understanding

of these real figures," Pillai says, "but there's this trend in India that promotes them to divine status because otherwise our confidence will suffer."

There's a scene in *Padmaavat* where Ratan Singh tells Khilji: "History isn't just written on paper which you can burn." For a film whose titular character might be drawn from a poem written two centuries after the events in it took place, this is a bold statement. It seems to suggest that what we think of as history could also include legends passed down from generation to generation, not just words on paper. This gives the film-maker a wide range of crowd-pleasing material to draw on, but what of the impressionable viewer who ends up believing that Manikarnika rode a horse off the edge of a fortress and survived what appears to be a 30ft fall? Perhaps future films could carry, in the style of tobacco warnings, little fact-checks in a corner of the screen, informing us when history is being rewritten.