

# The Biopic in Hindi Cinema

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## Introduction

The biopic genre has been relatively unproductive in Indian cinema, despite the massive international critical and commercial success of the 1982 Indo-British biopic *Gandhi* (directed by Richard Attenborough), with its impressive collection of awards, not least its eight Oscars (Dwyer 2011b). Although biopics form only about 5 percent of Hollywood's output (Anderson and Lupu 2002: 91), they have a high success rate at the Oscars (Gilbert 2010); and it is unlikely that this would have escaped the notice of the Indian film industry and its critics, who keenly observe Hollywood and the Oscars in particular. However, it is striking that, while a few biopics have been made in the Hindi film industry over the last decade, many more are planned. This chapter explores the current interest in the biopic, locating it in major shifts in Indian cinema and society in the last decade.

## Indian Cinema and Forms

There are many forms of Indian cinema, ranging from the avant-garde and arthouse to the mainstream commercial ones, and these latter are made in many languages; but the present chapter is concerned with the mainstream Hindi cinema produced in Bombay/Mumbai, which is now usually known as "Bollywood" (Rajadhyaksha 2003; Vasudevan 2011). Hindi film genres are notoriously fuzzy and are often regarded as *masala* – that is, a spicy mix of ingredients rather than a single genre – although there are generic groups recognized by the industry as well as by audiences. However, biopic has been a rarely used term and is not widely known, the films being classed usually as "historicals."

Like Hollywood biopics (Mann 2000), so Indian biopics, too, are a part of other genres. In Indian cinema there is much overlap with other genres that have a quasi-historical nature (Dwyer 2011a), including the founding genre of Indian cinema, the mythological – whose stories often form a mythological biopic that focuses on gods/goddesses and heroes/heroines, mostly from Hindu mythology. The devotional genre is concerned with the life of a historical devotee, of a *sant* (“saint”), of a particular deity – a concern that brings it closer to the biopic, although the figure of the devotee has a striking iconicity and remoteness, even in the case of *Sant Tukaram* (Kapur 1987; Rajadhyaksha 1987). This latter genre was mostly made in languages other than Hindi, as it used the songs of the *sants* in the languages in which they were composed. Both of these genres – the mythological and the devotional – were closely associated with the nationalist movement in the colonial period, as their stories focused on the creation of a different history, on the struggle of the righteous, and on semi-historical figures who underwent trials in their efforts to promote truth and (very frequently) social reform (for more on these genres, see Dwyer 2006).

The genre to which the Indian biopic is most closely aligned is, as in other national biopics, the historical, one of the earliest genres in Indian cinema, dating back to the silent period with films such as *Kalyan Khajina* (directed by Baburao Painter, 1924). The historical genre is particularly skilled at depicting a nation in crisis, so the films are about the melodrama of the nation itself, not just about their heroes and heroines – who are struggling and often sacrificing their lives to a cause (Dwyer 2011a and b). Hindi historical films focus on characters whose lives are told as narratives of struggle, sacrifice, and patriotism. Indian film draws on what is known as “bazaar history”: its presentation of the past, built as it is on images, words, songs, and imagination, is interested in rumour and gossip, to which facts are subsidiary. These stories circulate among members of the public, and they were long preserved in traditions such as bardic compositions and folk songs, poems, and plays. Christopher Pinney (2004) has noted that the visual image in India tells a different history from the official ones; and he cites the example of Bhagat Singh (see below), who was more popular than Gandhi in the 1920s but is excluded from most official histories. The numerous biopics of Bhagat Singh support this view, and it is likely that key moments that have circulated in popular prints or chromolithography are found in the films, which in turn tell their own histories (Rosenstone 1995 and 2006).

### The Old Hindi Biopic

Without compiling a list of the biopic in Hindi film in the twentieth century, the formation of the genre may be traced by mentioning a few key examples. Biopics of contemporary figures were rare, the most celebrated being *Dr. Kotnis Ki Amar Kahani*, which is based on K. A. Abbas’s biography of an Indian doctor

who worked in Japanese-occupied China in the 1940s. Many major filmmakers made several semi-autobiographical films in which the director also starred as the hero (that is, as himself). This drew on a tradition of autobiography that began in the nineteenth century and was developed by many major political figures such as Gandhi and Nehru (Majeed 2007; Moore-Gilbert 2009; see also Kracauer 1995). The semi-autobiographical film included Guru Dutt's *Pyaasa* (1957), often seen as blending elements of Guru Dutt's own life with the biography of the lyricist Sahir Ludhianvi. The Romantic story of the poet – whose lover abandons him for a rich husband, whose family mocks him and then sells his art, and who is loved by a sex worker – is a typical melodrama capped by a happy ending; but the film's style has a beautiful darkness at its heart, for which a tragic ending would have been appropriate – but that would have probably led to a box office disaster. This was the fate of Guru Dutt's tragic *Kaagaz Ke Phool* (1959), which blends the filmmaker's life story with the iconic fictional character of Devdas (Dwyer 2004): the latter's all too real tragedy and personal turmoil, now viewed as foretelling the director's suicide, was rejected by contemporary audiences. Similarly, Raj Kapoor's intended *magnum opus*, *Mera Naam Joker* (1970), which told his life in three parts – all stories well known to his audience and performed by Raj Kapoor himself – was a disaster from which he bounced back by making a dramatic change in style in *Bobby* (1973).

In spite of the small number of Indian biopics, there is a cluster that may be classed as a sub-genre of the biopic, namely one that is formed by the biopics of the leaders of the freedom struggle (1857–1947) – although these films are found almost exclusively in the realist Indian cinema, most of them being made after Attenborough's *Gandhi* (Dwyer 2011b). The leading figure of “middle” – or realist – Hindi cinema, Shyam Benegal, has made a number of biopics and quasi-biopics, mostly drawing on autobiographies, biographies, and semi-autobiographical scripts. One of them, *Bhumika* (1977), deals with a Marathi actress of the 1930s, Hansa Wadkar; another, *Zubeidaa* (2001) deals with a movie actress. These stand side by side with films on the nationalist leaders Gandhi (*The Making of the Mahatma*, 1996) and Bose (*Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose: the forgotten hero*, 2005).

### The New Hindi Biopic

India has been undergoing the most rapid social changes in its history after its economic liberalization in 1991. Since it emerged as a potential global power, there has been an ongoing reconsideration of history in the context of a growing ideology of Hindu nationalism and of the rise to dominance of the new middle classes, which form the main audience in film culture: films are produced for and consumed by them. The films reflect this group's understanding of its history and culture – and they do so in what Charles Taylor has called the social imaginary (Dwyer 2011b).

The 1994 family drama *Hum Aapke Hain Koun . . . !!* (*What am I to you?* directed by Sooraj Barjatya) marked a watershed in Hindi cinema: the audience returned

to cinema halls and there was a rapid subsequent growth in budgets and net box office returns for the film industry. The 1995 *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (*The braveheart will take the bride*, directed by Aditya Chopra) established the diasporic romance and is seen as the founding film of what we now call “Bollywood” (Vasudevan 2011). The films were now aimed at the metropolitan and diasporic audiences, heralding a new, young, rich India; the films with lower-class referents, particularly the action film and the comedies of Govinda, were less discussed by the critics, distracted as they were by the new phenomenon, only to be reminded of the former with the huge success of Salman Khan’s films in the 2010s. The metropolitan audiences enjoyed the new multiplexes that opened in the 2000s, which showed big-budget Bollywood alongside the small *hatke* (“offbeat”) films (Athique and Hill 2010; Dwyer 2011c). These same audiences are also consumers of the new media that arrived with the opening of the Indian economy, and now they watch Hollywood and world cinema, particularly Korean and Japanese, while consuming and participating in a whole new range of other media.

One of the most popular literary genres for the English-reading middle classes is the biography. These are of film stars, celebrities, and other heroes/heroines of the new middle classes such as business people and politicians. Rather than drawing on the “bazaar” history and on the visual history mentioned above, these new life stories draw more on direct interviews and on sources produced by the rapidly expanding media. Important among the latter are the gossip columns and social pages in the newspapers – notably page 3 of the *Times of India* – and Internet sites that are in conversation with interviews on television shows, magazines, and other sources. These new biographies are for the most part popular accounts sanctioned by the subject and his/her family rather than historically researched, academic biographies. There are some scandalous or critical biographies of the kind that has been popular in the West, but Indian biographies in English tend toward hagiography. Like other forms of gossip (Dwyer 2000: ch. 6), these lives are often read not to establish a truth, but rather to address key issues in ordinary lives. They seem to have little use as a basis for biopics – unlike autobiographies and biographies, on which the realist cinema has frequently drawn.

The media themselves are often shown in Hindi biopics – as they are in other biopic traditions, in particular in documentary footage, which is sometimes made for the film (when it is often shot in sepia – that is, in black and white), or in actual historical footage, which is frequently manipulated digitally, so as to allow the star to appear in the old footage. Other media – such as photographs, newspapers, magazines – are also used, in order to create a sense of history and to reinforce the myth-making influence of the media themselves (Mann 2000: v).

### **The Hindi Film Form and the Biopic**

The basic plot structure of the Hollywood biopics give lives cinematic shape through the use of three basic configurations – “resistance, the struggle between

innovation and tradition, and the importance of the big break” (Custen 1992: 178). This structure is familiar from other Hindi film stories where the hero struggles to find his place in the family, the community, and the nation without giving up on his family values in the dramatic conflict, where moral order must be restored (Thomas 1995; Vasudevan 2011). In the Hindi melodrama, the narrative is often subsumed to a series of attractions (Dwyer and Patel 2002), which works well for the requirements of the biopic (Custen 1992; Bingham 2010). The narrative may be diverted or arrested for the sake of spectacle, including the famous Bollywood song and dance (although this element may advance the narrative in some cases). Spectacle may be incorporated diegetically in the biopics of creative persons such as filmmakers, singers, and movie stars, but it may be used in ways that would be surprising in other biopics, for instance by having characters sing and dance.

Hindi films are often star vehicles and, while the star’s charisma may often be a match for the character’s own, the problem is that the star must match the figure in some way and be appropriate for the role. It is often felt that only a new potential star is best for a role where there is no star persona that needs to be fitted to the character. The Hindi film uses grandiloquent speech, delivered in “dialogues” that are learned and delivered outside the cinema, as part of the wider consumption of films. The biopic, with its mixture of invented dialogue, famous quotations, and imaginary private scenes, is thus particularly well suited to the form of the Hindi film.

### National Heroes and New Historical Biopics

The first cycle of biopics in mainstream “Bollywood” in the early 2000s was part of the revival of the historical genre (Dwyer 2011b). The first of these biopics, *Asoka* (directed by Santosh Sivan, 2001), featured the superstar Shahrukh Khan as Indian Emperor Asoka (or Ashoka) the Great, who united much of India in the third century BC.

Ashoka’s greatness was related to this unification, which was followed by his conversion to Buddhism after a series of terrible wars. His edicts, inscribed on pillars and rocks, are the oldest writings extant in India, and the *Asoka chakra* (“wheel”) features on the flag of India, representing the turning of the wheel of *dharma* – that is, of law and virtue. The film focuses on the warrior prince and his romance, taken from folktales, with Princess Kaurawaki, and it barely features his conversion and renunciation; as Shahrukh Khan fights, romances, and dances, there is only one mention of Buddhism, right at the end of the film, after an unintentionally comical death sequence. The film was not well received, as audiences felt that it was disrespectful toward a national hero (see similar views on the filming of Gandhi’s biopic in Dwyer 2011b) and offered little of historical interest.

The next major biopic starred another great Bollywood star: Aamir Khan, who had consolidated his status with *Lagaan/Once upon a Time in India* (directed by Ashutosh Gowariker, 2001) – a film shortlisted for an Oscar as Best Foreign Film.

Khan played Mangal Pandey in *The Rising: The Ballad of Mangal Pandey* (directed by Ketan Mehta, 2005), the story of an Indian sepoy who becomes a semi-legendary hero in the 1857 Uprisings (an event that led to the British crown taking control of India). The film develops its story by having Mangal Pandey befriend an Irish/British soldier, rescue a *sati* from a funeral pyre, and go to the house of a dancing girl. The film ends with footage of Gandhi: this is designed to tie the freedom struggle into one narrative extending from the 1857 Uprisings – which was dubbed by V. D. Savarkar, the architect of Hindu nationalism, the “First War of Independence” – to the end of British rule in 1947.

Laxmibai, the Rani (Queen) of Jhansi, was one of the most celebrated figures from the 1857 Uprisings, and her story was told in many accounts, including the famous poem *Jhansi Ki Rani* by Subhadra Kumari Chauhan (1919–1949) and Sohrab Modi’s film on the queen, *Jhansi Ki Rani* (1956), which was dubbed and partially edited in English as *The Tiger and the Flame*. This film was more hagiographic and did not attract the controversy of *The Rising*. Political parties – such as the then ruling Bharatiya Janata Party and the state government of Uttar Pradesh – sought to ban *The Rising* on the grounds that it contained errors amounting to falsehood and that it showed a national hero visit a courtesan’s house. In the area from which Pandey came there were protests and demonstrations against the film. These served as further reminders that showing great leaders and national heroes as men and women with feet of clay was going to prove controversial and unpopular with audiences. *The Rising* remains Aamir Khan’s only unsuccessful film of the last decade; the others include the commercially most successful Hindi film of all time (*3 Idiots*, directed by Rajkumar Hirani, 2009).

The story of Akbar, the Great Mughal (r. 1556–1605), has been told through many media, not least the nineteenth-century Parsi theater and many film versions. Again, these draw on bazaar history rather than on the large chronicles and archives of Akbar’s reign, such as Abu’l Fazl’s *Akbarnama*, the *A’in-i Akbari*, and Bada’uni’s *Muntakhab at-Tawarikh*. The images are of tourist India, in particular Agra and Fatehpur Sikri, rather than illustrations of the *Akbarnama*. One of the most famous stories about Akbar is his incarceration of the courtesan Anarkali, “Pomegranate Blossom,” as a punishment for her love for his son Salim, later to become Emperor Jehangir. This story had its greatest moment with the magnificent *Mughal-e Azam* (directed by K. Asif, 1960), whose narrator is India personified and telling the story of the new nation. In this story Muslims are an integral part of the newly divided nation, which had recently seen the creation of Pakistan as a homeland for Indian Muslims. Again, the narrative is one of romance and family history rather than dealing with the social or political impact of Akbar’s rule.

*Jodhaa Akbar* (directed by Ashutosh Gowariker, 2008) took for its subject the other famous story of Akbar, namely his marriage to a (Hindu) Rajput princess Jodhaa. Although seen as a strategic alliance designed to consolidate Akbar’s unification of India, this marriage is also celebrated as showing his respect for Hinduism and other religions, in an early form of Indian secularism that has

equal regard for all religions. The film also presents Akbar as very much an Indian, not a Persian-speaking Central Asian outsider – as the Great Mughals are regarded by Hindu nationalists. Like the other films on the Mughals, *Jodhaa Akbar* is clearly about present-day debates, notably intercommunal marriage and the role of Muslims in shaping India's history.

*Jodhaa Akbar* features two of Bollywood's biggest stars, Hrithik Roshan and Aishwarya Rai (Tunzelmann 2008). In spite of displaying skills in elephant training and martial arts, the royal couple is portrayed as a middle-class unit. The Hindu wife wants to feed her husband as part of her wifely duties, cooking a vegetarian feast (although Rajputs are non-vegetarian) and to establish herself both as a good Hindu wife and as the power behind the throne. Although Akbar's mother is very welcoming to her daughter-in-law, the evil wet-nurse, Maham Anga, plays the wicked mother-in-law in a manner familiar from the popular *saas-bahu* (mother/daughter-in-law) genre of Indian television. The film allows for much Bollywood spectacle, from Akbar's taming of a rogue elephant to the huge song and dance number "Marhaba," which is performed by Akbar's grateful subjects on the occasion of the lifting of the *jazia* tax on Hindu pilgrims at Jodhaa's suggestion: the occasion invites a display of national diversity and unity and a show of weaponry and power in the format of contemporary Republic Day parades.

It is not entirely clear whether Jodhaa ever existed, as Akbar had many wives. However, even biopics of possibly fictional characters based on bazaar history can be contested. The Karni Sena (a Rajput group) claimed that Jodhaa was not the daughter of Bahrmal of Amer and was married to Salim, Akbar's son. This protest led to a ban on the film in several north Indian states, while Hindu nationalists demonstrated against the film, objecting to the good image of Akbar as protector of Hindus.

The Bollywood film form has a problem: nationalist leaders are represented as too revered, too saintly, too uncontroversial – and, besides, they cannot sing and dance (Dwyer 2011a). A film about the Emperor Shivaji would be an example of an impossible subject for a biopic – unless the emperor were shown as in Bhalji Pendharkar's Marathi classic *Chhatrapati Shivaji* (1952): a great heroic leader with no shades of grey, who can state that minorities have to conform to the culture of the majority. Recent plans to make biopics of Indira Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru have been canceled due to predictions that they would cause controversy. It is feared that these controversies would be more than media discussions and might lead to court cases, holding up film releases as well as causing actual violence.

There is, however, one figure who is well suited to the biopic form, indeed he is the only one among the leaders of the anti-British freedom struggle to have biopics in popular Hindi cinema. This is Shaheed "Martyr" Bhagat Singh (see Dwyer 2011a), a leader considered to have been more popular than Gandhi in his own time (Pinney 2004: 124–127), yet barely mentioned in official histories. He is also the only nationalist leader who fulfills the requirements of a real-life popular hero as well as those of a Hindi film hero: he is a Romantic figure martyred at a

young age and he can sing and dance, although as he is revered as an unmarried hero and is not usually represented as romancing a heroine.

The year 2002 saw the release of several films – a television biopic of Bhagat Singh among them (Dwyer 2011a). These films, which often criticized Gandhi, made a hero of Bhagat Singh; but they were not commercial successes – in fact they were listed as “disasters” on box office websites (such as <http://www.boxofficeindia.com/showProd.php?itemCat=208&catName=MjAwMg==>). However, they may have paved the way for *Rang de Basanti* (directed by Rakesh Omprakash Mehra, 2006), which was one of the biggest hits of the year and was later selected by India as its entry to the Oscars. This film, named after Bhagat Singh’s favourite song (“Color it saffron”), shows a group of disillusioned metropolitan youths who are inspired to action when they take part in a play about Bhagat Singh produced by an English girl. Said to be influenced in structure by *Jesus of Montreal*, *Rang de Basanti* addresses the themes of a politicized youth and of anti-corruption, in parallel with the story of Bhagat Singh. The biopic forms one of the streams of the film, as the modern-day protagonists gradually adopt the ideology of the characters they are playing and respond accordingly to their own anger with modern India and its corrupt politics, examining issues related to the minorities; but their struggle ends in their own martyrdom. Ultimately the film demonstrates the futility of violent protest, but it became a cult film among youth, as did Bhagat Singh himself.

### Quasi-Biopics

A cycle of quasi-biopics in the late 2000s dealt with recent lives of less revered figures, easily identified though not named, although the stories were closely based on the heroes of India’s emerging new middle classes: businessmen (*Guru*, directed by Mani Ratnam, 2007), sportspeople (*Chak De! India*, directed by Shimit Amin, 2007), filmstars (*Woh Lamhe*, directed by Mohit Suri, 2006; *Khoya Khoya Chand*, directed by Sudhir Misra, 2007), and underworld dons (*Sarkar*, 2005, and *Sarkar Raj*, 2008, both directed by Ram Gopal Varma, the latter drawing heavily on the *Godfather* story. *Once upon a Time in Mumbai* (directed by Milan Luthria, 2010) was immediately identified with the story of the gangsters Haji Mastan and Daud Ibrahim (Dwyer forthcoming).

One of the most popular of these quasi-biopics is Mani Ratnam’s 2007 Hindi film *Guru*, which was a box office success and received good critical reviews. It was based – loosely, though clearly – on the life of one of the world’s richest men: India’s “Polyester Prince,” Dhirubhai Ambani (1932–2002) – although Mani Ratnam always denied this association. *Guru*, the main character, represents the dream of India’s new middle classes, whose members hope that in one generation they too can follow a similar trajectory of rags to riches. The film sets up around *Guru* characters who tell us about life at a time of massive social change.



The protagonists represent the old and the new; even though the old is valued, the new is inevitable. The beauty of the film, both visually and aurally, creates a sense of nostalgia about a world whose end is imminent. The hero brings about the end of much of the old India, as his focus is only on the present and the future; but the film justifies the decisions and actions he takes to build the new India.

Another recently made biopic, *Dirty Picture* (directed by Milan Luthria, 2011), is the story of the life of the south Indian soft porn star Silk Smitha, whose death at the age of 35 was a suspected suicide. Before its release, the film attracted criticism from her family, whose members thought the film could not be made without their consent.<sup>1</sup> The major interest of the film consists in starring a major and popular actor, Vidya Balan, in her first “raunchy” role, with a director famous for gritty films that often deal with the underworld (e.g., *Taxi 9211*, 2006; *Once upon a Time in Mumbai*, 2010). However, the film was brought down by overblown dialogue. It offers less of a view on public sexuality than films about the new “digital sleaze” (Kaushik Bhaumik, personal email), which is referred to in films about secret filming (*Love, Sex Aur Dhokha*, directed by Dibakar Banerjee, 2010; *Ragini MSS*, directed by Pawan Kripalani, 2011).

### Issues with Making Hindi Biopics

Perhaps partly as a result of *Guru*'s success, talk began in the late 2000s of the making of a number of biopics. The true story of a model murdered at a celebrity party (*No One Killed Jessica*, directed by Raj Kumar Gupta, 2011) is not a true biopic, as it does not tell the life of Jessica but describes how a life, its meaning, and its value are examined – largely through the media. The model herself was not a celebrity, but the film attacks celebrity culture, showing how the rich and powerful can bribe their way into literally getting away with murder, while the victim's life is the object of prurient inquiry and muck-raking, which is designed to show the cheapness of life. However, the film also depicts middle-class non-political mobilization, mixes fact and fiction, and creates a positive role for the media. In it, television (NDTV) replaces the actual print journalism (*Tehelka*).

Made but not yet released are the biopic of a soldier and runner turned bandit, *Paan Singh Tomar* (2010) and the biopic of the father of Indian art, *Rang Rasiya* (2008), both directed by Ketan Mehta (the director of *The Rising*). *Rang Rasiya* has been screened at festivals (where it belongs) rather than in mainstream venues. Another biopic of Ravi Varma, *Makaramanju* (directed by Lenin Rajendran, 2011), has been made in Malayalam. It stars Santosh Sivan, the director of *Asoka*, and it seems to have been released only in the Keralan circuit.

The current ferment of the biopic is clear from the many that are announced but then withdrawn or canceled. The circulation of life stories in the media – from books to Internet sites, urban legends, gossip, and historical documents – clearly provides a rich source of potential biopics. The new middle classes have their

own heroes, and films like *Guru* indicate that they find an appreciative audience in the cinema marketplace. Shekhar Kapur's *Bandit Queen* (1994) and *Elizabeth* (1998) were landmark films of Oscar caliber, which Kapur made after leaving India; only recently, William Dalrymple's history, *White Mughal* (2002), has been snapped up by Ralph Fiennes. But there is relatively little interest in the biopic in Bollywood, despite a list of obvious characters: there are for instance national heroes whose biopics have never been made, even though there are documentaries about them. These include icons such as Ranjit Singh, Rabindranath Tagore, Ranjitsinhji, Nehru, Indira Gandhi, Sonia Gandhi, and M. F. Husain.

No study has been made of the early biopics, and the extent to which they are true biopics is not entirely clear. While the films do portray life stories, the leading character is often presented not as iconic, but only as a stock melodramatic figure; that figure represents purity and honour, and there are no critical assessments or controversial issues around it. If the leading character is a figure of national stature in India and therefore has to fit the Indian contemporary audience's requirements of middle-class morality, then that character cannot be shown to be too human or too frail. Portraits must be hagiographic and conceal the unpleasant side of the personality they represent. Respect for the family of a biopic's hero is often cited, along with the threat of legal action and censorship, as either of these could delay a film indefinitely and be extremely costly. Juicy stories circulate now in other media, in particular in the digital realm, but not yet in film. In addition, producers are generally wary of biopics because their budgets are still huge, although digital effects make historical reconstructions easier. While the media themselves are interested in biopics, as can be seen from the circulation of stories around them, it is unclear whether audiences would share this interest instead of being uncomfortable with the close examination of someone's life.

The biography does have some problems with fitting the Hindi film form. The Hindi film, which must have a hero, melodrama, spectacle, and music, also needs a star. The director of *Paan Singh Tomar*, Tigmanshu Dhulia, points out that audiences would classify a biopic without stars among documentaries; at the same time, critics Maithili Rao and Munni Kabir point out a certain resistance to the documentary in India, where this form has never been successful. The star must have an image that is appropriate to the character and must resemble or impersonate the character convincingly. Two biopics of filmmaker Guru Dutt have been planned, then shelved – perhaps because it would be hard to get someone to look like Guru Dutt, who is a well-recognized face; but, perhaps more importantly, it would be hard for a biopic to achieve the glamor of the two semi-autobiographical films from the 1950s, which starred Guru Dutt himself. Perhaps a contemporary biopic of him would have to give a more accurate portrayal of a depressive man, rather than perpetuating the Romantic image of the earlier films.

Like arthouse or festival Hindi cinema, other varieties of film that are often screened in this circuit but use more realist language also produce biopics. Marathi has recently made several biopics, including one on the founding father of Indian

cinema, D. G. Phalke: *Harischandrachi Factory* (directed by Paresh Mokashi, 2009). This is a charming film, although its endless Chaplinesque humor, its absence of footage, and its lack of critical or serious engagement indicate perhaps a compromise in finding an audience. The film was popular in India and was the Oscar nomination for its year. *Mee Sindhutai Sapkal* (directed by Anant Mahadevan, 2010), the story of a still living social worker, has been critically acclaimed. A struggle for form is still seen in *Sound of Heaven: the Story of Balgandharva* (directed by Ravi Jadhav, 2011); this is a biopic of Bal Gandharva, the stage actor famed for his female roles in the Marathi theatre. Despite its beautiful costumes, sets, and music, and for all the uncanny performance of Subodh Bhave in the title role, the film seems to skim over the story of his unconventional life and of his refusal to accept the new medium of cinema – in which he took only one role, in *Dharmatma* (directed by V. Shantaram, 1935). Biopics have been popular in other languages; for example *Kerala Varma Pazhassi Raja* (directed by T. Hariharan, 2009) had Malayalam cinema's major star Mammooty playing successfully the Keralan national hero Kerala Varma. Perhaps it will be in these other forms of cinema, less constricted by Bollywood conventions, that the biopic will develop. It is notable that one of the most critically acclaimed biopics was made for television by a major figure in Hindi movies, Gulzar. The television biopic of the great Urdu poet Ghalib (*Mirza Ghalib*, 1988) was surprisingly frank, and perhaps the director felt that this medium allowed him to break away from the conventions of the Hindi film.

These films were made in the context of the cinema culture of the late 2000s which saw the emergence of “multiplex” and offbeat (*hatke*) films, with their own personnel of producers, directors, and stars, and with experimental story-telling. These films were made and viewed by metropolitan audiences of world cinema seeking more realist representations. Biopics in this category include the life of a conman, *Oye Lucky! Lucky Oye!* (directed by Dibakar Banerjee, 2008) – a film whose unusual style, story-telling, referencing of mainstream Hindi films, and Punjabi music made it something of a cult classic.

It seems that the recent surge of interest in biopics is due in part to these shifts in Indian cinema, as audiences have changed in response to transformations in Indian society in the last two decades (Dwyer 2011c). The Hindi film, for a long time viewed outside India, has now become transnational, and its producers have an eye on overseas markets. Like the metropolitan circuits in India, in particular the new multiplex audience, these overseas audiences are prestigious as well as financially important, as they attract the highest ticket price. These audiences are familiar with a wide range of media, as well as with viewing a range of Hollywood, Asian, and European cinema; and so are the producers themselves. The latter are indeed aware of the huge potential for the biopic but are hesitant to experiment. Part of the reason why the planned biopics are getting shelved seems to be that the producers feel insecure about an untested market for a new kind of biopic, which should retain something of the Hindi film but experiment with new elements, notably in the portrayal of the key character. This latter element

is the major problem; music, dance, and the melodrama can be incorporated into most forms, but the star and the character are key problematic areas. Some stars, like Aamir Khan, have been willing to experiment with roles unfamiliar to Hindi cinema. With such major figures accepting to take risks when they also have the star power needed to market a film, there is great potential for the new unconventional biopic.

One of the major problems for the biopic is the quality of writing in Hindi cinema. Recent years have seen some outstanding scripts – for films like *Lage Raho Munnabhai* (directed by Raj Kumar Hirani, 2006) and *Dabangg* (directed by Abhinav Kashyap, 2011) – as major screenwriters such as Jaideep Sahni have emerged. However, many films are not constructed to yield a strong narrative, and weighty and ponderous dialogues pull them down. The making of a real-life character needs to combine known stories and dialogue with imagined private scenes in a convincing manner rather than to shape them along the lines of other genres, where stardom and not character is the concern. The talent is there, but the danger lies with the producers and the hyper-inflated budgets of Bollywood. Again, as producer, Aamir Khan has taken a risk by releasing a scatological picture, *Delhi Belly* (directed by Abhinav Deo, 2011), whose tagline was “Shit happens.” The picture was replete with references to oral sex, lavatories, farting, and swearing. Aamir Khan’s nephew Imran Khan, a recent but rising star, was the only known actor in it. The music was mostly rock, and the lyrics were packed with innuendo. The film was hilarious; it managed to pass the censors and proved to be a huge hit.

A successful biopic has to be more than the story of an interesting individual, showing how this individual was important in his/her time. The rapid social changes in India today would seem to require new stories. They could also be read as a guide to morality and values in these unstable but exciting days. Yet it seems that the biopic is being held back by anxieties over the changing form of Hindi film and its potential audiences, as well as by traditional views on not speaking ill of the dead. The publication of a number of biographies as books, where the financial risk is smaller, and these books’ targeting of an English-reading public indicate that there is an interest in the life-story genre, which filmmakers seem keen to exploit despite producers’ anxieties.

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### Note

- 1 At <http://www.hindustantimes.com/Entertainment/Bollywood/Silk-Smitha-s-brother-sends-legal-notice-to-The-Dirty-Picture-makers/Article1-764401.aspx> (accessed November 19, 2011).

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