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Historical Accuracy Vs Creative Liberties

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Abstract: Cinema is one of the favorites way of entertainment. Most people find it relaxing when they watch a film. Indian film industry is one of the largest industry in the world in terms of films produced. India produces over 1500-2000 films every year, in more than 20 languages. Indian films serves as a powerful medium for shaping public perceptions. In recent times we are witnessing that, a lot of films are made on historical events and figures. They usually try to navigate a delicate balance between historical accuracy and creative liberties. While some films prioritize authenticity through extensive research and consultation with historians, others take dramatic liberties to bring entertainment value and simplify complex narratives. This paper examines how Indian historical films depict historical accuracy, citing examples of movies that have maintained factual integrity and those that have taken significant creative liberties. It explores the challenges filmmakers face in balancing commercial appeal with historical responsibility and discusses the impact of these portrayals on public historical consciousness. The study concludes that while creative storytelling is essential for engagement, filmmakers should strive for a responsible representation of history, ensuring that entertainment does not overshadow historical authenticity.

Keywords:

Cinema, Entertainment, Historical, Liberties, Creative, Perception, Commercial, Narratives, Authenticity, Integrity, Consciousness

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Introduction

Movies have been important in helping people understand history. They educate and entertain at the same time. In India, where history is closely linked to culture and national pride, historical films greatly impact how people remember the past. The way history is shown in movies often leads to discussions about the balance between artistic freedom and being true to the facts. Filmmakers, while drawing from real events, often change historical details to make the story more engaging, sometimes bending the truth to fit their narrative or themes. Filmmakers mix real history with made-up stories, creating engaging tales that can sometimes deviate from actual events. This research paper will analyze how these films find a balance between artistic freedom and historical accuracy, looking at the creative he portrayal of historical events in Indian cinema has been a subject of intense debate, with critics and historians often questioning the authenticity of certain films. Some filmmakers choose to stay true to documented history, ensuring minimal creative liberties, while others take significant artistic freedom,

sometimes at the cost of factual accuracy. Many popular Bollywood historical films blend fact with fiction, reshaping history to fit a particular narrative. This results in a romanticized, dramatized, or politically influenced retelling that often departs from the realities recorded in history books. In some cases, these distortions lead to controversy, with audiences and historians criticizing the misrepresentation of important historical figures and events. Despite these concerns, films that take creative liberties tend to attract larger audiences, perform well at the box office, and even shape public perception of history more effectively than historically accurate films. This phenomenon raises important questions about whether audiences prefer historical truth or an engaging story that plays with facts.

This research paper explores the delicate balance between artistic freedom and historical accuracy in Bollywood historical films. By analyzing films that have been criticized for distorting history and those that have maintained factual integrity, we aim to understand how different approaches affect audience reception and influence historical awareness. Some films, such as *Padmaavat* (2018), *Manikarnika: The Queen of Jhansi* (2019), have been widely criticized for prioritizing spectacle over accuracy, altering historical details to fit dramatic storytelling or political narratives. These films, despite their deviations from recorded history, have been commercially successful, with audiences embracing their larger-than-life portrayals. In contrast, movies like *Sardar Udham* (2021) have received praise for their commitment to historical accuracy, yet they have not always achieved the same level of mass appeal. decisions and the moral issues of altering history for film.

Research Methodology

Research Approach

This study employs a qualitative research approach to examine how Indian historical films depict historical accuracy

Data Collection Methods

- **Content Analysis:** Selected films are analysed for historical accuracy, narrative structure, and creative liberties.
- **Comparative Analysis:** Historical records, academic sources, and expert opinions are compared with cinematic representations to identify discrepancies.
- **Audience Reception Analysis:** Reviews, scholarly critiques, and social media discussions are examined to understand how audiences perceive historical authenticity in films.

Theories on Historical Accuracy and Creative Liberty

Before analysing specific films, it's important to look at the theories that shape discussions about historical accuracy and artistic freedom in filmmaking. Historical realism suggests that filmmakers should aim for accuracy to maintain the authenticity of the past. This accuracy not only educates viewers but also ensures that important cultural stories and figures are depicted honestly. Historians like John Tosh (2015) believe that films about historical events should serve as "windows into the past," providing a deeper understanding of the complexities of the era and human experiences, rather than distorting them.

On the other hand, creative freedom allows filmmakers to modify historical events, characters, or timelines to enhance a story or emotional journey. This artistic license is based on the belief that art should fulfill a greater purpose, such as exploring human feelings or offering social insights. Filmmakers like Peter Brooks (1985) argue that historical events in films don't have to be strictly factual but should instead convey deeper emotional or psychological truths, even if they involve some exaggeration. However, this creative freedom can lead to issues when historical stories are adapted, especially if they mislead or misrepresent actual history.

Creative Liberties In Movies

From the earliest movie (*Mughal-E-Azam*) to Contemporary Times (*Bajiroa Mastani*, *Padmavat*, *Manikarnika*) We are seeing creative liberty is getting more attention than historical facts

- **Mughal-E-Azam (1960)**

Mughal-e-Azam is a 1960 Indian epic historical drama film produced and directed by K. Asif. Starring Prithviraj Kapoor, Dilip Kumar, Madhubala, and Durga Khote, it follows the love affair between Mughal Prince Salim (who went on to become Emperor Jahangir) and Anarkali, a court dancer. Salim's father, Emperor Akbar, disapproves of the relationship, which leads to a war between father and son. It broke box office records in India and became the highest-grossing Indian film, a distinction it held for 15

years. The accolades awarded to the film include one National Film Award and three Filmfare Awards at the 8th Filmfare Awards. Mughal-e-Azam was the first black-and-white Hindi film to be digitally coloured. While inspired by the Mughal era, the film prioritizes drama and romance over historical accuracy. Below are key distortions in the film compared to historical sources:

- **Film Version:** Anarkali is depicted as a beautiful courtesan who falls in love with Prince Salim. Akbar disapproves of their relationship and ultimately orders her execution, but she is secretly spared.
- **Historical Records:** The existence of Anarkali remains unconfirmed. Abdul Qadir Badayuni, a Mughal chronicler, mentions a concubine who was punished for misbehavior, but there is no clear evidence linking her to Salim. William Finch, an English traveler (1608-1611), recorded a story of Salim's affair with Akbar's concubine, whom Akbar had entombed alive. However, this account is not corroborated by Mughal court records. Akbar's official biographies, like Abu'l Fazl's Akbarnama and Jahangir's Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri, make no mention of Anarkali.
- **Distortion:** The romanticized Anarkali-Salim love story is a product of folklore and literature, not historical fact.
- **Film Version:** The War Between Akbar and Salim. Salim raises an army against Akbar to protect Anarkali, leading to a large battle.
- **Historical Records:** The actual rebellion (1600-1604) involved military struggles in Allahabad, Agra, and the Deccan, not a single grand battle as shown in the film. The film exaggerates the conflict, making it seem like a personal war over love rather than a political succession battle.

- **Bajirao Mastani (2015): A Mix of Romance and History**

Bajirao Mastani is a 2015 Indian Hindi-language epic historical film directed by Sanjay Leela Bhansali. The film stars Ranveer Singh, Deepika Padukone and Priyanka Chopra. It tells the story of the Maratha warrior Peshwa Bajirao I and his love affair with Mastani, a Muslim princess. The film blends romance with significant political events, including Bajirao's military campaigns and his relationship with his first wife, Kashibai. He was Peshwa for 1720 -1740. According to the history books, More was written about his administration capabilities and military achievements "He was only 20 years old and already had a reputation for rapid decisions and a passion for military adventure," wrote Stewart Gordon in *The Marathas 1600-1818* (from *The New Cambridge History of India*). His reign was marked by "ceaseless military and administrative activity." Mastani was merely a footnote in history. It was the creative liberty of director which shows more about the romantic angle than his military achievement. Some Of the Marathis were offended by the movie also take the route of demonstration against the movie and take up the case to court .It creates some sort of tension among society. Historian Irfan Habib said that movie prioritize romanticized and nationalist narratives over historical complexity.

- **Padmavat (2018): A Story of Honor, Lust, and Glory**

Padmavat, directed by Sanjay Leela Bhansali, is inspired by the epic poem of the same title by Malik Muhammad Jayasi. The film features Deepika Padukone as Rani Padmavati, a stunning Rajput queen of Sinhalese descent, who is married to Maharawal Ratan Singh, portrayed by Shahid Kapoor. Sultan Alauddin Khilji, played by Ranveer Singh, learns of her beauty and launches an attack on her kingdom to capture her. The film takes substantial creative liberties

According to Sharma, Much of the drama surrounding Khilji's obsession with her is exaggerated. The character of Khilji is depicted as a power-hungry, tyrannical figure, whose lust for Padmavati drives him to extreme violence. However, historical records do not suggest such an obsessive or villainous portrayal of Khilji's character. Several historians and scholars have called her "fictional," while asserting that the earliest reference to her existence was in Malik Muhammad Jayasi's. This Reference from Ram Vallabh Somani's book, *History of Mewar: from earliest times to 1751 A.D.* questioned the historicity.

Identification of Chittor mentioned in the Padmavat

K. R. Qanungo concludes his essay on the historicity⁶ of Padmini with the following imaginary findings—

1. Chittor, mentioned by Jayasi, could not be identified with Chitrakuta, the famous capital of Mewar, but it is the place, having the same name, situated in the district Banda (U.P.).

2. Ratansena, mentioned by Jayasi, was not the ruler of Mewar, but was a local ruler of U.P., whose descendants subsequently migrated to Nepal, as is evident from the description preserved in the *Ratansena-Kulawali*.

Numerous absurdities are packed up in the above findings. It is surprising that the learned scholar took little care to consult the original text of *Padmavat*⁷, which refers not only to Chittor of Mewar but to Kumbhalgarh also as its neighbouring place. It also mentions Ratnasingh as the leader of the Hindus of India, a title which apparently applies to the rulers of Mewar. Similarly, the present ruling family of Nepal also claims its inheritance from the family of Mewar. Thus, the location of Chittor can not be questioned.

Some groups also attacked director due to the hurting of their sentiments .Due to the widespread protest against the movies in some states like Rajasthan, Gujarat film was not released. In spite of all this movie was considered as success and shaped people's mind

- **Manikarnika(2019)**

Manikarnika: The Queen of Jhansi (2019), directed by Kangana Ranaut and Krish, narrates the story of Rani Lakshmibai's resistance against British rule during the Revolt of 1857. While the film captures the spirit of patriotism, it takes several creative liberties that distort historical facts. One major distortion is the overemphasis on nationalism. The film presents Rani Lakshmibai as a nationalist freedom fighter, but historians argue that the Revolt of 1857 was primarily a military and feudal uprising against British policies rather than an organized national movement. The concept of nationalism, as understood today, did not exist at that time. However, the film portrays her as fighting for "Bharat Mata," a term that gained prominence much later in Indian history. Another significant fictionalization is her relationship with the British. The film exaggerates her direct confrontations, making her seem like a lone warrior challenging British officials. In reality, she initially sought a compromise with the British after her husband's death before finally taking up arms, but the movie omits these negotiations, portraying immediate and absolute defiance.

Additionally, the film sidelines key figures in the revolt, such as Nana Saheb and Tatya Tope, both of whom played crucial roles in the resistance. While Tatya Tope is briefly shown, his pivotal role in military planning is downplayed, making it seem as though Lakshmibai was the sole leader of the movement, whereas historical records suggest a collective resistance. The movie also heavily dramatizes battle sequences, making them appear larger-than-life, similar to fantasy war films like Baahubali. While Rani Lakshmibai was undoubtedly a skilled warrior, the depiction of her performing elaborate stunts on horseback while carrying a child transforms a historical war into a near-mythological battle. Moreover, the film ignores key social realities of the time. It presents Jhansi as a progressive society where Rani Lakshmibai empowers all sections of people but fails to address the caste and gender hierarchies that

were prevalent in 19th-century India. The 1857 revolt did not challenge existing caste structures, as many upper-caste landlords and rulers led the uprising, while Dalits often fought on both sides. The film creates a modern feminist image of Rani Lakshmbai rather than placing her within the socio-political realities of her time.

Finally, the portrayal of the British as purely evil lacks nuance. While colonial rule was undoubtedly oppressive, the film depicts British officers as one-dimensional villains. In contrast, historical records indicate that some British officials, such as Major Ellis, were sympathetic toward Rani Lakshmbai's plight before the war. By presenting the British in an almost cartoonish manner, the film oversimplifies the political and military complexities of the 1857 revolt. While *Manikarnika* succeeds in celebrating Rani Lakshmbai's bravery, it does so at the cost of historical accuracy, turning a complex and multi-dimensional leader into a mythologized figure.

Historical Accuracy In Movie

- **Sardar Udham (2021)**

Sardar Udham is a 2021 historical drama film directed by Shoojit Sircar. Vicky Kausal played role of Sardar Udham Singh. It focuses on the life of Udham Singh, an Indian revolutionary who assassinated Michael O'Dwyer, the former Lieutenant Governor of Punjab, to avenge the 1919 Jallianwala Bagh massacre. It largely adheres to historical facts, it does take creative liberties to enhance the emotional impact of the narrative. The film uses flashbacks and dramatic reenactments to illustrate Udham Singh's experiences, including his time in Britain and the traumatic impact of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre. The film dramatizes Singh's emotional and psychological turmoil in a way that is not directly supported by historical records but serves to humanize him as a hero driven by a sense of justice. The film accurately depicts the brutality of the massacre, the British colonial government's indifference. Historians have lauded the movie for bringing attention to colonial violence and the impact of British imperialism in India, which is often downplayed in mainstream historical narratives. The film paints a stark picture of colonial oppression, not just in terms of violence like the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, but also in terms of the daily struggles faced by Indians under British rule. Some historians believe that the film contributes significantly to the re-examination of colonial history in India. Movie did not get that much credit for showing accuracy. In fact it did not get the theatre release. It was release on ott. not many people had watched this movie

Why Directors Focuses on Creative Liberties?

Directors often focus on creative liberties in historical movies to enhance commercial appeal and engage a wider audience. Real history is complex, with multiple perspectives and intricate details that may not fit within the typical runtime of a film. To make the story more engaging, filmmakers simplify narratives, add dramatic elements, and introduce romance, action, and larger-than-life heroism, even if these aspects are historically inaccurate.

Another major factor is nationalistic and political influence. Many historical films align with contemporary political sentiments, glorifying national heroes while portraying certain groups as villains. This selective storytelling appeals to popular emotions but often distorts historical realities.

Cinematic storytelling also demands a clear protagonist-antagonist structure, which is often absent in real historical events. To make the narrative compelling, filmmakers dramatize conflicts, create exaggerated character arcs, and sometimes blend history with folklore. A notable example is *Padmaavat* (2018), where Alauddin Khilji was turned into a barbaric antagonist, despite historical records portraying him as a strategic ruler.

Filmmakers also alter history to avoid controversies and censorship. Certain historical truths might offend religious or political groups, leading to protests or bans. To prevent backlash, directors modify facts, soften sensitive issues, or present a version of history that aligns with mainstream narratives.

Lastly, the romanticization of war and struggle plays a key role. Historical battles were often brutal, with political complexities and strategic failures. However, films depict them as glorious struggles for justice, with the hero fighting against all odds. Movies like *Manikarnika: The Queen of Jhansi* (2019) exaggerated Rani Lakshmbai's combat abilities to make her seem like an invincible warrior rather than a skilled but human leader.

While creative liberties help make historical films more engaging, excessive distortion can mislead audiences, erase historical complexities, and promote biased narratives. The challenge for filmmakers is to balance authenticity with cinematic storytelling, ensuring entertainment does not come at the cost of historical truth

Public Perception and Impact

Films greatly shape how the public views history, as they are often the most engaging and accessible way to tell historical stories. When filmmakers take creative liberties, they can alter how audiences remember events and figures, sometimes promoting myths instead of facts. Many viewers, particularly those who are not familiar with academic history, tend to accept these cinematic portrayals as reality, which can lead to a skewed understanding of the past. For example, movies like *Padmaavat* present certain historical figures as either purely heroic or villainous, overlooking the complexities of their actual choices.

This misrepresentation can have broader social and political effects. By offering one-sided stories, films can intensify communal, regional, or nationalistic feelings, often leading to misplaced pride or resentment. Historical inaccuracies can also overshadow or exclude important perspectives, such as those of lower castes, women, or lesser-known individuals involved in significant historical events. Over time, this selective representation in films can shape public discussions, influence school curriculums, and affect political conversations and collective memory.

On the other hand, cinema can also spark interest in history. Films like *Sardar Udham* despite some creative adjustments, have encouraged conversations about lesser-known historical events. The main concern is that when filmmakers focus more on entertainment than on accuracy without providing context, they risk misleading viewers instead of educating them. In an era where visual media has a strong impact, filmmakers have a responsibility to balance storytelling with factual accuracy, ensuring that public understanding is informed rather than distorted.

Conclusion

Historical distortion in films significantly influences how the public views history, reinforces myths, and shapes national identity. While filmmakers often take creative liberties to make history more captivating, this raises an ethical question: should they prioritize entertainment over factual accuracy? Most viewers tend to accept the historical narratives presented in films as truth without critical examination. This makes historical movies powerful for both educating and misleading audiences. When films simplify, dramatize, or politically skew historical events, they can create a biased national memory, often neglecting the complexities of history and the voices of marginalized groups. The glorification of certain individuals, the demonization of others, and the omission of uncomfortable truths lead to a narrow understanding of history that aligns more with current ideologies than with actual events.

On the flip side, films can also ignite interest in real history, encouraging viewers to look beyond the fictional portrayals. Movies like *Padmaavat* and *Manikarnika* may twist facts, but they can also stimulate discussions that drive some audiences to seek out genuine historical information. However, this effect is limited, as many people passively consume history through entertainment rather than actively researching it. The challenge is to find a balance between historical accuracy and engaging storytelling, ensuring that these films do not serve as vehicles for propaganda or misinformation.

To tackle this issue, filmmakers should embrace ethical storytelling methods. One way is to be transparent, using disclaimers to inform viewers about creative liberties and providing resources for further historical exploration. Collaborating with historians during the filmmaking process can also help maintain factual integrity while meeting artistic needs. Moreover, audiences should cultivate a critical mindset, understanding that historical films are not always accurate representations of the past. In the end, historical films should create a thoughtful conversation between reality and imagination. Although artistic freedom permits some dramatization, altering history to support a specific agenda damages both intellectual honesty and public understanding. Given the strong influence of mass media on people's beliefs, filmmakers must portray history with care, honoring the facts and considering their lasting effects on society. Finding this balance is crucial to making sure that historical movies are both engaging stories and accurate reflections of the past, rather than tools for distortion and falsehoods.

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