

From Emperor to Entertainer: Ashoka's Bollywood Transformation

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Abstract

The purpose of a historical film is to provide an audio-visual portrayal of a specific period of time. It is a media that allows for the interpretation and preservation of the past. Despite the fact that historians and filmmakers approach history in different ways, their goals frequently overlap because they both aim to produce tales that have significance. Historical films are extremely important in the preservation of cultural heritage because they illustrate key events and make use of a variety of cinematic methods to enhance the impact of these visual representations.

In order for a historical film to serve as a trustworthy reference for individuals who are particularly interested in ancient history, culture, and customs, it is necessary for the film to be founded on extensive research. In spite of this, academics and theorists contend that the twenty-first century, which is marked by the saturation of digital media, is becoming increasingly separated from historical consciousness, which in turn increases the possibility of repeating mistakes that have been made in the past. When seen in this light, the study of historical films takes on a greater level of significance because of the potential they possess to mold the collective memory and the public's interpretation of historical events. Asoka, which was released in 2001, provides an opportunity to investigate the processes that are involved in the selection and construction of historical tales within the realm of commercial cinema. The purpose of this research is to investigate the underlying motivations and ramifications of such creative liberties in historical depiction by concentrating on features of the film that depart from that which has been documented through history. An important contribution to the ongoing conversation is made by this study, which investigates the ways in which Bollywood's portrayal of Ashoka overlaps with literary and historical views of his rule. The purpose of this research is to shed insight on the complexity involved in adapting historical personalities for contemporary media and the repercussions of historical distortion in the process of molding collective memory. This is accomplished by thoroughly analysing the film's portrayal.

Keywords: Dhamma, Ashoka, Bollywood, Cinema, History, and Popular Culture

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Introduction

Cinema, as a cultural and artistic medium, possesses enormous influence in constructing historical narratives and public memory as a creative literary genre through the art of script writing. This power is derived from the fact that cinema utilizes script writing. In particular, historical films serve as audiovisual texts that reconstruct the past via the creative narrative of the screenplay. These films frequently combine reality with fiction in order to increase the emotional appeal of the whole experience. The Bollywood film *Asoka* (2001), which was directed by Santosh Sivan, is a prime example of this phenomena because it depicts the life of Emperor Ashoka (who ruled from 268 to 232 BCE) with significant deviations from the factual authenticity of

the time period. The purpose of this study is to investigate the historical errors that are present in the film as well as the commercialization of Dhamma, which is Ashoka's Buddhist-inspired ethical government, within the context of the larger discourse of media representation.

Distortion in Cinematic representations of historical events

According to Rosenstone (1995), the term "historical distortion" refers to the process of manipulating or altering historical facts for the aim of artistic expression, political influence, or financial interests. In spite of the fact that dramatization is an intrinsic part of cinematic narrative, historical films frequently generate a "illusion

of truth" (Toplin, 2002), which causes viewers to mistakenly believe that portions that are exaggerated are actually reality. Among the notable changes that have been made in *Asoka* include the introduction of a romanticized subplot that features Princess Kaurwaki, the simplification of Ashoka's conversion to Buddhism, and the deletion of important political and administrative aspects of his tenure. These discrepancies raise problems regarding the role that cinema plays in the construction of historical awareness as well as the ethical duties that filmmakers have when depicting real figures.

Movies Based on the Dhamma and Their Adaptations

According to Thapar (1961), Dhamma was a collection of moral and ethical principles that had their origins in Buddhist philosophy but stretch beyond the confines of religion in order to foster societal harmony and justice. Ashoka was the one who popularized this set of ideas. The concepts of non-violence (Ahimsa), religious tolerance, and administration based on ethical conduct are articulated in Ashoka's edicts, which are incorporated into rock and pillar inscriptions all over the Indian subcontinent (Strong, 1983). This revolutionary ideology, on the other hand, is reduced to a secondary topic by *Asoka*, who places a higher priority on Ashoka's military achievements and personal ties than he does on his philosophic contributions. This alteration is reflective of a larger pattern in historical filmmaking, which is that intricate historical tales are frequently modified in order to conform to commercial cinematic patterns (Bose, 2003).

History as a Subject of Commercialization in Bollywood

The repackaging of historical individuals and events in order to appeal to a large number of people is an example of the commercialization of history in the film industry. According to Desai (2004), Bollywood, which is India's most prominent film business, usually uses historical subjects, but alters them in order to make them more marketable with commercial appeal. This approach is shown by the film *Asoka*, which incorporates spectacle-driven storyline, romance motifs, and action sequences that cater to popular cinematic expectations rather than portraying historical events in an authentic manner. The public's perception of historical personalities is altered as a result of this activity, which also raises issues about the ethical implications of the commercialization of history for the purpose of entertainment.

Theoretical Underpinnings and Their Significance

This research makes use of historical cinema analysis as a methodological technique, drawing on several theories pertaining to film historiography and cultural memory. Through this lens, *Asoka* is analyzed not as a documentary representation of Ashoka's life but rather

as a cinematic re-imagining that is influenced by narrative conventions and market dynamics. This is in accordance with the assertion made by Robert A. Rosenstone (2006), who states that "history on film is not history as it happened, but history as it is imagined and reinterpreted."

Review of the Literature

A significant amount of academic discussion has been devoted to the depiction of historical persons in films, with a particular focus on the conflict that exists between the pursuit of historical truth and the interest in cinematic storytelling. The portrayal of Emperor Ashoka in the Bollywood film *Asoka* (2001) is a prime example of the ways in which historical narratives are recreated in order to conform to the frameworks of commercial filmmaking. The purpose of this literature review is to investigate the existing body of information concerning historical films, Ashoka's legacy, and the influence that cinematic distortions have on cultural memory.

The Politics of Representation in Historical Films and Their Influence

Films that are considered to be historical serve as cultural texts that act as a mediator between the public and history. Scholars such as Robert A. Rosenstone (1995) argue that "history on film is a constructed reality, shaped by narrative conventions rather than objective historical fact." Unlike traditional historiography, which relies on documentary evidence, films employ visual storytelling, dramatic structures, and emotional engagement to shape historical consciousness (Rosenstone, 2006). Further criticism is offered by Richard J. Evans (2000), who argues that historical films have the ability to favor spectacle over substantial historical investigation, so causing a shift in the public's understanding of significant events.

According to Desai (2004), Bollywood's historical films frequently combine historical events with amusement, which results in selective interpretations of the past. This phenomenon occurs within the setting of India. Mihir Bose (2003) asserts that Bollywood has a proven track record of changing historical narratives in order to conform to the expectations of popular audiences. This is accomplished by commonly incorporating elements of romance, action, and melodrama into the recounting of historical stories. The ethical duties that filmmakers have when recreating historical personalities for popular consumption are brought into question as a result of this observation.

Examination of the Historical Legacy and Filmic Representation of Emperor Ashoka

In the history of ancient India, Ashoka is still considered to be one of the most well-documented monarchs. Both Buddhist chronicles, such as the *Ashokavadana* (Strong, 1983), and inscriptional evidence from his rock and pillar edicts (Thapar, 1961) provide proof of his reign. His reign is documented in both of these publications.

The metamorphosis of Ashoka from a militaristic emperor to an advocate of non-violence and dhamma is highlighted in these records, which constitute a significant turning point in the history of India.

Scholarly writings on Ashoka place an emphasis on his administrative practices, his commitment to religious plurality, and his endeavors to spread Buddhist doctrine beyond the borders of India (Smith, 1901). John Strong (1983) and Romila Thapar (1997) investigate the political and philosophical aspects of Ashoka's administration, highlighting the fact that his policies were profoundly anchored in ethical governance rather than merely being a means of religious propagation. Ashoka is positioned as a transnational historical character, according to Thapar (1961), who believes that the inscriptions of Ashoka provide vital insights into his diplomatic outreach, notably in places such as Sri Lanka and Central Asia.

Asoka (2001), on the other hand, glosses over a significant number of these components, concentrating instead on heightened interpersonal dynamics and military conflicts. Another factor that contributes to the distortion of Ashoka's legacy is the lack of important historical personalities, such as Queen Devi, who was Ashoka's first wife and had a crucial impact on his decision to accept Buddhism (Allen, 2012). The tendency of Bollywood to concentrate personal drama over the broader socio-political influence of historical people is shown by omissions of this kind.

Context of cultural narratives, the Dhamma and its interpretation

According to Thapar (1961), the Dhamma stands for a distinctive intellectual framework that goes beyond Buddhism to cover moral and ethical government. This framework is described in Ashoka's edicts. Some of the values that contributed to Ashoka's historical significance include nonviolence, religious tolerance, and social welfare. This document advocates for these principles.

The complexity of dhamma is sometimes oversimplified in contemporary interpretations of the phenomenon in literature and film. In contrast to the emphasis that scholars like Keay (2000) place on Ashoka's contributions to the fields of diplomacy and philosophy, films like *Asoka* reduce dhamma to a secondary topic, which is overwhelmed by the themes of romance and conflict. The film portrays Ashoka's guilt for the Kalinga War as an instantaneous turnaround, but historical evidence suggests that it was a gradual ideological movement that was influenced by Buddhist monks (Strong, 1983).

Bollywood's tendency to commercialize historical narratives in the film industry

Critical arguments about the monetization of historical figures are brought up when history and commercial cinema cross with one another. According to Desai (2004), Bollywood's historical films frequently use fictional aspects in order to enhance the narrative appeal

of the films, so distorting the public's understanding of actual historical events. The theory of media spectacle proposed by Douglas Kellner in 1995, which states that contemporary visual culture reshapes historical discourse by placing a higher emphasis on dramatization and emotional engagement than it does on factual accuracy, is consistent with this viewpoint.

An example of this phenomena is the transformation of a complicated historical figure into a glorified warrior-hero. *Asoka* offers as a case study for this phenomenon. The film is a prime example of Bollywood's technique of rewriting history in order to appeal to a wider audience (Bose, 2003). The film places a strong emphasis on visual grandeur, action sequences, and romantic love stories. However, despite the fact that these depictions make historical personalities more accessible to a wider audience, they can contribute to historical misconception, which raises ethical questions regarding the veracity of cinematic presentation of historical people.

Influence of Film Representations on the Recollection of Cultural Memory

Films about the past have an impact that goes beyond the realm of entertainment; they have the ability to shape cultural memory and collective identity. In his work from 1987, Hayden White makes the argument that historical narratives, whether they are found in literature or film, are essentially subjective and are formed by selective storytelling. Films like *Asoka* are associated with the mythologization of history, which is a phenomenon in which fanciful narratives take the place of factual records in the consciousness of the general public (Toplin, 2002).

The manner in which modern audiences interact with Ashoka's historical achievements is influenced by these kinds of distortions, which are relevant to the legacy of Ashoka. The potential of film to change historical legacies is demonstrated by the fact that the depiction in *Asoka*, which is idealized and militarized, stands in stark contrast to the ethical and philosophical qualities that are highlighted in historical literature (Jha, 2004).

Evaluation

The Emperor Ashoka's Historical Context and Background

Around the year 268 BCE, Ashoka, the third emperor of the Mauryan dynasty, arrived to the throne after a period of internal warfare had taken place the previous year. He enlarged the empire and subjugated provinces such as Kalinga, where it is said that the catastrophic war resulted in more than one hundred thousand citizens losing their lives. His metamorphosis and embrace of Buddhist teachings, which are reflected in his rock and pillar edicts that were transmitted across the subcontinent, were brought about as a result of the sheer savagery of this invasion (Thapar, 1961). The rule of Ashoka, which is described in these inscriptions, placed an emphasis on nonviolence, religious tolerance, and social welfare respectively.

There is ample evidence that he played a significant role in spreading Buddhism beyond the borders of India, particularly in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia (Strong, 1983). Because Ashoka, in contrast to many other kings, left behind a comprehensive primary record of his policies, it is feasible to analyze his reign with a degree of accuracy that is at least somewhat accurate.

Film Asoka's Narrative Structure and Organization

Asoka is a film that provides a fictionalized depiction of Ashoka's early life and the military victories he achieved. It is the path of the eponymous character, played by Shah Rukh Khan, from a warrior prince to a sorrowful emperor that is depicted in the film. A fabricated relationship between Ashoka and Kaurwaki (Kareena Kapoor), who is portrayed as a princess of Kalinga, is the primary subject of the movie. However, the film also places a large emphasis on the romance. The following are important components of the storyline of the movie:

1. As part of the **Exile and Romance Narrative**, the movie implies that Ashoka, while he is living in exile, develops romantic feelings for Kaurwaki, a fictional figure who is not mentioned in any historical document (Allen, 2012).

2. During the **Kalinga War**, the film dramatizes Ashoka's victory of Kalinga, but it oversimplifies the consequences of the conflict by portraying his guilt as an instantaneous awareness rather than a gradual metamorphosis.

3. The **role of Buddhism** Despite the fact that the movie acknowledges Ashoka's conversion to Buddhism, it does not show the full depth of his Buddhist policies and administration.

Due to the presence of these aspects, problems are raised regarding the equilibrium that exists between historical accuracy and artistic freedom in historical films.

Historical falsifications and artistic licenses

Despite the fact that Asoka makes an effort to depict the change of the Mauryan emperor, it takes a number of substantial creative liberties, including the following:

1. Relationships that are romanticized:

The fact that Kaurwaki was initially introduced as Ashoka's romantic interest is not supported by historical evidence. The presence of this woman is not mentioned in any historical records, much alone the fact that she was a princess of Kalinga (Smith, 1901). Despite the fact that Ashoka had a number of wives, one of whom was Devi, who was instrumental in bringing him to Buddhism, she is glaringly omitted from the film (Keay, 2000).

2. Differences in Chronology and Political Perspectives

• According to the film, Ashoka was exiled and spent some time in Kalinga before becoming emperor, which is contrary to the historical facts. According to Thapar (1997), there is no evidence to suggest that

Ashoka resided in Kalinga prior to the war time.

• The depiction of Kalinga as a monarchy that was ruled by a princess is factually incorrect; Kalinga was established as a republican state (Kosambi, 1956).

3. During the Kalinga War, Ashoka underwent a transformation.

The transition of Ashoka into a Buddhist monarch is shown in the film as an instantaneous consequence of the war, which simplifies the concept of the metamorphosis. A number of historical sources, on the other hand, indicate that his conversion to Buddhism was a progressive process that was influenced by Buddhist monks over the course of time (Strong 1980).

• His commitment to social welfare, religious tolerance, and nonviolence is emphasized in the Ashokan edicts, which are qualities that are mostly lacking from the film (Allen, 2012).

Reactions and Critical Appreciation of film

As soon as it was released, Asoka was met with mixed reviews. Inaccuracies in the film's historical depictions were attacked, despite the fact that it received accolades for its photography and acting.

1. The Criticism of Scholars

Concern has been raised by historians regarding the film's deviations from historical facts, which are as follows:

According to Bose (2003), academics in Odisha, which was formerly known as Kalinga, have voiced their dissatisfaction with the inaccurate portrayal of Kalinga's history.

According to Thapar (1997), the absence of Ashoka's latter policies, which included his diplomatic contacts with Greek countries, was regarded as a squandered opportunity to teach people about the global influence that he had.

2. Opinions of the Public and Their Influence on Culture

According to Jha (2004), the romanticized narrative has the potential to corrupt the public's perspective of Ashoka by reducing his legacy to a love tale rather than a complicated historical character who had a significant role in shaping the history of both Buddhism and India.

Considerations Regarding the Dramatization of Historical Events in Film

In the long run, the way historical personalities are portrayed in films has an impact on both the public's knowledge and the cultural memory of the people. Dramatized adaptations such as Asoka give rise to multiple problems, including the following:

1. False information and the creation of myths

When movies put an emphasis on entertaining rather than authenticity, they run the risk of generating myths that obscure the truth about historical events. According to Jha (2004), a significant number of spectators, particularly those who are not familiar with historical records, may choose to take film portrayals at face value.

2. The Obligation of Independent Filmmakers

In spite of the fact that artistic freedom is unquestionably important, filmmakers who depict historical characters ought to demonstrate accountability. According to Bose (2003), historical films have the potential to function as teaching tools if they are accompanied by factual information.

3. The commercialization of historical events

It is common practice for the film business to alter historical tales in order to boost their commercial appeal. According to Desai (2004), the inclusion of a fictional romance in *Asoka* is consistent with Bollywood's market-driven strategy rather than historical proof.

Conclusion

Films that are based on historical events are strong narrative media that have the ability to influence both cultural memory and popular perspectives of the past. The line between cinematic history and actual historical events, on the other hand, frequently becomes muddled, which brings to substantial distortions in the communal perception of the subject matter. The film *Asoka* (2001), which was directed by Santosh Sivan, is a prime example of this phenomena because it depicts a narrative of Emperor Ashoka's life that is both dramatic and romanticized. While the movie does a good job of introducing viewers to a significant historical figure, it also makes significant changes to Ashoka's legacy, putting an emphasis on spectacle rather than historical authenticity. This conclusion provides a summary of the most important ideas that were provided, including a discussion of the distinctions between cinematic representation and actual history, the nature and impact of historical distortions, and the broader implications that such portrayals have from a societal perspective.

It is important to differentiate between historical reality and film. There is a significant amount of dissimilarity between the depiction of history in films and the historical scholarship. Unlike academic history, which is based on evidence-based study, historical films generate narratives through the use of dramatic elements, character arcs, and visual storytelling (Rosenstone, 1995). The effect of this is that movies frequently shorten their timeframes, combine characters, or insert fake subplots in order to increase the audience's emotional engagement. This pattern is followed by *Asoka*, which presents a narrative of Ashoka's life that is geared more toward cinematic appeal than it is toward historical accuracy. The introduction of Princess Kaurwaki as a prominent character in *Asoka* is one of the most significant examples of the novel's unintended consequences. According to Thapar (1961), historical sources do not provide evidence that establishes her existence as a Kalinga princess or as a significant figure in Ashoka's life. Instead, Ashoka's real-life wife, Devi, who was instrumental in converting him to Buddhism, is completely erased from the movie (Allen, 2012). Devi was the one who introduced Ashoka to Buddhism. The

narrative is reshaped to conform to the rules of commercial storytelling, as seen by this modification, which shows how films value love subplots over their historical depth.

The portrayal of the Kalinga War and Ashoka's transformation is another significant point of differentiation between the two eras. In the movie, Ashoka's guilt is shown as an immediate emotional reaction to the carnage that occurred on the battlefield. Historical records, on the other hand, point to a more gradual change, which was inspired by his interactions with Buddhist monks and his long-term musings on government (Strong, 1983). The Ashokan edicts, which offer direct insight into his policies, place an emphasis on social welfare, religious tolerance, and ethical government. The film merely acknowledges these characteristics in a cursory manner (Thapar, 1997).

An Examination of the Narrative Justifications Behind the Distortions in *Asoka* When it comes to historical films, the aim to increase drama and appeal to large audiences frequently results in the distortion of historical events. Bollywood is known for its inclination to incorporate aspects of romance, action, and personal turmoil into historical narratives, and *Asoka* is a prime example of this tendency. In spite of the fact that these embellishments make history more approachable for viewers, they also contribute to the deterioration of factual truth (Bose, 2003). The emotional basis of the film is the romantic subplot between Ashoka and Kaurwaki; nevertheless, this subplot does not have any historical foundation supporting it. This element is consistent with the usual narrative structure of Bollywood, which places a significant emphasis on romance as a major component of the storytelling process (Desai, 2004). In a similar manner, Ashoka's portrayal in the movie shifts from being a cruel warrior and a passionate lover, which obscures his contributions to the realms of philosophy and administration. The complexity of his historical path is simplified in the film by focusing on his metamorphosis mostly as a result of emotional loss rather than ideological development.

Additionally, the film portrays Kalinga as a monarchy that is led by Kaurwaki, which is a significant change to the socio-political structure of the region. According to Kosambi (1956), Kalinga was a republican state that exercised a decentralized form of government throughout its history. The audience's perspective of ancient Indian politics is reshaped as a result of these alterations, which reinforce monarchical systems that may not be in accordance with historical realities. As a result of historical errors in films, the effects extend beyond the realm of entertainment, as they have the ability to shape public memory and influence how society perceives the past. Inaccuracies can contribute to widespread misconceptions, which is a particularly problematic situation given that cinema is the predominant medium of historical engagement for many audiences (Rosenstone, 2006).

1. In the process of mythologizing historical figures, films such as *Asoka* contribute to the mythologization

of historical figures by raising them to a stature that is almost legendary while also removing them from the historical situations in which they occurred. The audience's perception of Ashoka's achievements is altered as a result of the emphasis placed on his warrior persona and sexual entanglements, rather than on his governance and ethical principles (Jha, 2004). It is possible that the most essential components of his legacy, like as his advocacy for dhamma and his diplomatic outreach, will be obscured by this selective presentation.

2. Historical films are an important component in the formation of national and cultural identities, as they play a significant influence in the formation of cultural memory. On the other hand, when history is commodified for the sake of gaining cinematic appeal, it can result in the reinforcement of narratives that are biased. Asoka portrays a narrative of history that is consistent with Bollywood's emphasis on grandeur and spectacle, which has the potential to alter the way in which spectators interact with India's historical past (Desai, 2004).

3. Influence on Academic Discourse Historians and other academics frequently find themselves in conversation with cinematic depictions of history, addressing misconceptions that are caused by popular culture. As Richard J. Evans (2000) points out, films frequently become primary sources of historical information for the general public, which necessitates efforts by academics to repair the errors that have previously been made. In the instance of Asoka, academics have expressed their disapproval of the movie due to the fact that it does not adhere to historical evidence, highlighting the importance of providing a nuanced and accurate account of historical events (Thapar, 1997).

4. Ideological and Political Implications Historical films can also serve ideological roles, altering narratives to conform with present political or cultural goals. It is possible for historical films to perform these functions. According to Kellner (1995), the portrayal of Ashoka in the film Asoka places more emphasis on his image as a warrior than on his model of governing. This implicitly reinforces narratives that prioritize power and conquest over ethical governments. These kinds of depictions have the potential to affect public discourse on topics such as leadership, ethics, and historical legacy.

In its capacity as a mass medium, cinema contains the power to influence how people understand history, politics, and their own identities. There is a strong correlation between the power of visual storytelling and the fact that historical films frequently have a greater impact on forming public awareness than scholarly books (White, 1987).

Audiences frequently connect with historical films without being able to differentiate between dramatization and reality. This is a problem since historical films typically blur the line between fiction and fact. If historical individuals are transformed

through the conventions of cinema, it is possible that their actual contributions and ideas will be pushed to the background in order to satisfy the narrative requirements of the film (Toplin, 2002).

- Having an Impact on Educational Narratives — In certain instances, films become a component of educational discourse, either as additional materials or as interpretations of history that are generally accepted. Nevertheless, the presence of mistakes in films such as Asoka calls for critical engagement in order to guarantee that historical knowledge continues to be founded on research that is supported by evidence (Bose, 2003).

- Contributing to the formation of Collective Memory - Films have a prominent role in the formation of collective memory, exerting an influence on the manner in which societies remember and celebrate historical personalities. According to Jha (2004), the visual and emotional impact of cinema has the ability to ingrain particular images and storylines into the consciousness of the general audience, even when they significantly stray from historical fact.

The analysis of Asoka highlights the difficulties that are involved in recreating historical events for the purpose of cinematic storytelling. Films, despite the fact that they play the role of easily accessible entry points into historical narratives, also bear the obligation of accurately representing historical events. The fact that the history depicted in Asoka is not the same as the history taught in schools demonstrates how important it is for filmmakers to engage with historical study when they are portraying real people.

As we move forward, it is necessary to take a balanced approach—one that allows for artistic expression while still preserving the integrity of the historical record. For the purpose of ensuring that the depiction of historical events does not compromise fundamental historical realities, filmmakers should work together with historians. Furthermore, it is essential for audiences to develop a critical viewpoint, acknowledging that historical films are interpretations rather than definitive depictions of events.

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