

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

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### 1.1 Background of the Study

Cinema as an artistic endeavour and an indispensable medium of the masses encompasses a wide range of human experiences and it has the power to reflect the growth and progress of an entire community, society, or a country. Since 1890, when Lumiere brothers displayed their invention by filming the daily lives and environments of common people and demonstrated the film's capacity to document the world around, films have become a popular way to narrate stories both real and fictitious. However, real life narratives have always enjoyed a specific authority among the audience because these films provide them with a sense of witnessing something which actually occurred. *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) by D.W. Griffith has been highly successful in reconstructing significant historical events and till today it is being considered exemplary in imparting a narrative form to the film. In India, the silent mythological film *Raja Harishchandra* (1913) by Dadasaheb Phalke based on the legend of Raja Harishchandra, not only marked a historic benchmark in the film industry in India but has also proven to be a commercial success paving the way for more such films.

According to Andrew Hoskins (2002), "the societies turn on their past in an attempt to alter their own and others' perception of the collective in the present, they also turn to the past, in an attempt to find some kind of anchor in the characteristically fragmented experience of modern life. Different ways are explored by historical commentators in a move to share the experience of a collective past" (p. 206). Jacques Le Goff (1992) argues that "the pursuit, rescue, and celebration of collective memory, no longer in single events but over a long

period, this quest for collective memory less in texts than in the spoken word, images, gestures, rituals, and festivals, constitutes a major change in historical vision. It amounts to a conversion shared by the public at large, which is obsessed by the fear of losing its memory in a kind of collective amnesia—a fear which is awkwardly expressed in the taste for the fashions of earlier times, and shamelessly exploited by nostalgia-merchants; memory has thus become a best-seller in a consumer society” (p. 95). This explains how historical films soon emerged as a popular genre of films. Biographical films or biopics hold a significant position among the various authentic historical discourses projected on the screen. Minier et.al (2016) mention that, George F. Custen argues in his 1992 monograph, that lays down the groundwork for the study of the topic, that the form matured by the 1930’s when the proliferation of biographical films with distinct generic characteristics appeared in Hollywood. It is with this kind of film that Custen associated the term ‘biopic’, a colloquial contraction of ‘biographical motion picture’.

According to Christie, the biopic is “certainly the most familiar and most significant form of biographical narrative to emerge from modernity that has only recently begun to receive intense and systematic study” (as cited in Epstein, 2011, p. 1). The genre of the biopic is defined as encompassing films that “depict the life of a historical person, past or present” and in which the central character’s “real name is used”. It is a genre whose traits “shift anew with each generation” (Bastin and Bastin, 2009, p. 34). According to Bingham (2010), “the biopic is a genuine, dynamic and an important genre that narrates, exhibits and celebrates the life of a subject in order to demonstrate, investigate, or question his or her importance in the world” (p. 10). A biopic has to deal with fact and fiction in a very balanced manner and its similarity to other genres cannot be discounted.

Genres are dependent upon audiences for both their existence and meaning. The idea of genre circulated in public thinking well before the first scholarly writing on film genre

appeared. Almost from the beginning, movies have been promoted in the media primarily through their generic affiliations. They signal to prospective viewers the type of story as well as the kind of pleasure they are likely to offer and assist them in making a choice. (Grant, 2007). Conventional definitions of genres tend to be based on the notion that they constitute particular conventions of content (such as themes or settings) and/or form (including structure and style) which are shared by the texts regarded as belonging to them (Chandler, 1997). “The genre demarcation is always historical. That is to say, it is correct only for a specific moment of history” (Bordwell, 1989, p. 147). Some genres are defined only retrospectively, being unrecognized as such by the original producers and audiences. Genres need to be studied as historical phenomena; a popular focus in film studies, for instance, has been the evolution of conventions within a genre. Current genres go through phases or cycles of popularity (such as the cycle of disaster films in the 1970s), sometimes becoming dormant for a period rather than disappearing. On-going genres and their conventions themselves change over time. Reviewing 'evolutionary change' in some popular film genres, Andrew Tudor concludes that it has three main characteristics: innovations are added to an existent corpus rather than replacing redundant elements, it is cumulative; these innovations must be basically consistent with what is already present, it is 'conservative' and these processes lead to the crystallization of specialist sub-genres, it involves differentiation. (Tudor, 1974, pp. 225-226).

Undoubtedly biography has always been practiced in the history of cinema. Ian Christie, in his article *A life on film*, illustrates that the biographical film is essentially as old as cinema itself, both within and beyond the Anglo-American context. He demonstrates that early silent film footage, such as the chance recording of the assassination of the President William McKinley (1901), and the capturing of the suffragist Emily Davison's death (1913), paved the way for the emergence of the biographical film. The form started to develop in the early

1990's with, for instance, the 1912 Russian production, *The Departure of a Great Old Man* (portraying Tolstoy in his final days), Oskar Messter's 1913 *Richard Wagner* as well as *The Life of David Lloyd George* from 1918, which "would have been the first biographical film of a serving national leader" had it not been withdrawn right before its scheduled premiere (as cited in Mimier et.al 2016, p. 288).

Film studies has not recognized the biopic as a genre with its own conventions and stages of development. Furthermore, in the Hollywood studio era, biographies were staples of several of the major studios especially Warner Bros., Twentieth Century Fox, and MGM (Bingham, 2010). However, like any genre that dates back nearly to the beginnings of narrative cinema, the biopic can be said to have gone through the following developmental stages as given by Dennis Bingham in his work *Whose Lives Are They Anyway: The Biopic as Contemporary Film Genre* (2010): the classical, celebratory form (melodrama), warts-and-all (melodrama/realism), the transition of a producer's genre to an auteurist director's. (Martin Scorsese, Spike Lee, Oliver Stone, etc.), critical investigation and atomization of the subject (or the Citizen Kane mode), parody (in terms of choice of subject- a movie about somebody who does not deserve one), minority appropriation (as in queer or feminist, African American or third world), and since 2000 the neo-classical biopic which integrates elements of all or most of these. (Bingham, 2010)

As mentioned by Bingham (2010), applying genre development model of Henri Focillon (life-cycle model)<sup>1</sup> and Christian Metz (evolutionary model)<sup>2</sup>, it can be seen that the genre seems to have been through the stages and cycles more than once. The biopic went into eclipse as a consistently produced popular genre in the 1960s. The 1970s, an exciting phase for American cinema, was the low ebb of the biopic. The biopics did not receive a full

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<sup>1</sup> The life-cycle theory of genres put forward by Henri Focillon in *The life of forms in art* (1942). The stages are experimental to classic to refinement to baroque (self-reflexive).

<sup>2</sup> The concept of evolution from classicism to parody to contestation and critique, proposed by Christian Metz in *Language and Cinema*. (1974)

revival until the 1980s, the reasons being the rise of the auteur and the film school generation and the shift of the biopics from the producer's genre to the director's medium. There is, moreover, a glaring disconnect, especially since 1980, between the genre's withering critical and academic reception and its enduring success with voters of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and other award-giving bodies. Evidence abounds that biography has been a more prestigious genre since 1980 than it was in the studio period. In 1980 alone, out of five nominations for Best Picture, three were biographies: *Coal Miner's Daughter*, *The Elephant Man* and *Raging Bull*. Twenty-eight biopics were produced from 1981 to 2008 and seven won: *Gandhi* (1982), *Amadeus* (1984), *Out of Africa* (1985), *The Last Emperor* (1987), *Schindler's List* (1993), *Braveheart* (1995) and *A Beautiful Mind* (2001) and the trend still continues.

Rachel Dwyer (2012) in her work traces the growth of the genre in the Indian context and mentions that the biopic genre has been relatively unproductive in India despite the massive international critical and commercial success of the 1982 Indo-British biopic *Gandhi* by Richard Attenborough. In India, biopic has been a rarely used term and is not widely known, and it is usually being classed as "Historicals". They depict a nation in crisis, so the films are about the nation itself focusing on characters whose lives are told as narratives of struggle, sacrifice, and patriotism. There is also an overlap with other genres that have a quasi-historical nature including the mythological and devotional films.

Rachel Dwyer (2012) observes that, since biopic is a hybrid genre, "the biography does have some problems with fitting in the Hindi film form, which must have a hero, melodrama, spectacle, music, and also a star. The director of *Paan Singh Tomar* (2010) Tigmanshu Dhulia points out, that the audiences would classify a biopic without stars among documentaries; and a certain resistance to the documentary in India can be seen as this form has never been commercially successful" (p. 228).

The formation of the genre of the biopic in Hindi in the twentieth century, may be traced by mentioning a few key examples with the most celebrated being *Dr. Kotnis Ki Amar Kahani* (1946), based on K.A. Abbas's biography of a doctor. Many major filmmakers made several autobiographical films which drew on a tradition of autobiography that began in the nineteenth century and was developed by major political figures such as Gandhi and Nehru. The semi-autobiographical film included Guru Dutt's *Pyasa* (1957), often seen as blending elements of Guru Dutt's own life with the biography of the lyricist Sahir Ludhianvi. 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*. The leading figure of realist Hindi cinema Shyam Benegal has also 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, Zubeidaa Begum. These films stand side by side with films on the nationalist leaders Gandhi, *The Making of Mahatma* (1996) and Bose, *Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose: The Forgotten Hero* (2005). Another film *Oye Lucky! Lucky Oye!* (2008) by Dibakar Banerjee became something of a cult classic because of its unusual style and story-telling.

In the Indian context, the biographical film genre can be seen to encompass films about musicians, artists, scientists, political figures, writers, sports heroes, etc. Further, the genre also encompasses films that take extremely different approaches to dramatizing lives; some biopics attempt to give a comprehensive view of the subject's entire life, while others might dramatize only one significant period in the depicted person's life. Indian Cinema or specifically popular Hindi Bollywood Cinema bears testimony to such examples.

There is a recent surge in biopics due to shifts in Indian cinema, as audiences have changed in response to transformations in Indian society in the last two decades. Bollywood's incessant fascination with the biopic has grown stronger and become more evident. The success of biographical films like *Jodha Akbar* (the love saga of the greatest Mughal King Akbar and his Rajput wife Jodha), *The Dirty Picture* (a narrative on the life of the actress Silk Smitha), *Rang Rasiya* (based on the colorful life of 19<sup>th</sup> century renowned painter Raja Ravi Varma), *Mary Kom* (inspired by boxer Mary Kom's journey), *Main Aur Charles*, *Bajirao Mastani*, *Neerja*, *Aligarh*, *Azhar*, etc. seems to have truly reinforced the industry's faith and put Bollywood on a biopic spree. With the Indian films becoming transnational and the producers having an eye on the overseas market, biopics have become a major attraction, with the unprecedented success of *Paan Singh Tomar* (2010) and *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag* (2013). Biopics, especially sports biopics, have become immensely popular. Sports personalities have become a huge source of inspiration for filmmakers keen to make films based on them. Apart from this, there is a sudden surge of biopics about common people in Bollywood. These films are quite different from the usual biopics as the focus has shifted from only celebrating the life stories of the famous. These biopics create drama out of the stories of ordinary people who face extraordinary circumstances and still emerge as successful in their endeavours. Films like *Manjhi. Manjunath*, *Sarabjit*, etc. are quite successful examples of such biopics. Reality (in terms of biopics) as a formula is gaining prominence in Bollywood, with even fictional scripts creating thrust on authentic characters and situations.

Every biopic is supposed to have a basis in reality but biopic is by no means a simple recounting of the facts of someone's life, it operates at the border between fact and fiction. Robert Rosenstone (2012) points out that in a visual medium, history "must be fictional in order to be true" (p. 248). Catherine Parke (1996), argues that historically a "tug of war" has

taken place among fiction, biography, and history, “with biography in the middle” (p. 15). Whereas, biopics have a significant contribution in reconstruction of history, historical films, notes Sumita Chakravarty (1993), writing about the Bombay Cinema, “have played an important role in the formation of national identity and therefore it can be said that biographical approaches contribute in valuable ways to identity research by exploring the links between narrative and life” (p. 158).

Despite the genre’s newfound success, there is a dearth of academic research on Indian biopics. According to Rachel Dwyer (2012), “no study has been made of the early biopics and the extent to which they are true biopics is also 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 represents purity and honour, and there are no critical assessments or controversial issues around it” (p. 228).

Apart from various other significant features of biographical narratives, what makes biopic an interesting area of study is the difference in its narratology as compared to other genres. The majority of genres are bound to specific narrative conditions and these are formed by earlier films within the same genre. If they are violated, the film shifts its generic register or establishes a connection with another genre. Dorrit Cohen (2008), among others, has demonstrated that established narrative categories and conventions such as story/discourse, voice focalization, etc. do not apply to non-fiction in the same way as to fiction, and as biopics are an amalgamation of fact and fiction, they very uniquely assimilate narrative strategies and offer a rich area of inquiry. Henry M. Taylor (2011), who has made a comprehensive study of narration in biographical films, notes, a biopic has three narratological challenges. Firstly, it usually has to tell a life story in approximately two hours. Secondly, a life, in its entirety, is seldom very dramatic. Thirdly, the life of a protagonist has to be (audio) visualised, even if the protagonist is a writer whose daily work



does not seem and sound spectacular. Furthermore, a biopic builds a fictional character out of a public figure through narrative and cinematic means (as cited in Lehtisalo A., 2011). The distinctive features of biopic coupled with the genre hybridity, provide an intriguing area of research specifically in the Indian context, where the lack of such research is evident.

## **1.2 Research Objectives**

The present thesis aims to study some aspects of narrative style and structure of selected Hindi Biopics in order to identify an inherent pattern. Following objectives have been framed in order to address the broader research question, which is an attempt to explore the narratology of Hindi Biopics:

1. To analyse and compare the overall film style of selected biopics according to the running time and identify the similarities in the stylistic parameters.
2. To analyse act-wise organization of the narrative content and compare the act style across the sample to identify similarities.
3. To identify the stylistic and structural similarities in the eight narrative components selected for the study.

In order to achieve the above-mentioned objectives, following approach of analysis has been adopted.

## **1.3 Research Methodology: Statistical Style Analysis**

Films serve as objects of research, as meaningful documents with a potential to yield rich insights into the culture and time in which they are made. Films convey a host of ideas, values, and beliefs about a specific culture at an implicit or subconscious level. Moreover, film analysis aims to make us aware as audience about these implied ideas or values, and also the formal means through which they are communicated to us. As opposed to casual

discussions and reviews, film analysis, or criticism, strives to examine in detail the myriad narrative, thematic or formal choices that are a part of every film. It may, for example, focus in detail on a particular scene, examining the shot selection and editing transitions, framing, camera angles and movements, lighting and special effects, as well as the sound or music, to discover ideas, assumptions, and effects that even filmmakers themselves might not have intended (Geiger and Rutsky, 2013, pp. 1-2).

The film theorist Robert Stam argues that “subject matter is the weakest criterion for generic grouping because it fails to take into account *how* the subject is treated” (Stam 1999, p.14). This well explains that when one tries to examine biopic as a distinct genre and attempts to trace the patterns of similarities, it is not only the content that needs our attention but how that content is cinematically narrated through style and structure, is also an important aspect of the investigation. “Every film develops techniques in patterned ways. This unified, developed and significant use of particular technical choices is called style. Each filmmaker creates distinctive stylistic system” (Bordwell and Thomson, 2008, p. 111). These technical choices though employed differently for each film, bear some similarities to films of the same category or genre and therefore generic conventions can be a significant reason for patterned similarities in a set of films.

Nick Redfern (2013) expresses his concern over the lack of use of quantitative methods by film scholars. The approaches sought by scholars through years of research in film studies mostly turn out to be text-led analytical methods placed firmly within the Humanities that immediately cut off the film studies from decades of empirical research on the cinema, which looked at how viewers experienced and comprehended films, at the behaviour of audiences, and at the social impact of cinema.

According to him, the study of film is a diverse field comprising four distinct but related areas of inquiry:

- Industrial analysis: the political economy and organisation of film industries; technologies of film production, distribution, and exhibition; practices of film production, distribution, and exhibition; government policies, etc.
- Textual analysis: representation and the symbolic meanings of the film; film form; film style; narrative/non-narrative structure, etc.
- Ethnographic analysis: the composition of audiences; rituals of cinema-going and film experiences; cultural meanings and issues of identity, etc.
- Cognitive-psychological analysis: the viewer's perception of a film; communication and information in the cinema; psychological processes of meaning-making in the cinema; the psychological basis of the viewer's response to a film, etc.

He observes that “Statistics is relevant to each of these four areas and we can encounter information presented in the numerical, graphical, and tabular form in whatever aspect of the cinema we choose to study. Therefore, if a film is approached as a complex object of inquiry with the methodological openness it demands, this naturally includes quantitative methods, which encompass historical and text-based methods, because quantitative methods help us to answer questions about the economics of the film industry, about patterns in the style and form of motion pictures, about audiences' behaviours and attitudes, and about how we understand and experience the cinema.” (p. 62)

Thus, the present thesis with an aim to study the film form of biopics via cinematic style and narrative structure, adopts the technique of statistical style analysis which is established by Barry Salt and is further explored by scholars like Warren Buckland, James E. Cutting, and Nick Redfern. The analysis majorly depends on the descriptive and inferential statistics and is also complemented by the descriptive analysis of narrative content.

## **1.4 Significance of the Present Study**

Academic research on Hindi biopics is limited to a few research papers. Biopics in India and especially in Hindi Cinema, are usually discussed in magazine articles or newspaper editorials. Owing to the dearth of studies on Biopics, especially in the Indian context, this research is highly relevant at this point when Hindi Cinema is witnessing a fascination for biopics both by the filmmakers and the audience. Review of different studies establishes that though Style analysis has been used to understand some aspects of filmic narration but biopics have not been approached from this perspective. Style analysis of Hindi Biopics to understand the narrative structure and similarities in their production in terms of style would, therefore, be a significant contribution to the existing corpus of biopic research in India.

## **1.5 Delimitations of the Present Study**

- The present study is limited in its scope since it has taken only five films as the sample for analysis. Due to the tedious task of manual data extraction, recording and coding, a larger sample cannot be managed at the level of a thesis.
- All the biopics selected for study are released after 2010, therefore, the analysis shows only the recent trend in style and structure and hence, the findings cannot be generalized to the biopics produced before that period.
- Though the sample consists of five films but there are more than 8000 data points that are identified and extracted for study, therefore, out of all the elements of film style (cinematography, mise-en-scene, editing, and sound) only cinematographic elements come under the purview of the present analysis.
- Since the sample consists of only biopics and other genres are not considered for a comparative study, it is only assumed that the identified similarities are present because the films belong to the same genre but it cannot be claimed that these patterns are generic

conventions and are not found in other genres. Therefore, the purpose is to simply study the underlying pattern of a biopic rather than comparing the cinematic style with the other genres.

## **1.6 Chapter Division**

The thesis is divided into six main chapters:

Chapter 1, **Introduction**, provides the background of the study and emphasizes the need to conduct research on Hindi biopics. Thus, it establishes the relevance of the present study.

Chapter 2, **Literature Review**, is a detailed review of literature related to different aspects of biopics as a film genre, cinematic narration, and statistical style analysis. It is an overview of the major research work done in these areas and a research gap is traced after an extensive literature review.

Chapter 3, **Research Methodology**, deals in detail with the procedure of sample selection, data extraction and recording procedure and the methods of data analysis.

Chapter 4, **Results and Discussion-I**, discusses the results of the first phase of analysis. It is an overall style comparison of the five films along with an analysis of the act-wise organization and structuring of the narrative content.

Chapter 5, **Results and Discussion- II**, discusses the results of the second phase of analysis which examines the different narrative components in terms of style and structure and the results are compared across the sample of five films.

Chapter 6, **Conclusion**, summarises the findings of the analysis and discusses the stylistic and structural similarities and dissimilarities in the pattern of selected Hindi biopics.

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