



11. Media and the Reinterpretation of History: A Study of Unsung Heroes in Hindi Films (2015–2025)

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Abstract

*Between 2015 and 2025, there was a noticeable increase in historical biopics in Hindi cinema that focused on local or underappreciated personalities, frequently with a nationalistic tone. This study examines five such movies that focus on a character who is typically underrepresented in popular historical narratives: *Tanhaji: The Unsung Warrior* (2020), *Sardar Udham* (2021), *Samrat Prithviraj* (2022), *Sam Bahadur* (2023–24), and *Chhaava* (2025). It investigates how these movies create their heroes and stories by referencing reviews, promotional materials, filmmaker interviews, and film content analysis. It examines criticism of historical accuracy and emphasizes their reliance on nationalist themes and heroic symbolism. According to the analysis, these movies use cinematic spectacle to popularize a mythologized or sanitized version of history in order to affect collective memory. These releases frequently generated media discussion regarding how they presented historical facts, suggesting that film has emerged as a key location for memory formation in modern India. Certain films were officially promoted (via special screenings or tax exemptions), highlighting their influence on public discourse and education. They frequently use modern ideological frameworks to resurrect underappreciated tales. The study comes to the conclusion that by narrating these stories, Bollywood actively reinterprets India's past, demonstrating the intersection of popular culture and historical memory, rather than just providing entertainment.*

Keywords-Hindi cinema; Unsung heroes; History; Nationalism; Indian Films

Introduction

In Indian cinema, films that dramatize historical events and figures have become increasingly popular in recent years. Epics about famous kings or saints are still popular, but a new generation of movies focuses on India's historical "unsung heroes." These films frequently appear in the midst of a resurgence of nationalism, implying that history is once more a contentious issue. Cinema is a significant location for the construction of collective memory, as cultural theorists point out. Filmmakers influence how the public views history by choosing which historical figures to honor.



(For instance, the BJP's nationalist narrative was formally endorsed when Samrat Prithviraj was granted tax exemption in Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh.) This study looks at five movies that highlight underappreciated historical figures and were released between 2015 and 2025. It queries how these films reinterpret Indian history, and what effects they have on popular memory.

Hypothesis

We hypothesize that by elevating heroes who were previously "forgotten" in popular culture, these movies purposefully rewrote India's history in ways that support modern ideologies. In other words, the movies emphasize bravery, sacrifice, and patriotism through dramatic storytelling, even at the expense of strict historical accuracy, in order to popularize particular historical interpretations. The audience's perception of these individuals is therefore influenced more by the stories in the films than by archival scholarship. In other words, Hindi historical film actively reshapes collective memory to reflect current national identity in addition to reclaiming underappreciated tales.

Theoretical Framework

This study makes use of popular historiography and theories of collective memory. Collective memory, as used in sociology and cultural studies, describes how societies remember and piece together the past. These memories are anchored and transmitted by media such as film, which act as lieux de mémoire (sites of memory). Film, according to Rosenstone and others, serves as "popular history," reaching viewers outside of the academic community. In the Indian context, academics (like Kasbekar and Ganti) have observed that Bollywood frequently reflects modern ideologies in its historical portrayals. Therefore, how a historical figure is portrayed in a movie reveals as much about modern values as it does about the past. This study approaches each movie as an instance of cinematic historiography, looking at narrative decisions like dialogue, character development, music, and visual symbolism from the perspective of memory theory. It asks whether the films simply "correct" historical oversights, or whether they also encode national myths that resonate with modern audiences.

Methodology

The study is interpretive and qualitative in nature. The films themselves serve as primary data, carefully examined for narrative and stylistic elements. The way the main character and historical events are portrayed in each film is examined scene by scene. In order to ascertain intent, public statements, promotional materials (such as posters and trailers), and filmmaker interviews are taken into consideration whenever possible. News stories, scholarly commentary, and media reviews are examples of secondary sources. These resources aid in evaluating the reactions and discussions surrounding each movie. The amount of research the directors did, for instance, may



be disclosed in production notes or interviews. Official involvement with the movie is indicated by media coverage, such as rumors that Tanhaji had special army screenings. Impact is measured using audience responses (on social media, box office numbers), as well as reviews from critics.

Detailed Case Studies

Case Study 1: *Tanhaji: The Unsung Warrior* (2020)

The campaign of Maratha commander Tanaji Malusare (Ajay Devgn) under Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj in the 1670s is portrayed in the movie *Tanhaji: The Unsung Warrior*. Though little known outside of Maharashtra, Tanaji is a legend there. Om Raut, a Marathi filmmaker, had the goal of making this story known across the country. Tanaji's bravery and loyalty in taking Kondhana Fort from the Mughals (Saif Ali Khan) are highlighted in the movie. The story is filled with fervent religious declarations and visually stunning battle scenes. The film's role in patriotic education was demonstrated by the state and military's support for it, as it was tax-exempt and screened for soldiers.

There were differing opinions among critics. The scale and performances were praised by some. Some viewed it as overtly patriotic. The *New Indian Express*, for example, made the joke, "What's a historical in Bollywood nowadays without... jingoistic nationalism?" Tanaji Malusare was never an unsung hero in Maharashtra, according to retired Colonel A. Athale, who also bemoaned the film's factual errors. (Athale also admitted that the film brought Tanaji's story to viewers throughout India.) The Sambhaji Brigade and other pro-Maharashtra organizations objected to specific scenes, saying the movie misrepresented Shivaji's legacy. These kinds of disputes are similar to those surrounding other historical dramas in the 2010s.

In reality, the movie *Tanhaji* popularized a heroic, albeit oversimplified, portrayal of Tanaji. His sacrifice and the battle cry "Har Har Mahadev" were explained to the audience. Tanaji was specifically framed as having recently been rescued from obscurity by the movie's tagline, "The Unsung Warrior." Despite taking historical liberties, the film popularized Tanaji outside of Maharashtra. *Tanhaji* is a prime example of Bollywood's use of spectacle as a cultural artifact to inscribe a Maratha nationalist narrative into the collective consciousness.

Case Study 2: *Sardar Udham* (2021)

The film *Sardar Udham* tells the story of Udham Singh (Vicky Kaushal), a Punjabi revolutionary who killed Michael O' Dwyer in London in 1940 as retaliation for the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in 1919. After years of research, director Shoojit Sircar created a film that stands out for its solemn tone. Haunting flashbacks to the massacre and Udham's years overseas are intercut with his final trial. The film's psychological focus is highlighted by *The Times of India*, which notes that "it does



not depict Udham Singh as a stereotypical action hero but rather as a deeply affected individual driven by grief and conviction." In order to achieve a "cinematic portrayal that focuses...on Udham's face, furrowed as it is by pain, anger, and...resolve," Sircar purposefully shunned melodrama and patriotic grandstanding. Interviews verify Sircar's intention to emphasize historical accuracy instead of myth (he insisted he "did not take any liberty" with facts).

The movie was praised by critics for being historically accurate and restrained. Its prominence was demonstrated by the numerous National Awards it received, including Best Actor and Best Film. Jallianwala Bagh, which TOI describes as a "harrowing sequence" that makes an impression, was especially well received by viewers. Udham re-centers a Sikh revolutionary within the narrative of India's freedom in terms of memory. The goal of the movie's climax, according to scholar Bhattacharya, is to "shake the global collective out of its passive complicity", that is, to compel people to remember the atrocity. Historians generally praised Udham's attention to detail, which places a higher priority on accuracy than Tanhaji. Therefore, without using fantasy, the movie informs viewers about a lesser-known martyr. It has brought the story of Udham Singh and the background of Jallianwala Bagh back into the public eye.

Case Study 3: *Samrat Prithviraj* (2022)

Chandraprakash Dwivedi's *Samrat Prithviraj*, which is based on the medieval epic *Prithviraj Raso*, portrays Akshay Kumar as King Prithviraj Chauhan. Although Prithviraj, the Chauhan king of the 12th century, is a well-known historical and legendary figure, Bollywood had never before portrayed his life to this extent. Prithviraj, who is blind, uses an arrow to kill Sultan Muhammad of Ghor in the film's climax, which is based on the *Raso* poem. (According to an IAS briefing, this "miracle" scene is fabled; according to most historical accounts, Prithviraj was put to death following his defeat.) *Samrat Prithviraj* embodies the heroic myth: the trailer notably depicts Prithviraj using voice recognition to identify his blind adversary.

According to commentators, Prithviraj is portrayed by some on the Hindu right as the "Last Hindu Emperor" who valiantly resisted the invaders. This is emphasized by the film's images, which include Rajput weapons, temple flags, and a triumphant closing shot. Political support was demonstrated by the censor board's pre-approval and the declaration of tax exemptions by BJP-ruled states. There were some disputes at the time of release (such as conflicting Gujjar and Rajput claims regarding Chauhan's ancestry), but no significant demonstrations.

Samrat Prithviraj's commercial success was mediocre. It mainly solidified Prithviraj Chauhan's highly exalted reputation in the public consciousness. By popularizing the *Raso* story as fact, the movie effectively combined history and legend. In doing so, it strengthened a nationalist historiography, turning Prithviraj from a complicated medieval king into a symbol of valiant



resistance. Thus, the movie shows how Bollywood can adapt historical accounts to contemporary identity politics. It did, however, heighten interest in Prithviraj's tale by giving myth precedence over subtlety.

Case Study 4: *Sam Bahadur* (2023)

India's Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw (Vicky Kaushal) is the subject of the biopic *Sam Bahadur*. Manekshaw, who led the Indian Army in 1971, is a post-independence hero who is already highly regarded, in contrast to the others. The film, which was directed by Meghna Gulzar, follows his early career through the war of 1971. The tone is solemn: according to interviews, Meghna Gulzar "stayed true to historical facts," and Kaushal described playing the adored general as a "massive responsibility." According to reports, the team sought authenticity by consulting Manekshaw's family and archival footage.

Sam Bahadur essentially portrays Manekshaw as an unquestionable hero, according to critics. The Guardian notes that in line with contemporary nationalist sentiment, the movie "presents [Manekshaw] in terms of outright, if charming, heroism." In fact, the story emphasizes his humor, leadership, and victories while ignoring controversy (such as the numerous arguments between the general and political leaders). A joyful portrait is the end result. After its theatrical run, the film was widely streamed and received positive reviews, being viewed as patriotic fare.

Instead of presenting a hidden hero, *Sam Bahadur* serves to reinforce a well-known legacy for younger audiences because Manekshaw was never "unsung." Its effect is to solidify Manekshaw's legacy in the eyes of the public, a feat made coherent by meticulous attention to detail and impressive production values. In contrast, the audience believes the story to be true in these myth-driven movies. In conclusion, *Sam Bahadur* is a prime example of simple patriotic filmmaking: it reinforces preexisting national narratives while educating viewers about a well-known individual without causing much controversy.

Case Study 5: *Chhaava* (2025)

The upcoming film *Chhaava*, which translates to "lion cub" in Hindi, is based on Shivaji Sawant's Marathi novel about Shivaji's son, Chhatrapati Sambhaji Maharaj. In 1689, Sambhaji, a Maratha king, lost his battle against Aurangzeb, the Mughal emperor. Mughal narratives have frequently portrayed him negatively, so *Chhaava* specifically aims to change that perception. In trailers, Vicky Kaushal plays Sambhaji, who is seen inspiring Maratha troops and defiantly fending off torture. "A person like... Sambhaji Maharaj is an unsung hero for us," Kaushal says in the press. It's time to highlight these unsung heroes and elevate them to the status of heroes. Tanhaji's goal is reflected in this mission statement, which calls for bringing a little-known person to the attention of the country.



Chhaava was criticized even before it was released. According to media reports, some groups questioned any deviations and requested that imagined scenes, like a Lezim dance, be removed. Film historian Dilip Thakur is cited as stating that epics from the past "never faced controversy" and that modern filmmakers should continue to portray them in a way that is "factually correct" and thoroughly researched. Using the Padmaavat example, trade analyst Saurabh Varma noted that social media can intensify criticism even before viewers see the film. The politicized environment in which Chhaava will arrive is highlighted by these discussions.

Chhaava might be a blockbuster, according to box office tracking (early figures show strong openings in Maharashtra). If so, Sambhaji's story will probably be widely revived. Sambhaji is portrayed in the movie as a martyr-hero battling oppression from abroad, just like Tanhaji. Its narrative choices, who survived and how, will become part of popular culture. All things considered, Chhaava seems ready to bring Sambhaji back as a national hero, once more fusing the past with modern Maratha pride. How audiences react to it will ultimately determine its impact, but given current trends, it is likely to become one of the many movies that "popularize a version of history" to the general public.

Discussion

There are definite trends among these five instances. Every movie chooses a hero connected to a military or revolutionary conflict. Individual bravery and selflessness are the main narrative themes; complexity (such as competing allegiances or moral ambiguity) is minimized. Tanhaji and Chhaava, for instance, highlight Hindu-Maratha bravery by showing Marathi warriors engaged in a fierce battle with the Mughals. Prithviraj and Udham portray retaliation against foreign oppressors. A flawless modern warrior is portrayed by Sam Bahadur. The antagonist is always portrayed as evil, and the protagonist as admirable and selfless. This sharp contrast between good and evil is typical of nationalist narratives.

The "unsung" label is a major theme. The marketing for each movie specifically refers to its subject as an unsung or forgotten hero. This designation indicates that the film seeks to address a historical omission. In reality, though, local recollections occasionally run counter to this; for example, Tanaji and Sambhaji were well-known in Maharashtra. Instead, the movies focus on viewers outside of those areas. The films defend their own retelling to a pan-Indian audience by characterizing the hero as "unsung." This tactic, which provides identity through mediated narratives, is similar to academic concepts of prosthetic memory.

These depictions are also infused with ideology. India is experiencing a wave of assertive nationalism at the time of all five films. Many addressed contemporary pride or received government support (official screenings, tax exemptions). Three of the films' focus on Hindu-



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Maratha versus Muslim-Mughal conflicts may support popular historical interpretations. In contrast, Udham and Bahadur were more overtly patriotic in nature, concentrating on a Sikh and a Parsi general, respectively. These movies are frequently praised in reviews for inspiring patriotism; for example, The Guardian said that Sam Bahadur makes viewers "feel proud."

It is indisputable that these movies influence people's memories. They reached young audiences, as evidenced by their box office success and social media buzz. Names like Tanaji or Sambhaji are more well-known after these movies. As previously stated, Tanhaji's narrative was institutionalized through screening in schools and the military. These films are likely to make an initial impression on younger Indians who have not received much formal education on the history of the 17th century. For better or worse, Bollywood thus serves as a de facto "textbook" of history for a large number of people.

But the memory that is made is selective. In line with a heroic nationalist trope, the movies tend to glorify sacrifice, martyrdom, and revenge. They ignore any facts that are inconvenient, like Sambhaji's documented personal problems or the Rajput's internal politics before Tarain. Historians, like Athale and others, have pointed out these gaps. This creates a conflict because these movies bring back forgotten heroes, but they also show history through modern ideological lenses. In a way, history and popular culture interact: the past is changed to fit stories that are happening now.

Conclusion

This study looked at how recent Hindi movies change Indian history by focusing on "unsung heroes." The five case studies show that Bollywood has systematically taken under-told lives and made them into larger-than-life characters. These include the Maratha warriors Tanaji and Sambhaji, the martyr Udham Singh, King Prithviraj, and General Sam Manekshaw. To make people feel proud and emotional, the movie uses dramatic dialogues, stirring music, and stunning visuals. Filmmakers also have creative freedom. They often make events simpler, mix legends with facts, and give stories modern values.

There is a significant impact on collective memory. These movies effectively rewrite popular understanding curricula by introducing viewers to historical figures who might otherwise go unnoticed. This rewriting isn't neutral, though. While their enemies (colonial officers or Mughal invaders) are constantly demonized, the heroes are constantly praised. As a result, the movies spread a narrative about the country's history that supports contemporary ideologies. As a result, the public's perception of the past is changing: the intricate fabric of history is reframed as a story of heroic struggle, and unsung heroes are elevated to the status of icons.



To sum up, Indian popular cinema serves as a potent historical medium. Filmmakers have added to the pantheon of remembered figures by bringing underappreciated tales to the big screen. However, there are two sides to their reinterpretations: on the one hand, they may exalt pride, but on the other, they may oversimplify history. It should be noted by academics and educators that these kinds of films are now a major source of historical knowledge for many people. Thus, comprehending how they depict history is essential to comprehending the current outlines of collective memory.

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