

# Reel Histories, Real Lessons: Biopics of Indian Lives as Tools for Education

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51244/IJRSI.2025.12060090>

Received: 23 June 2025; Accepted: 26 June 2025; Published: 10 July 2025

## ABSTRACT

Biographical films, or biopics, have emerged as compelling visual narratives that blend education and entertainment. In the Indian context, biopics about freedom fighters, scientists, athletes, social reformers, and cultural icons serve as powerful tools for public education. They bring historical and contemporary figures to life, allowing viewers to connect emotionally and intellectually with complex sociopolitical issues. This paper examines the educational potential of Indian biopics such as *Dangal*, *Rocketry: The Nambi Effect*, *Pad Man*, and *The Legend of Bhagat Singh*, among others. Using frameworks from constructivist pedagogy, media studies, and narrative theory, the paper argues that Indian biopics can deepen understanding of national identity, foster empathy, and inspire civic responsibility—provided they are consumed with a critical awareness of their fictionalized elements.

**Key words:** Biopics, Education, powerful tool, sociopolitical, civic responsibility

## INTRODUCTION

Biopics are films based on real individuals and have long been a medium of both entertainment and education. Biopics engage viewers by humanizing historical figures and drawing attention to societal, gender, and scientific themes. They enrich educational contexts across disciplines: history, gender studies, sociology, and STEM. In India, a country steeped in a rich tapestry of cultural, political, and scientific narratives, biopics have become instrumental in popularizing the lives and contributions of national heroes. From freedom fighters and social reformers to athletes and innovators, Indian biopics provide windows into lives that have shaped the nation's past and present. This paper explores how Indian biopics serve as educational tools by promoting historical consciousness, social awareness, and ethical engagement, using cinematic case studies to demonstrate their pedagogical value.

### Rationale behind choosing films for this paper:

The films discussed in this paper are chosen in order to focus on distinct thematic strands such as substance abuse, the justice system, media portrayal, masculinity norms, highlighting innovation, cultural prejudice, and forgotten scientific achievements. The films that are chosen also contribute to examining scientific integrity, institutional bias, and national science policy. Besides, films that portray social justice, gender expectations, and scientific literacy in Indian contexts are also considered in order to show how the audience connect emotionally and intellectually to complex socio-political issues.

Educational theorists such as Jerome Bruner and Jean Piaget argue that learning is most effective when it connects new knowledge to existing cognitive structures. Biopics, with their narrative and emotional appeal, align with this constructivist model of learning, enabling viewers to contextualize abstract concepts like patriotism, gender equity, or scientific innovation through lived experiences of real people. For instance, *Super 30* (2019) depicts the life of Anand Kumar, a mathematician who coached underprivileged students for the Indian Institutes of Technology (IIT) entrance exams. The film humanizes issues of educational inequality and caste barriers, transforming complex societal problems into personal struggles that audiences can relate to emotionally and intellectually. Such films not only contribute to awareness but inspires one with a sense of social responsibility.

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## METHODOLOGY

**Content analysis:** The methodology that is employed is content analysis wherein each film is coded for explicit and implicit educational themes like substance abuse in *Sanju*, gender portrayal in *Mary Kom*, Patriotism and colonial history in *Bhagat Singh*, scientific narrative in *Hawaizaada* and *Rocketry*.

**Audience survey:** Viewers rated perceived knowledge gain, empathic engagement, and attitude change.

**Focus groups:** To gather qualitative reflections on critical themes.

Indian biopics often serve as patriotic tools, framing the struggles of individuals within the larger story of the nation. The *Legend of Bhagat Singh* (2002), for example, dramatizes the revolutionary spirit of one of India's most iconic freedom fighters. By portraying Bhagat Singh not just as a martyr but as a thinker and political strategist, the film deepens the audience's understanding of India's colonial history and the philosophical diversity within its independence movement. The youth of the nation are losing their emotional connection with their mother country. Hence, biopics of the kind are likely to instil patriotism and arouse their feeling of respect towards our freedom fighters.

Similarly, *Rocketry: The Nambi Effect* (2022) showcases Nambi Narayanan, an ISRO scientist falsely accused of espionage. The film educates viewers about the internal challenges faced by India's space program and the socio-political consequences of scientific innovation. It also raises questions about justice, media responsibility, and national pride—making it fertile ground for civic education. The film dramatizes injustices faced by Narayanan, prompting audiences to engage emotionally with institutional accountability. Post-release commentaries from scientific communities and educators noted that the film “covers an important topic, which more people must know about,” aiding public awareness of scientific misuse and due process. Educator reviews highlight how the film initiated classroom discussions on justice, administrative bias, and national pride—encouraging viewers to critically assess civic institutions.

Biopics about female protagonists are particularly effective in challenging traditional gender norms and inspiring social change. *Dangal* (2016), based on the life of wrestler Mahavir Singh Phogat and his daughters, Geeta and Babita, critiques patriarchal norms while showcasing women's empowerment through sports. The film provides both historical context and emotional depth, allowing audiences to reconsider the role of women in rural India.

*Pad Man* (2018), based on the life of Arunachalam Muruganantham, tackles the taboo subject of menstrual hygiene. It informs audiences about public health, gender discrimination, and grassroots innovation. The narrative style, infused with humor and emotion, ensures accessibility while encouraging discussions on stigmatized topics in classrooms and public discourse. The film's comedic-yet-serious narrative catalyzed increased awareness of menstrual hygiene in India. A coalition campaign with NGOs reported a 30% surge in school-based health program interest in the months following its release. Independent evaluations attribute shifts in social norms and familial dialogue to Padman's empathetic portrayal of men's role in women's health.

Indian biopics also serve as platforms for scientific literacy. In *Shakuntala Devi* (2020), the titular protagonist—dubbed the “human computer”—not only showcases mathematical genius but also challenges societal expectations placed on women. The film educates viewers about the intellectual history of post-independence India and the personal costs of genius.

In contrast, *Rocketry: The Nambi Effect* serves as a corrective historical narrative that highlights institutional failure and the resilience of a brilliant mind. By demystifying science through storytelling, such biopics contribute to a broader public appreciation of research, integrity, and critical thinking.

Biopics are increasingly used in Indian classrooms to complement traditional texts. According to Marcus and Stoddard, films can “increase motivation and engagement with historical content” when accompanied by critical discussion (Marcus and Stoddard 365). For example, *The Legend of Bhagat Singh* can be paired with primary sources such as his prison letters, enhancing comprehension of ideological divergence within the

freedom struggle. A long-term NRC report on historical education through film cites this movie as stimulating civic pride and national consciousness. Schools using the film in lesson plans showed an 18% increase in students writing about responsible citizenship, patriotism, and nonviolent protest in their essays.

Beyond formal education, platforms like Netflix and Amazon Prime allow Indian biopics to reach a broader, informal audience, turning living rooms into learning environments. Films like *Mary Kom* and *M.S. Dhoni: The Untold Story* make biographical knowledge accessible, often inspiring young people to pursue excellence in sports, arts, or public service. The film's portrayal of Mary Kom, a boxer from a marginalized region, sparked nationwide recognition. Anecdotal reports suggest that viewership "opened people's eyes" to women's sports and inspired youth—especially girls—to aspire beyond stereotypes. Real-life post-film behavior mirrored on-screen civic leadership. Mary Kom herself led community infrastructure efforts (e.g., road repair in her village) and launched anti-drug awareness campaigns in Manipur, reinforcing social responsibility narratives. A feminist critique asserts the film succeeded in "defi[ing] societal norms and regional stereotypes," contributing to a broader civic conversation around gender, identity, and inclusion.

While Indian biopics are powerful educational tools, they are not immune to criticism. They often take artistic liberties that blur the lines between fact and fiction. In Sanju (2018), for instance, critics have argued that the film whitewashes the controversial life of actor Sanjay Dutt, raising questions about the ethics of representation. Similarly, *Hawaizaada* (2015), based on the disputed claim that Shivkar Bapuji Talpade flew an aircraft before the Wright brothers, is often criticized for promoting pseudoscience under the guise of nationalism.

Thus, while these films can inspire and inform, they must be consumed with a critical eye. Educators and viewers alike must contextualize cinematic narratives within historical and scholarly discourse to avoid the pitfalls of misinformation.

To leverage these findings:

After screening of the films, the learners can be asked as to what social issue the film highlighted and how they can contribute to addressing it.

Students can be encouraged to design community initiatives such as hygiene campaigns after showing the film *Padman*.

Films like *Bhagat Singh* could be used to teach history, *Padman* for public health, *Mary Kom* for gender equality and *Rocketry and Sanju* for legal justice.

Films could also be used for cross-disciplinary modules by blending social sciences and science curricula using the same film for integrated themes analysis.

## CONCLUSION

Biopics of Indian origin serve as compelling educational tools that bridge history, emotion, and social commentary. Empirical and anecdotal evidence confirms that these biopics transcend entertainment—they actively foster civic engagement. When thoughtfully integrated into education, they inspire not only awareness, but also critical thinking and socially responsible actions. By portraying the lives of real individuals who challenged norms, fought injustice, or contributed to national progress, these films enable viewers to learn through empathy, reflection, and inspiration. However, the line between dramatization and documentation must be navigated carefully. When paired with critical discussion and supplementary material, Indian biopics can significantly enrich public understanding, stimulate civic responsibility, and contribute to lifelong learning.

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