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CATCHING UP ON BIOPICS

SHALINI SAKSENA speaks to stakeholders who say that films on people have always grabbed eyeballs whether it is a Bollywood project like *Dangal*, *Guru* or *Neerja* or a Hollywood film like *Bohemian Rhapsody*, on Freddie Mercury, which has been nominated for Academy Awards in five categories

From movies on sportspersons (*Mary Kom* and *MS Dhoni*) to politician (*Thackeray*) to businessman (*Guru*) to social worker (*SP Chauhan*) to a warrior's journey (*Manikarnika: The Queen of Jhansi*) to even a dacoit (*Bandit Queen* and *Paan Singh Tomar*), Bollywood has churned out great biopics in the last couple of decades. The subjects have grabbed the eyeballs and therefore filmmakers are now looking for subjects and profiling men and women from everyday life.

Sushil Kumar Agrawal, CEO Ultra Media and Entertainment Pvt Ltd, tells you that India has always been historically rich in terms of stories, rulers, patrons, warriors and the various struggles it had undertaken to fight both the foreign as well as internal tyrannical rulers and the world has been in awe of the nation's colourful history even today.

"Indian cinema, for all these years, has portrayed those tales illustriously. Many films exploring these topics had been commercially successful. Being nostalgic journeys, these tales are constantly inspiring and giving us insights into nuances we were unaware of. There is a huge set of youngsters there who over and above reading about the history in textbooks will benefit a lot watching it getting depicted on the screen and understand the opulence of the rich and the varied folklore and culture India had. Filmmakers nowadays have a special affinity for historical films. Historical films definitely will and always have a market and patronage. Case in point is the success of these films in the past two years and the 2019 and 2020 promising us gems like *Manikarnika: The Queen of Jhansi*, *Panipat*, *Kalank*, *Taanaji*, *Kesari* and *Takht*," Agrawal says.

Shariq Patel, CEO of ZEE Studios, tells you that it is not just India where there is a market for biopics, globally too there are takers. "Increasingly, people like to see people stories. In this context, we have been seeing movies like *Manikarnika*... which has done very well. In the past, there was *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag* and *Mary Kom*. *Uri* has done well, though not a biopic but inspired by true events. There is a market for films on the big screen for subjects that we may have read



in history books and in the newspapers. There is an innate desire to see a dramatised version of the subject which can entertain and be informative as well," Patel explains.

Even internationally, we have movies like *Social Network* to *Bohemian Rhapsody*; they are all related to real life characters. These movies resonate with the audience because there is already an underlining fan base and connect.

Despite reading about these characters either in books or read about them in the newspapers, the reason for the fascination of watching a movie of them is because we are curious on how it will be dealt with on the 70 mm screen.

"There is something about watching the protagonist struggle and a hero emerging. Or it could be related to wanting to know behind the scenes of making a film on Queen (*Bohemian Rhapsody*). Wanting to know the relationships between the four band members. There is an increased value. 'I have read it, now want to see it,'" Patel says and agrees that it is similar to watching *The Jungle Book* or even *Cinderella*.

"That is why films based on books are doing so well too. It is someone's interpretation of the book. It is a great source for cinema — if you have not read it, then movies is a great way to dive into them. If you have read it, then to just see how it can come alive," Patel says.

He tells you that it is not just the CGI or the props that are part and parcel of biopics. "It depends on the subject matter. "For example, in *Manikarnika*..., if one was showing



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the battlefield, people come to watch the visual spectacle. But if it is a movie like *Mary Kom*, besides whatever they did in terms of boxing, there were no props. It was a single girl's journey which was fairly simple when compared to *Manikarnika*... where everybody enjoys the recreation of the past," Patel says and opines that each biopic comes with its challenges.

"Take *Manikarnika*... for example. The battle that she is known for is the battle she lost and escaped from with the child tied at the back from Jhansi to Gwalior. This scene is what has caught our imagination — the imagery of her leaping off — which is the more grandeur battle that the battle at the climax where she dies fighting. Even *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag*. We have heard how he lost the Olympic medal because he looked behind. This was done with right at the beginning. The challenge is to then take the movie forward intelligently and engaging for the audience. Hence, a lot of creative liberties are taken and can be taken given the subject," Patel says.

A prime example of this is

Bohemian Rhapsody where an interesting infographic has been made related to which song came out first and which concert was done when and where. This is not what is shown in the film. The main idea here is not to be chronologically correct but to entertain and give a gist of what happened. The challenge is what to show, what not show, how much to dramatise and getting the costumes correct. To ensure that if it is a period film, to get rid of the roads and the electrical towers down to the minutest details like the pens used during that time.

"Risks are involved when it comes to each movie not just biopics. The biggest is when it comes to making a biopic on the person who is living so that it doesn't become like an ode to that person. Since the person is alive, a lot of negatives and positives have to be taken into consideration so that the person doesn't come across as a shallow person and the living person has to approve it. This is where creative problem crop up. That was the problem with *Azhar*. A lot of criticism came because even though he was exonerated, he was flawed. If mistakes were done, they should have acknowledged. A film should be as true to life as possible," Patel explains.

Atul Mohan, editor of Complete Cinema and a trade analyst tells you that the fascination for biopics stems from the change in the storytelling pattern. "The taste of the audience has changed. They are looking for content that is inspiring and finds a connection that is realistic. The old kind of cinema will not work. They want larger than life cinema or biopics and are not fictionalised," Mohan says and tells you that at best a biopic can have 15-20 per cent dramatisation.

"Like in *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag*, it had a fictional story in the form of a song. Even *MS Dhoni*... was fictionalised to keep the interest of the viewers till the very end. Otherwise, it would end up like *Sachin: A Billion Dreams*," Mohan says and is quick to point out had any other movie been made on the lines of *Sachin*... would not have worked.

"Therefore, it makes for a viable formula for filmmakers to pick up a biopic subject that is inspiring and be well made," Mohan says.