



## **The Metamorphosis of Indian Sports Films: From *Boxer* (1984) to *Chandu Champion* (2024)**

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### **Abstract:**

Mainstream Hindi Bollywood cinema has functioned as a key platform for the construction of “ideational assemblages”, of the nation (Chakraborty 846). Viewed through the lens of Indian sports films, this assemblage showed a noticeable change from the early sports film *The Boxer* (1984), to *Chandu Champion* (2024). This paper argues that Indian sports movies have moved from a hypermasculine paradigm, examined by physical endurance, discipline, and an able-bodied, male ideal, to more inclusive stories that seem to move beyond gender, disability, and identity. As early sports films foregrounded success with victory, strength, and national pride and presented sportspersons as the pillars of hard labour and moral strength. Yet, modern-day films, by contrast, redefined the sporting body as a site of struggle, negotiation, and self-assertion, often giving place to females, marginalized people, and people with disabilities. While reconfigured thus, these films encountered dominant beliefs of ability and success and redefined what it means to be a real “champion”, Drawing on the changing subject matter of the films, this manuscript situates Indian sports film as a cultural text through which growing discourses of patriarchy, empowerment, and identity are questioned and reimaged.

**Keywords:** India, sports, able-bodied, strength, ideology, films.

**Introduction:**

Indian cinema has been called one of the largest film industries in the world. Cinema has been labelled as, ‘the temple of modern India’, (Mishra 3). While functioning as a powerful visual medium that produces and circulates models of vocation and social mobility. Through narrative conventions, star personas, and recurrent genre logics, films map out recognizable pathways to success. So, these pathways do not merely reflect societies’ taboos but they also help make certain skills, behaviors, and job choices seem natural and desirable. As a result, cinema contributes to how people imagine their futures and decide which careers are worthy or possible, with those ideas shaped by gender, class, caste, and regional differences. So, Indian sports films are emerged as a site of social change. Now the sports cinematic narratives gradually move from the refrain of hard-labour to inclusion. As Indian Bollywood industry evolved through many stages, from industry’s roots with *Raja Harishchandra* (1913), to Dadasaheb Phalke and its journey towards sound cinema with iconic film *Alam Ara* (1931). Its history consists of the Golden Age of the 1940s to 1960s, characterized by films such as *Pyaasa*, *Do Bigha Zamin*, and *Mother India*, as well as Parallel Cinema. Later decades brought major changes; the angry young man era of the 1970s, the masala films of the 1980s, and the liberalized, consumer-oriented cinema of the 1990s. In the 2000s and beyond, Indian cinema increasingly explored urban life, institutions, gender, caste, disability, and social inequality. Within this broader history, Indian sports films such as *Lagaan*, *Iqbal*, *Chak De! India*, *Dangal*, and *Ghoomer*, stand out for presenting sport as a site of struggle, discipline, and transformation. The intersection of sport and films in India constitutes a critical cultural site where narrative form, national ideology, and social difference are conveyed. Sport has a long history of visual representation that films follow. Recently in India, it has become that ancient Greek statues of runners and throwers and the paintings of the 19<sup>th</sup> century are the antecedents of modern-day visual representation of sport (Babington 3). So, sports and films have galvanized the era of

sport as a spectacle. As Garry Whannel explains, sport is bound by narrative structure, further elucidating its potential for narrativity, highlighting that it's a 'rule-governed contest that results in a winner' (Whannel 197). Rather than merely recounting athletic achievement, Indian sports movies function as ideological texts that encode shifting understandings of gender, disability, caste, and region within the broader project of nation-building. Due to the overwhelming presence of US culture across the world, sports films have been largely and disproportionately associated with Hollywood (Ransom 35). Recently in India, it has become a more prominent presence in films. This paper argues that the genre undergoes a decisive change from the 1984s *Boxer* (1984) to *Chandu Champion* (2024). Tracking this shift across six historical phases, the analysis shows how sports cinema progressively reconfigures the hero from an able-bodied, masculinized figure of nationalist discipline to a heterogeneous set of subjects.

### **In the early phase of Indian sports films (1950s–1980s)**

The sports movies of this era were more emphasized on the sacrifice of hero. So, the most of directors of this time set their films narratives around the athletic qualities like, masculinity, strength and hard labour. As from the history sports has been called the arena of self-control and perseverance. The sports movies of this time such as *Rustom* (1982), s based on Franco Zeffirelli's *The Champ* (1979), seems to move around the sports of boxing, but in the film, boxing is portrayed as a tool to take revenge of his father's humiliation instead of a sport. In through the film, Shanker is shown as an epitome of emotional and familial sacrifice. Shanker choose boxing in order to challenge the reigning champion, Raghu Raj Saxena. The film visualizes Shanker's punishment, bleeding and his physical sacrifice to demonstrate his worth to take his father's lost image. The statement, '*Khoon paseena ek karna padta hai*', 'You must give your blood and sweat', *working trans*, (Shankar, 1:15:20) depict that the athletic success is known only through extreme physical suffering. Similarly, in *All Rounder* (1984), directed by Mohan Kumar. Here Ajay (Kumar Gaurav), a talented young cricketer from a poor

background, rises to play cricket, but his achievement, however, provokes jealousy, particularly from Vikram (Shakti Kapoor), a wealthy rival who feels entitled to selection. Here Ajay's achievement is less about cricketing skill than about his capacity to endure humiliation, injustice, and classed violence without losing moral innocence, thus reinforcing the notion that merit is proven through stoic suffering rather than structural access; *Hip Hip Hurray* (1984), centres on a sports teacher who finds love and redemption by guiding a school football team to victory; and *All Rounder* (1984), loosely shadows the affective afterlife of India's 1983 World Cup triumph while focusing primarily on Ajay (Kumar Gaurav), a talented but naïve cricketer from a poor rural family. In this film cricket occupies only a small fraction of screen time while the narrative foregrounds Ajay's classed vulnerability, his late father is identified as a *mali* (gardener), signalling a lower-caste position, yet caste is subsumed under a broader class struggle, which Crosson says about this time of films as 'more complex components of particular cultures and societies, including questions of identity, gender, race and class', (Crosson 157). Thus, sports films of this time 'valorize and moralize the individual pursuit of self-realization in the terms of a moral and virtual quest for individual responsibility, self-actualization, and self-determination', (Gooptu 7). In this era films and sports imagery, whether through boxing, wrestling, or rural *akhara* settings, reinforces hypermasculine ideals of discipline, celibacy, and national pride. So, this masculinist focus is indeed perennial, but it isn't monolithic as Gita Rajan's notion of a "composite masculinity", (Geeta Rajan 115) helps to identify internal differentiations that become more pronounced in the early 2000s. Significantly, however, these early sports films naturalize what Crosson terms the "meritocracy myth", means the sports, demands discipline, single-minded focus, and a Spartan lifestyle, a logic crystallized in the training montage that becomes ubiquitous in later phases (Crosson 157). This can be noticed in the real-life sportspersons, like the gymnast Dipa Karmakar, who performed a dangerous move called the Produnova at the Rio Olympics. In the absence of

formal training facilities, she practiced the move while using a broken scooter. So, this type of hard labour characterization is reminiscent of the “American dreams of upward social mobility and success”, that’s the central theme of this era's sports films (Crosson 65). This attitude is often articulated through bodily sacrifice. As in *Boxer* (1984), In sum, this phase consolidates the hard labour template, sport as a site of masculine sacrifice and national honour, while foreclosing sustained engagement with gender, disability, and caste as constitutive of sporting subjectivity.

### **Transitional Phase: Underdog and National Identity (1990s-early 2000s)**

The liberalization of the Indian economy in the 1990s coincides with the emergence of sports films as a significant popular genre, marking a transitional phase in which the earlier sacrifice ideology of masculine composite, sacrifice and hard labour is redesigned into a contested visual and narrative field where sport mediates class aspiration, national identity, and inclusivity. Thus, sports films not only reflect the socio- political change of time but also negotiates the contradictions of globalization and neoliberal reform. So, this era sports films produced the hybrid stories of the masses. They are foregrounded around various arena such as, caste, region, and gender. As Bruce Babington says, ‘Stretches from ancient Greek statues of athletes to nineteenth-century British sporting paintings, gradually turning sport into a mass-mediated spectacle (Babington 23). Read through Debord’s account of the society of spectacle, the sporting body in these films becomes an image to be consumed, its struggles and triumphs framed for television audiences and mass popular reception rather than confined to the sports alone (Debord 12–15). No sports films shift sport from a primarily physical or competitive activity to what David L. Andrews terms “sport entertainment”, a highly commercialized, media-driven form oriented toward profit and mass appeal, a transformation that reshapes narrative strategies in sports films by emphasizing spectacle, emotional stakes, and marketable heroism (Andrews 45). A defining feature of this phase is the use of sport as a metaphor for

resistance and national pride, as presented in *Jo Jeeta Wohi Sikandar* (1992), where the bicycle race stages a confrontation between local students from modest backgrounds and wealthy boarding-school boys in a small hill town. The film's slogans, '*Veer bahadur ladke kaun... Rajput!!!*', 'Who is the brave and courageous boy... The Rajput' !!!, *working trans* (Ratan1:40:2), the derogatory label '*pajama chhap*', 'Pajama-wearing outsider', *working trans*. (Ratan1:24:15), for Model School students encode a local hierarchy of masculinity and class that's both reproduced and contested through sport. Thus, the narratives of this era promote a neoliberal fantasy of upward mobility through hero's one's own struggle. the very fact that the films focus on the fatigue and sweat of the protagonists', signals that sport is an arena through which structural inequity is both enacted and overcome. Almost films explore the matter of class on the significant degree, and resolved it with the spirit of universal solidarity. While retaining their androcentric bias, sports films in this vein retain the notion of collective struggle for goals bigger than oneself, which would influence upcoming films on sports.

### **Golden Phase: The Realist Turn in Indian Sports Films (mid-2000s–2010s)**

This tenure marks a noteworthy change from a metaphorical use of sport to a more realist representation. As because of the advancement of technologies such as PVR cinema, 4DX and IMAX cinema, films produced a more nuanced real portrayal of the subject matter. Now, sport is no longer only a metaphor for national regeneration; it becomes a credible social field where personal ambition, gendered constraints, and state ideologies are presented. Thus, biopic films gained prominence; this turned sportspersons into national icons while opening space for both celebration and critique of sporting institutions. Films like *Lagaan* (2001), inaugurate this phase by staging a cricket match as an anti-colonial tribunal. Bhuvan's leadership of a multi-caste, multi-religious village team against British officers transforms the game into a site of dignity, justice, and collective resistance. The dialogue, '*Agar hum jeet gaye, toh tumhen poore*

*prant ka teen saal ka lagaan maaf karna hoga. Aur agar hum haar gaye, toh hum teen guna lagaan denge*’, ‘If we win, you must waive three years’ tax for the entire province. If we lose, we’ll pay triple tax’, *working trans.* (Bhuvan 1:15:30). So here the sport of cricket emerges as a medium of war where natives can challenge imperial power. Through the match, Ashutosh Gowariker depicts an inclusive nationalism rooted in agrarian community rather than elite modernity. *Iqbal* (2005), extends this realist turn by centring a deaf and mute boy (Iqbal) from a rural background whose talent is recognised despite social and bodily stigma. The coach’s insistence that, ‘Courage, not speech, enables one to play’, ‘*Khelne ke liye zabaan nahi, hausla chahiye*’, (Naseeruddin Shah 1:10) reframes disability as a difference to be accommodated rather than a deficit to be erased. The film positions sport as a space for marginalised subjects. Such narratives can be understood through Benedict Anderson’s notion of “imagined communities”, which suggests that cultural forms like cinema help construct a shared national identity by bringing diverse social groups into a common narrative framework (Anderson, 1983). *Chak De! India* (2007), is based on the first Indian women’s national hockey team’s journey. In the film, Muslim coach Kabir Khan is previously accused of “selling” a match to Pakistan, so he seeks redemption by coaching the women’s team. Here, sport becomes a site of revenge. Khan’s speech, ‘Mujhe states ke naam na sunai dete hain... sirf ek aawaz sunai deti hai, India’, ‘I don’t hear the names of states... I only hear one name, India’, *working trans.* (Khan 1:08:45), articulates a constitutional nationalism that subsumes regional identities under the nation, yet the film also exposes how such unity can silence difference, particularly when the coach’s loyalty is constantly questioned. The film critiques institutional neglect of women’s sports while promoting unity through performance, revolving around the breaking down of societal barriers, to achieve success as a unified team. Here the sports of hockey emerged as a platform to unite people under the roof of one nation; *Dhan Dhana Dhan Goal* (2007), relocates the sports narrative to the diaspora, tracing a South Asian community’s

struggle to save a football club in the UK. In the film the sports club becomes a vessel of cultural memory and collective agency. Moreover, in this era the advancement of biopic films, turned sportspersons into the national icon. Apart from that women also started participate in sports who have been considered, ‘differently’, in the arena of sports. So, this phase does not mark a clean break from earlier Nehruvian egalitarianism, rather, it constitutes a liminal formation in which globalisation, diasporic audiences, and rising majoritarian politics coexist with residual ideals of secular, inclusive nationalism.

As the period of post-1990s liberalisation prolonged the NRI market and encouraged sports films that idealised “Indian culture” through rural settings, Hindu family values, and conservative gender norms (Dwyer, 2006; Roy, 2020; Rajadhyaksha, 2003). Yet films like *Lagaan* and *Chak De! India* complicates this trend by insisting on pluralist solidarities, even as they reproduce certain hierarchies, most notably, the centrality of male authority in enabling women’s success. As, *Lagaan* (2001), still presents an inclusive and collective vision of nationalism; *Chak De! India* (2007), promotes teamwork, *Dhan Dhana Dhan Goal* (2007), and *Dil Bole Hadippa!* (2009) also explore themes of unity, but present sports as a space for inclusion, yet remain tied to patriarchal frameworks.

Further, sports films also present an interesting take on diasporic identities, as India’s cinema culture became more globally aware after the economic liberalisation of the 1990s. It is essential to note that the tendency to utilise the diasporic culture was especially strong in post-1990s films. So, through the sports-oriented films of this time give a glimpse of the on-going negotiations of identities in the context of a globalising world. As in the movie, *Patiala House*, (2011), depicts the story of Gattu, a fast bowler and a British citizen of Indian Sikh descent, revolves around his attempts to reconcile his love for the motherland with living in England. Gattu is the best example of a character who represents the diasporic as he embodies multiple visions of “being” and “becoming Indian” (Hall 2003). As, Jigna Desai (2004) notes that new

globalised cinema presents prototypical Indians to showcase how India's economic liberalisation process has used conservative values to advance its neoliberal agenda through popular culture. It is evident in the way sports films were used to negotiate diasporic tensions since sports is a symbol of national identity and pride. However, other movies highlight the role of women in Indian culture such as, *Dil Bole Hadippa!* (2009), Veera, a Punjabi girl, aspires to be a cricketer but is refused to join the men's team despite her skills simply because of her gender. Veera manages to convince the team that she is fit for the position as 'Veer Pratap Singh' and helps her team win the championship. 'Usne kisi ko dhokha dene ke liye nahi, balki apne sapne ko jeene ke liye yeh raasta chuna', working trans "She chose this path not to deceive anyone, but to live her dream', *working trans* (Pratap Singh 1:45:20). Veera is the representative of positive portrayal of women in sports culture. In this film sports emerged as a tool for the government to promote nationalism.

### **Contemporary Phase: Inclusivity, Gender and Margins (2010s–2020s)**

This phase represented a significant shift in the refrains of Indian sports films as compared to earlier phases. As in this phase, films captured more nuanced themes, such as disability, gender and marginalised classes, instead of only focused on the theme like 'nationalism', as explored in previous phase. Thus, sports in films are viewed as a means to question, negotiate, and create social identities.

### **From collective nationalism to personal, masculinist narratives**

While in previous phase, *Lagaan* (2001) depict sport as a medium to show the collective identity. But many films since 2010 have turned to the depiction of sports as an individual identity. Films such as, *Sultan* (2016), Salman Khan plays Sultan Ali Khan, a wrestler who embodies the nation as the akhara, upholding its codes of honour and discipline. Success in the film is achieved by returning to tradition, which is revealed to be not just authentic but

inherently masculine. Similarly, in *Dangal* (2016), promotes women's power and independence, but the girls are somehow controlled by male authority (Mahavir Singh). Overall, it shows that women no doubt came ahead in the male dominated arena but still they are under control. In this era to the upcoming eras women sportspersons achieved the zenith of the high but they later or sooner must have to face male oppression. The one live example of this patriarchy is the protest, of Delhi, 'Jantar Manter' by Vinesh Phogat. So, the films turn from the pluralistic and collective nationalism of previous years to a more individual and neoliberal themes depicts the positive growth of Indian cinema.

### **The biopic era: authenticity, institutions, and the neoliberal subject**

The period is further marked by the "biopic turn",s in which real-life athlete's stories in the arena of sports had been narrated. These films clearly depict their struggle and hardships that they faced in order to become the icon. The films such as *M.S. Dhoni: The Untold Story* (2016), *Sultan* (2016), *Budhia Singh: Born to Run* (2016), *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag* (2013), *Mary Kom* (2014), and *Soorma* (2018) are the prominent examples of this trend. In these films, the protagonist emerges as a neoliberal subject, entrepreneurial, resilient, and destined to overcome obstacles through willpower. In contexts of scarce infrastructure, jugaad (improvised enterprise) becomes a recurring motif: underprivileged athletes fashion solutions from makeshift equipment and spaces, dramatizing democratized enterprise in a resource-constrained environment (Gooptu 10). These era films clearly showed corruption, caste bias, and infrastructural gaps in the arena of sports, but the hero solved them through his/her perseverance rather than collective or policy-level solutions. Even when women are holding the centre as in the (*Mary Kom, Dangal*) narrative but often routes empowerment through male authority.

### Gender, motherhood, and the female athletic body

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was a tendency to define identity in terms of culture. Zaretsky claimed that ‘Mass consumption and mass culture emerged as basic spheres for the formation of personal identity (Zaretsky 248). Through the globalization of culture and spread of self-consciousness about the body, sports have become important in defining female identity. Thus, female-centric films come into existence. These female-centric films place the athletic body at the centre and reframe motherhood and sport as coexisting identities. Films like, *Mary Kom* (2014), foregrounds the intersection of gender, region, and sport, challenging patriarchal norms by depicting a woman entering male-dominated boxing; its institutional critique is crystallized in lines that point to match-fixing and gatekeeping against women, ‘*ladkiyo ko toh hum log fix krte hai performance prr depend nahi*’, ‘For girls, we fix the outcome it does not depend on performance’ *working trans* (Coach Narjit Singh 1:12:30). *Dangal* (2016), redefines the akhara as a contested space of empowerment; the iconic line, ‘*Mhari chhorian choro se kam hain ke?*’, ‘Are my daughters any less than boys?’ (Mahavir 1:42:15) functions as a regional-national rallying cry against gendered exclusion. *Saand Ki Aankh* (2019), challenges ageism and the gendered division of labour as the dialogue ‘*Humare khilaf sirf umar bolti hai, lekin jab hamre pass gun hota hai, toh hum kisi se bhi darr kar nahi rehte*’, ‘Only age speaks against us, but when we have a gun in our hands, we don't fear anyone’ *working trans* (Chandro 1:15:30). Further, Parkashi’s assertion, ‘*humare liye toh yeh shooting azadi ki talwar hai*’ ‘For us, this shooting is the sword of freedom’ *working trans* (Parkashi 1:22:10), aligns with the feminist maxim “the personal is political”, (Hanisch, para. 4), positioning personal passion as a political act that disrupts domestic confinement. *Panga* (2020), interrogates the “motherhood penalty”, (Budig 2), dramatizing how societal expectations constrain women’s return to sport; the film also gestures toward changing familial supports that enable mothers to pursue fulfilment. These narratives can be read through feminist frameworks of solidarity and

agency. Geeta and Babita's trajectory in Dangal and Tomar's daddies in *Saand Ki Aankh*, reads through, Audre Lorde's notion of, "conscious sisterhood", women recognizing interconnected oppressions and building collective resistance, while also exposing the limits of such solidarity when paternal authority remains the narrative engine (Lorde 120).

### **Caste, corruption, and the micropolitics of the grassroots**

A distinct strand of films interrogates the everyday violence of caste and the corruption that structures grassroots sport. *Mukkabaaz* (2017), offers a sustained examination of how caste and political networks determine access and advancement more than talent. The coach Bhagwan Das Mishra's Brahmin pride, patronage politics, and reckless administration of performance-enhancing drugs reveal sport as a terrain of social and material relations rather than pure nationalism. In *Saala Khadoos* (2016), Aditya 'Adi' Tomar, a tough, retired boxing coach, was removed from the national team due to internal politics and corruption. This film exposes the internal politics, bribery, and regional favouritism in the arena of sports. Further, the film, like *Mary Kom* (2014), also gestures toward institutional corruption that disproportionately affects women.

### **Cricket, affect, and "toxic" nationalism**

Cricket in India has evolved much beyond its fundamental definition as a game. The liberalization process in the 1990s, followed by the drastic social changes in the country, impacted the game, leading it to acquire new meaning as a cultural text. Thus, filmmakers turned towards cricket-centric films. The sport has found its way into many forms of media, particularly film, over the years. Both Bollywood and Hollywood have brought cricket to the big screen. Bollywood often uses cricket as a metaphor for larger societal struggles. Movies like *Lagaan*, based on underprivileged communities fighting for their existence, and *Iqbal*, Bollywood cricket films often use the sport as a metaphor for larger societal issues. Cricket as

a subject in films signifies hope, and the game's spirit of togetherness. It embodies a united India, and the sport's ability to bring people together to overcome challenges. Through cinematic representation cricket is emerged more than a sports in India. It is become a sport to restore honour. So, one can say that Bollywood has had a rocky relationship with cricket. There are several movies focused on the cricket, such as, (*Lagaan*, *Iqbal*, *M.S. Dhoni*, *83*, *Azhar*). The cricked themed films become more frequent after 2000, as the cinema portrayed the positive and negative aspect of the sports of crickets. Now some directors tried hard to capture the evils of the sports of cricket like match fixing and corruption. As a mater of fact people become aware of the things and it affected society sharply. As Boria Majumdar points out, *Lagaan* (2001) is a film that combines the magic of Hindi cinema with the excitement of cricket, tapping into the collective psyche of the nation. From the 1980s onwards, the discourse on nationalism changes from Nehruvian secularism to ethnocentric, affect-laden rhetoric. In this regard, cricket is both a unifying cultural code and a repository for 'toxic nationalism' (Mannathukaren 120). Slavoj Zizek's concept of 'jouissance' (Zizek 45) can be applied to understand the affective charge of cricket in India. The disciplinary power in India is supplemented by 'jouissance,' which transforms punishment into enjoyment. People in India enjoy suffering during the game, as it creates a collective emotional bond. As, Arjun Appadurai's reading of cricket as a "hard cultural form," (Appadurai 5) complements Zizek's interpretation. It explains the game's ability to withstand the test of time, as well as its capacity to bind Indians together, transcending class, caste, and religious divisions, and reiterating popular nationalist sentiment in a culturally appropriate form.

### **Emerging Phase: Commercialization and Global Sports Culture (2020–2026)**

The current period in the development of Indian sports films is characterized by a new stage of commercialization, globalization, and media interest. Sport films reflect a more extensive role of branded and celebrity culture as essential elements of mainstream economics. Movies now

depict sports as an elite and competitive domain in which people engage in the context of brand building. The Indian Premier League and other tournaments have made their impact on films of the day, and now it has become more spectacular and media-oriented. Films such as, 83 (2021), directed by Kabir Khan, focuses on the story of the Indian national cricket team that won the World Cup in 1983. This movie limelight's an important message of teamwork and patriotism. This film foregrounded around the spirit of the World Cup victory and its impact on the history of Indian sports resurface. Further, the film like *Rashmi Rocket* (2021) ponders on the issues such as gender inequality. It narrates about a young woman from the village who became a national champion but was forced to undergo a gender verification test. This film reveals details of sexism in sports and emphasizes how women break through the glass ceiling every day. *Jhund* (2022) is a biographical film about Vijay Barse and Slum Soccer – the first football academy for homeless kids. It is about the journey of players who were made to change their fate on the football pitch and eventually went to represent the country at the international level. *Shabaash Mithu* (2022), directed by Srijit Mukherji, is based on the life of Mithali Raj, the former captain of the Women's Cricket team of India. Mithali became the first female cricketer in history to score 10,000 runs in international cricket. By putting a woman hero at the center of the screen, the film openly challenges society and asks questions about gender inequality in the men's world of cricket. *Babli Bouncer* (2022) continues the story of female sports stars in male-dominated leagues. Babli Tanwar from Haryana is determined to become a bouncer in a male bouncer community. Despite the prejudice of the society, she trains hard and gains confidence to work in the night club industry while also preparing for the competition. Thus, sport appeared as a self-Seaver for the females. *Ghoomer* (2023), directed by R. Balki, tells the story of Anina, a young cricketing prodigy who loses her right hand in an accident. With the support of mentor Peddy Sodhi, she returns to the field as a left-arm spinner, reimagining ability and national representation. *Maidaan* (2024), directed by Amit

Ravindernath, revisits the barefoot Indian football team's 10–0 defeat at the 1952 Helsinki Olympics. When coach Syed Abdul Rahim is blamed, he demands proper equipment and the autonomy to select the team. Despite resistance from regional factions within the federation, he travels across India to assemble a merit-based squad, presenting sport as an inclusive, national project. *Chandu Champion* (2024), is based on Murlikant Petkar, a war veteran who becomes India's first Paralympic gold medallist. What's interesting is the film traces his journey from a small village to the army, his injury, and his rigorous training in para-sports, especially swimming. It highlights social stigma, institutional neglect, and the politics of recognition, culminating in a Paralympic gold at the 1972 Summer Games. Thus, themes across this phase include celebrity culture, the commodification of sportspersons and digital media influence. So, sportspersons are now no longer only national icons; they are also brand ambassadors and influencers shaped by global markets. Thus, this phase redefines Indian sports film by merging local emotional narratives with global aesthetics, positioning athletes as complex figures navigating fame, economics, and identity in an increasingly globalized sports culture.

### **Portrayal of Disability, family, and normalization in Indian sport films**

Sports films of this era also feature an extended scope for exploring themes of disability, using narrative cinema to deconstruct ableist ideologies and rethink relationships between able and disabled (Johanssen and Garrisi 112-13). Films such as, *Iqbal* (2005), *Ghoomer* (2023), *Chandu Champion* (2024), while centring around the disabled sportspersons paves a positive light for the messes. As previously sports are aligned with abled bodies construct so as because of positive portrayal, now it has been broken. As a result, the family dynamics in movies take a backseat to the encouragement provided by Anina's father, Iqbal's coach and sister, and Chandu's parents. Their on-screen support helps the protagonists continue their sports careers, normalizing the lives of differently-abled individuals and promoting diversity in the field. Real-

world impact is seen through the tremendous achievements of Indian differently-abled athletes at the 2025 World Para Athletics Championships in New Delhi. The nation's contingent equalled its best-ever performance with 22 medals, including six gold, nine silver, and seven bronze medals, capturing the imagination of the country and showcasing heart-wrenching stories on screen.

### **Courage, pressure, and the dark side of representation**

Although movies about sports are often celebrated for showcasing triumph, such films can sometimes generate a disillusioning side effect if viewers start believing that success in the sports world can only be achieved through relentless efforts. Movies like *Dangal*, *Sultan*, and *Chandu Champion* depict underdogs who later become prosperous national heroes after relentless training. Such movies create a healthy competitive spirit among the youth of the nation. However, when one sees an onscreen movie hero win medals, block the rival team's star player, or gain notoriety at the international stage, there is no doubt that it creates unhealthy pressure within people. Such, individuals' perception is that winning medals requires massive effort, but their success seems to have been achieved through some sort of unnatural means. These, unnatural means here imply the use of drugs and heavy steroids, which is why sports dramas and biopics like the Malayalam film *Captain* (2018), the biopic of footballer V. P. Sathyan, can be seen as the dark counterparts of sports movies. International films like *Icarus* (2017) depict the ruthless methods state-sponsored programs use to dope their athletes, making it clear that the pursuit of victory at all costs is a slippery slope for sportspersons, governments, and health organizations around the globe. *The Program* (2015) is another film that dwells on the doping scandal around Lance Armstrong. It underlines the ruthless pressure sports celebrities face, which often leads to performance-enhancing drug use. Professional road cycling's history, unfortunately, is closely entwined with blood doping and fatal anaemia, and the tragic deaths of many cyclists during the early stages of the sport's development prompted

numerous bans and subsequent repeals. At the time, the development of the sport was significantly hampered by commercialization and globalization. This happened due to the sport's growing popularity and courage among youth.

### **Regional turn: specificity, authenticity, and the “village” on screen**

Sports movies are turning to regional settings more frequently, while depicting local cultures and lifestyles that Bollywood had previously been neglected. So, this time, films centred on farmers and ordinary people reflect the lived textures of India. Today, the term ‘regional cinema’, no longer implies something secondary or niche; it signifies specificity, sincerity, and authenticity. These films aren't the ‘other’ India; they're India, diverse, dynamic, and deeply emotional. Through sports films, the world is listening, and India's many languages are finally being heard, not as subtitles, but as the main script. The silos that once divided regional and national cinema have been broken; powerful storytelling now transcends linguistic boundaries. Films such as *Sultan* and *Dangal* foreground akhara culture, embedding sport within rural patriarchy, land-based masculinity, and emerging state patronage structures. These regional underdog films echo the egalitarian principles of the American dream and reflect a Protestant work ethic in which natural talent must be developed through effort for the individual to prevail. As, Crosson notes, ‘sports films are usually more concerned with life outside the ring or off the pitch than with the sporting moment itself’ (66). In this context, regional cinema on screen enables women of rural areas to find greater visibility.

### **Haryana: akhara, gender, and the politics of visibility**

In this context, sports films have played a crucial role in reshaping public perception and enabling social change in states like Haryana. Films like *Dangal*, *Sultan*, *Saand Ki Aankh*, and *Babli Bouncer*, depict strong Haryanvi female characters who challenge patriarchy and redefine the sporting body. These films mirror the real-life achievements of athletes such as

Sakshi Malik, Geeta Phogat, and Vinesh Phogat, whose successes have contributed significantly to Haryana's dominance in international sports, despite the state comprising only a small percentage of India's population. As because of the growing awareness of social media, education, and social systems, sports opened the new gate of success for women. From passive observers, they have turned to athletes and champions. As Professor Tandan says, "Earlier, these girls were not allowed to step out of their homes. Now they are role models in their villages" (Daily News, 23 June 2023). President Draupadi Murmu also pointed out that "the way the daughters of Haryana have taken the pride of our country and state to greater heights in the field of sports is indeed an excellent example of women's empowerment" (The Tribune, 1 June 2023). Thus, through sports stories, mindsets can be changed, and a state like Haryana can serve as a successful example. Sport has become a new empowering arena for people in the state. For a long time, wrestling has been part of Haryana's folk culture. The martial art is performed with a closed fist (*akhara*), a symbol of "*ek rang ka sharir*", (the single colour of the body). The concept of *akhara*, which reflects the ideals of purity and strength, is the result of a socio-cultural and sporting policy that has seen the emergence of many champions. However, the place was made for male not for second sex. But now girls have conquered the same arena. Now the *akhara* (mud-pit), become the cradle of wrestling and shooting stars like Mahavir Singh Phogat, Bajrang Punia, Vinesh Phogat, Sakshi Malik, Antim Panghal or Manu Bhaker. The popularity of these sports figures has had a tremendous effect on Haryanvi society and changed the attitude towards sports as a whole.

### **Sports documentaries: authenticity beyond the mainstream**

Indian sports documentaries also constitute an important genre in the history of sports films, which have gained significant popularity after 2000 due to the emergence of various digital platforms and independent cinema. Unlike fictional films, Indian sports documentaries focus on athletes' experiences, revealing different aspects of their lives. For instance, documentary

such as, *Beyond All Boundaries* (India's 2011 World Cup victory), *Daughters of Mother India*, *Akhara*, and *Poorna* (documentary realism) illustrate sports-related gender, class, and other social issues. *Sons of the Soil: Jaipur Pink Panthers* is another sports documentary that depicts the development of kabaddi and pink panthers' globalization of this sport. *Roar of the Lion* follows Chennai Super Kings' journey in order to illustrate the relationship and depicted sport as something greater than just a game.

In 21st century India, the sports development policies influence the themes of sports films and videos. For example, state programs such as Sports Authority of India (SAI), *Khelo India*, and National Sports Development Policy aim to promote sports at various levels and improve the country's performance at international events (<https://haryanasports.gov.in/about-department/>). At the same time, sport in India has a wide network of organizations, clubs, associations, and agencies. It is regulated by the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports and the Indian Olympic Association (IOA); controlled by national federations, such as the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) and the All-India Chess Federation (AICF); and supported by anti-doping organizations, including the National Anti-Doping Agency (NADA) and the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sport\\_in\\_India](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sport_in_India)). According to Boria Majumdar, this is a "statist phase" of Indian sport, when the government plays an important role in promoting and developing sports at national levels, in order to gain global recognition (Majumdar 7). Today in India, cinema exists within a vibrant media culture that has been instrumental in creating a sports culture. Sports channels (Sony Ten and Six, Sky Sports, Power Sportz), digital news, websites, radios, and newspapers produce and air content about local and international sports events and stars. All India Radio and Doordarshan telecast regional sporting events, while local newspapers and magazines provide extensive coverage of local sporting events. For example, Doordarshan Haryana and the Haryana Sports Department have extensive YouTube content about local and international sports. Moreover, various

journals, such as Sportstar, Cricket Today, Golf Digest India, La Polo International, Tennis Today, and Bharatiya Kushti Patrika provide in-depth information about different sports and their athletes. These media outlets play an important role in reflecting and promoting sport cinema in India, as well as its athletes and events. Thus, national and regional media play a vital role in sports films and videos by distributing content via traditional (print) and digital media, making sports a part of the nation's culture. In addition, different sports academies and training centres for local and international events, such as Ch. Devi Lal northern regional center in Sonapat and the shaheed bhagat Singh international Kushti & kabaddi academy in Mirchpur, serve as sources of inspiration for sports filmmakers.

In today's globalized world, Indian sports films were also influenced by international movies. For instance, *Rocky* (1976) is a sports film centered on the life and career of Rocky Balboa, a working-class boxer who gets an opportunity to fight against Apollo Creed. It visualizes the relationship between sport and society, emphasizing the need to believe in oneself. *Escape to Victory* (1981) is another sports film that features the historical football match between British and German prisoners of war. It demonstrates how sports can be used to convey political messages. *The Jesse Owens Story* (1984) retells the life and career of an Olympic champion and a Civil Rights activist, thus, demonstrating sport's role in social change. Finally, *A League of Their Own* (1992) tells the story of the All-American Girls Softball League and the sportswomen who helped keep the league alive during the Second World War. The film comments on women's position in society, as female athletes lost their jobs when male players returned from war. Therefore, it portrays patriarchy and sexism in sports. Moreover, biographical films such, *Pele: Birth of a Legend* (2016), *Fighting with My Family* (2019), and *King Richard* (2021) demonstrate how family members influence and support sportspeople. Taking into account the impact of international films on Indian cinema, it can be concluded

that Indian sports films and videos are inspired by international films in terms of portraying sport and society.

### **Conclusion**

Honestly, the metamorphosis of Hindi sports films, from the intense physical struggle from *Boxer* (1984), to the emphasis on resilience and inner strength in *Chandu Champion* (2024), replicates a broader historical and conceptual move in Indian sports films. Over time, sports films have moved from reinforcing masculine endurance to questioning and redefining bodily limits and identities. The portrayal of female athletes has also undergone a significant transformation. Earlier ideals of beauty, fairness, fragility, and non-muscularity, have slowly been replaced by strength and capability. In the post-liberalization era, Hindi sports films have expanded globally, while positioning Bollywood as an international cultural force (Gooptu 5). Thus, sports films become a contested “battleground”, for gender and identity, where changing power relations between men and women reflect what Dunning terms the “feminization”, s of sport (Dunning 275). Overall, the evolution of Hindi sports films demonstrates how themes have shifted across time, from physical labour and nationalist masculinity to inclusivity, commercialization, and identity politics, mirroring broader transformations in Indian society and culture.

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