



Sania Mirza. Source: Robbie Mendelson on *Wikimedia Commons* at <http://tinyurl.com/z7hbdd4>.

Sports and Indian Culture in Popular Film

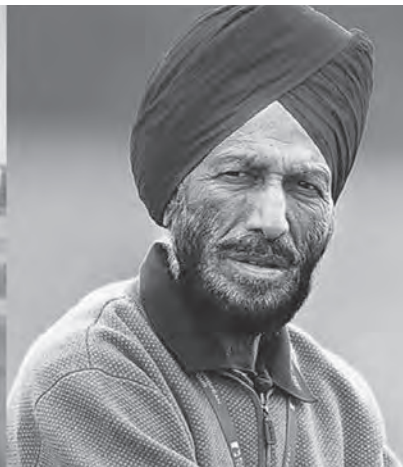
By Coonoor Kripalani

India is more likely to be associated with Bollywood film culture than sports. So what does the largest film industry in the world, in terms of output, tell us about sports? And what is the place of sports in the national culture? Of the six films selected here (available through online retail stores such as Amazon) to answer these questions, two deal with cricket, two are biopics about Olympian athletes in track and field and boxing, and the other two deal with hockey and soccer. Half these films are about women athletes, which helps reveal how women are treated in sports.

The films provide a commentary on the uphill task of becoming a champion, the particular difficulties of women athletes in a conservative society, and the particularly Indian viewpoint on this subject. Films both reflect and shape viewers' attitudes toward sporting culture. To accommodate these attitudes and enhance the achievements of the sporting champions, the biopics reviewed here do not necessarily faithfully recount every event in the lives of their subjects. They are highly dramatized accounts that may gloss over certain facts and present certain inaccuracies. This in itself indicates the mythmaking around sports personalities, with their narratives that create undisputed, larger-than-life heroes for the national polity.



Milkha Singh as a young man.
Source: *IndiaWest.com* at <http://tinyurl.com/jhurmt3>.



Milkha Singh today.
Source: *Alchetron* website at <http://tinyurl.com/gsvcs1b>.



P. T. Usha.
Source: *Alchetron* website at <http://tinyurl.com/guu8qv6>.



Mary Kom promotional photo.
Source: *Unisci24* at <http://tinyurl.com/hnozoqf>.

While cricketers are celebrities and frequently in the news, any sportsperson who displays excellence becomes a sort of national hero. For example, Sania Mirza, a tennis player, is a household name these days; as are Milkha Singh and P. T. Usha, the Olympic runners of yesteryears; and Mary Kom, the champion boxer. Popular sports personalities lend their names to worthy causes such as animal welfare, sports promotion among youth, creating opportunities for women, and product endorsement.

Indian sports achievers are inspirational heroes in the national lore, particularly when they come from rural areas and not homes of great privilege. Their fight against odds—family pressure to concentrate on academics rather than sports, the need to earn an income instead of being a financial drain, and the necessity of spending time and money on training or competition for choice spots in sports academies—is a common theme in the lives of many athletes.

Cricket

Cricket is a national obsession in India. Games are always in progress in parks and alleyways, where neighborhood children come together to play. When India is playing in a World Cup series or test match, the nation is almost at a standstill. Corporate bosses know that employees will call in sick just to stay home and watch the match. To ensure



Captain Russell challenges Bhuvan and the village to a game of cricket. © 2001 Columbia Tristar Home Video.



Bhuvan and the villagers work together to learn and practice the game, and make their own equipment for the match. © 2001 Columbia Tristar Home Video.



At the end of the three-day competition, Bhuvan and the village team win the prize: no taxes (Lagaan) for three years. © 2001 Columbia Tristar Home Video.



Iqbal lives his dream. © 2005 Moser Baer India Ltd.

that productivity doesn't take a total dive, some businesses arrange for huge TV screens on their premises so workers can watch the progress of the match during breaks. Therefore, it is not surprising that films on cricket generally do well at the box office.

Lagaan

Produced by Aamir Khan and Mansoor Khan

Directed by Ashutosh Gowariker

Written by Ashutosh Gowariker and K. P. Saxena

224 minutes, color, languages: Hindi, English, Awadhi, Urdu

Sony Entertainment Television (India), Aamir Khan Productions, Ashutosh Gowariker Productions, and Jhamu Sughand Productions, 2001

One of the most celebrated films about cricket is *Lagaan*. Set in colonial times (1893), *Lagaan* offers a small vignette of life under British rule. As villagers in Gujarat await the rains, District Collector Captain Andrew Russell, a capricious young colonial servant, demands double tax for the year. When the villagers plead for a waiver, Russell challenges them to a cricket match; if they win, he will waive their tax, but if they lose, they will have to pay three times the amount. The poor villagers have no clue about cricket but accept the challenge. Bhuvan, the hero, unites the villagers to form the team, cajoling the men by saying cricket is the British version of their boyhood game, *gulli-danda*.¹

Russell's sister, Elizabeth, finds Russell's challenge unfair and trains Bhuvan's team secretly. The British sense of fair play is further depicted when Russell is reprimanded by his seniors for this gamble. He is informed that if the Indian team wins, Russell will have to make up for the loss of revenue to the empire and be packed off to Central Africa.

On the day of the match, the villagers are greatly disadvantaged. The British team appears to be winning by underhanded means, leading to the local *raja* and senior British officials to root for the underdog. In a nail-biting climax—with the British players in their cricket whites in contrast to the bleeding feet of the unshod villagers in their native clothes—the villagers wrest victory and freedom from taxes for three years.

Iqbal

Produced by Subhash Ghai

Directed by Nagesh Kukunoor

Written by Vipul K. Rawal

132 minutes, color, languages: Hindi, American Sign Language

Mukta Searchlight Films, 2005

Iqbal brings the sport into contemporary times. It is the inspirational story of cricket-crazy Iqbal, a deaf-mute buffalo herder who practices bowling in the fields as his buffaloes graze. Despite his disabilities, with the support of his mother and sister, Iqbal overcomes various obstacles such as the objections of his father, rejection from the cricket academy, the drunkenness of his coach, and corruption of cricket officials to win his spot as the star bowler on the national team.



The powerful opening scene of *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag*. Milkha running from the ghosts of his past.
© 2013 Viacom18 Motion Pictures.



1947, Milkha's father tells him to run and not look back. © 2013 Viacom18 Motion Pictures.



Scene showing races won over time. © 2013 Viacom18 Motion Pictures.



Winning the race in Pakistan, where he was given the title "The Flying Sikh." © 2013 Viacom18 Motion Pictures.

Track and Field

Bhaag Milkha Bhaag

Produced by Rajiv Tandon, Raghav Bahl, Maitreyee Dasgupta, Madhav Roy Kapur, Rachvin Narula, Shyam P. S., Navmeet Singh, and P. S. Bharathi
Directed by Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra

Written by Prasoon Joshi

189 minutes, color, language: Hindi

Viacom 18 Motion Pictures, 2013

Bhaag Milkha Bhaag (Run Milkha Run) is a biopic of India's most famous Olympic runner, Milkha Singh. The film begins with Singh's run at the 1960 Summer Olympics in Rome, where he finishes fourth, and then returns to his carefree childhood in Govindpura village in the Punjab, where he runs barefoot to school across the hot sand. His classmates are Hindus and Muslims, and their teacher is a Maulvi (a learned Muslim). This idyllic existence is blown away after the 1947 Partition of India, which created the sovereign state of Pakistan. Singh's home village falls on the Pakistan side, and everyone in his family is slaughtered. His father's words, "Bhaag, Milkha, bhaag," resound in Singh's ears as he exhorts his son to save himself and not look back. But look back he does, only to catch a last glimpse of his father being decapitated by a fierce swordsman on horseback. This memory makes the suppressed emotional background of Singh's life.

Fending for himself, Singh grows up living by his wits. He joins the army, where he undergoes training as an athlete. Singh dons the blazer of the national team but fares poorly in the 1956 Australian Olympics. Ashamed of his performance, Singh begins to train seriously, determined to beat the world record. At the 1958 Asian Games, Javed, the coach of Pakistan's fastest runner, Abdul Khaliq, taunts Singh. Though it revives Milkha's memories of the slaughter of his family, he manages to beat Khaliq, much to the annoyance of Javed.

Following this, Singh wins a string of gold medals in both the Asian Games and Commonwealth Games. Decorated by the army and made an officer, he breaks the world record in France in 1960 (a controversial matter, but widely accepted in India as fact) and is awarded the Padma Shri by the President of India.² Soon after this, Pakistan wants to host friendly games with India. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru chooses Singh to lead the delegation, but Singh refuses. He does not want to "breathe the air of the land where his family's blood is spilled." Pressure is brought to bear by his former coaches, and the Prime Minister coerces him to do his duty by the nation.

Though Singh goes with the Indian team to Lahore, he fails to show up at the press conference, where Abdul Khaliq throws out a challenge to race Singh. Singh instead has returned to his home village, where he breaks down, overcome by the memories of his family's slaughter. His grief is interrupted by a child carrying his photograph. Singh is a hero in his birthplace and is greeted as a brother by his old school friend Sampreet. Sampreet is now a father and living in Singh's former home village. He was raised by the Maulvi and gently explains to Singh: "People are not bad; it is the times which are bad." Singh returns to Lahore and races Khaliq, whom he beats easily, earning him the epitaph "The Flying Sikh" from the Pakistani leader General Ayub Khan.



Kabir Khan is called a traitor by the press. © 2007 Yash Raj Films.



The sports official let Khan know how little the girls team means to them. © 2007 Yash Raj Films.



The best girl soccer players arrive from all over India. The man at the registration table is confused by their language and/or region of India they are from. © 2007 Yash Raj Films.



The team returns from Australia as world champions. © 2007 Yash Raj Films.

Hockey

Chak De! India

Produced by Aditya Chopra

Directed by Shimit Amin

Written by Jaideep Sahni

153 minutes, color, languages: Hindi, English

Yash Raj Films, 2007

A women's national hockey team is the subject of *Chak De! India* (*Go for It! India*). The hockey team, composed of sixteen champions from different states, is coached by a disgraced former captain of the national hockey team. Kabir Khan is suspected of giving away the game to Pakistan by deliberately losing a penalty goal. Crudely suggesting that as a Muslim his sympathies lie with Pakistan, Khan is reviled by the media and spat upon by his neighbors, who have painted "traitor" on the walls of his home. The former sports hero has to lock up his home and leave with his mother. After seven years in the cold, he applies to the Sports Authority of India to coach the women's team. He is given the job only because sports officials do not think the team is important enough. The team's travel overseas for the world championship is considered a boondoggle—a giveaway trip for the coach and the team. "It is the place of girls to cook and clean," says one of the officials, "not run about in shorts baring themselves in public." The only woman on the board does not object to this statement.

As the players arrive from across the country, we are treated to revealing vignettes of attitudes from the families of the girls and the biases of Indian men against women, particularly those from remote states. Some parents don't want their daughters to play on the team ("Who will marry her?" they worry), while others exhort their girls to uphold their families' sporting traditions! Prejudices are also displayed among the registration officials, who don't know the difference between Tamil and Telegu, two distinct languages from the south. These biases continue into the dorm, where the players' egos come to the fore. They squabble with each other, and parochial insults fly.

Khan's work is cut out for him as he drills discipline into his team and drives the players hard during training. He teaches them about playing as a *team* rather than trying to outshine each other. The players face a lot of pressure, and the film shows the difficulties the women undergo. Vidya, the married captain of the team, has difficulties with her in-laws, who enjoy the perks and free housing her job provides—but want her to be the traditional wife and daughter-in-law. Preeti's cricketer boyfriend belittles hockey and does not respect her career. "How can rolling pin-wielding women play World Cup hockey?" he asks, unmindful of the insulting tone of his words. When he is chosen for the national cricket team, he simply assumes she will marry him and put aside her sports career.

Finally, the girls, exhausted by Khan's exacting training, band together to oust him. He resigns knowing he has bonded them into a team. But when the Sports Association does an about-face and decides not to send the women's team to the World Cup, Khan intervenes. He drills into the team that their fight is against all those who don't believe in women's power to achieve. The officials again comment on the inappropriateness of women running about in small clothes,



Kabir Khan returns to his home as a national champion. © 2007 Yash Raj Films.



Jules meets Jess in the park and invites her to try out for the women's soccer team that she plays on. © 2002 Redbus Film Distribution.



Jess's mother cries when she discovers that Jess is still playing soccer, and bought soccer shoes instead of shoes for her sister's wedding. © 2002 Redbus Film Distribution.



Jules, Jess, and soccer coach Joe. © 2002 Redbus Film Distribution.

but eventually are persuaded to send the team to the world championship.

The scenes of the women with "INDIA" emblazoned on the backs of their jackets as the Indian flag flutters overhead are an exercise in creating national fervor. In the first match, they are trounced by the home team because of fouls committed by their opponents that are not called by biased referees. Taking the lesson to heart, the team strategizes and goes on to win game after game, qualifying as the winners of the semifinals. At the finals, they are up against their old adversaries, the home team, whom they beat in a spirited game to become the world champions. Khan is once again feted as the "Pride of India" and with his mother returns to unlock his home in his old neighborhood. His neighbors are now keen to befriend him and have his autograph. While patriotism is fanned, the audience also sees the fickleness of fans and the media.

Soccer

Bend It Like Beckham

Produced by Gurinder Chadha and Deepak Nayare

Directed by Gurinder Chadha

Written by Gurinder Chadha, Guljit Bindra, and Paul Mayeda Berges

112 minutes, color, languages: English, Punjabi, German, Hindi

Redbus Film Distribution, 2002

Not a Bollywood production, as Gurinder Chadha, the director, is a British Indian, but *Bend It Like Beckham* (BILB) is nevertheless a wonderfully telling comedy about Indian women in sports and cultural attitudes. Jess, a soccer-crazy fan of David Beckham, lives at home in the UK with her conventional Sikh family. The setting reveals how Indian families live in enclaves, where life in terms of food, dress, and shops is re-created to conform to their home culture. Jess daydreams about meeting Beckham, impressing him with her skills as a soccer player, and also about her mother disapproving such a career choice, harking back to old cultural values: "A girl shouldn't be running around in shorts baring her legs in front of 70,000 spectators."

While the household is absorbed in preparing for her sister's impending marriage, Jess is more interested in playing soccer than buying shoes and clothes for the wedding! Her friend Jules encourages her to join the women's team, where they hope to be selected by US scouts. When Jess's mother sees her playing soccer in the park with boys, she forbids her from playing. Her parents want her to act like a lady and learn to cook Indian meals. Jess begins to train with the women's team on the sly and gets close to her Irish coach, Joe.

This creates tensions with Jules, who is keen on Joe, but he's off-limits as their coach. Jess envies Jules, who seems to have the freedom to play soccer, but unknown to her, Jules's mother can't understand why her daughter is besotted by the game. Jules's mother would like a more feminine daughter, and concludes that her daughter and Jess are lesbians. Meanwhile, Jess gets into trouble when she is spotted by her sister's prospective in-laws parting from Jules with a hug. Mistaking Jules for a boy, they are scandalized by Jess's behavior and want to call off the wedding—they don't want their son to marry into a family where girls have loose morals.



Mary's father takes away the red boxing glove that she found. She finds it, with her mother's knowledge, and sleeps with it at night. © 2014 Viacom 18 Motion Pictures.



Mary's father tells her that she must choose between him and boxing. She chooses boxing. © 2014 Viacom 18 Motion Pictures.



Mary enters a prize fight with a man three times her size to win money to buy back the family cow. © 2014 Viacom 18 Motion Pictures.



Mary wins gold at the 2008 AIBA Women's World Boxing Championship in China. © 2014 Viacom 18 Motion Pictures.

Coach Joe visits the family to convince them that Jess is a player of great promise and should not waste her talent, but they are unmoved. Through hilarious twists and turns, both Jess and Jules convince their families and chase their dreams through to reality.

Boxing

Mary Kom

Produced by Sanjay Leela Bhansali

Directed by Omung Kumar

Written by Karan Singh Rathore and Ramendra Vasishth

122 minutes, color, language: Hindi

Viacom 18 Motion Pictures, 2014

Mary Kom, India's gold medalist flyweight boxing champion, is idolized internationally as "Magnificent Mary" for returning a winner to the boxing ring soon after becoming a mother. *Mary Kom*, the film, shows her rural life in her troubled home state of Manipur. The young Kom is a fighter. A chance finding of a discarded boxing glove inspires her to go to a boxing gym. The coach is rather dismissive of her until she impresses him with her practice and persists in making clear her ambitions. Her mother is her confidante, but her disapproving father is kept in the dark. Unknown to him, Kom fights a wrestler to win prize money to get back the family's cow. When Kom wins the state championship, her father asks her to choose between him and the sport. She chooses the sport and goes on to win the Women's World Amateur Boxing Championships in 2002, reconciling with her father in the process. After winning the amateur championship again in 2006, she marries Onler, who vows never to ask Kom to give up boxing. Her coach is unhappy at her decision to marry, and more so when she gives up her career upon becoming pregnant with twins.

Restless and unhappy about giving up her sport and career, Kom returns to the boxing ring with the encouragement of Onler. But her coach is as of yet unconvinced. Although she makes a comeback at the National Boxing Championships, she loses due to corrupt sports officials. An angry Kom loses her cool and throws a chair at them, resulting in a ban. She is forced to make a written apology and given the runaround before the official accepts it, and insults her yet again. The film makes much of the poor attitude of sports officials who treat overseas travels as tours and shopping trips for their wives and families, appropriating money intended for the athletes for their personal use. Kom accuses them of not providing the athletes proper nourishment and also of abusing the women, whose only recourse is to succumb if they wish to continue in the world of sports.

Kom goes on to be a winner while Onler and her mother help look after the twins in her absence. They ride out a huge setback when one of the babies is forced to have an operation for a heart defect while she is away, yet Kom wins her title again.

This dramatization of Kom's life makes only a brief reference to the decades-old insurgency that has plagued the beautiful state of Manipur. It unfolds facts loosely and not chronologically, stopping short of the great win of her career—a bronze medal at the 2012 London Olympics. One could speculate the reason for this is that the filmmakers



Iqbal: Regardless of the fact that he has won a place on a state team, his father demands that he will now work with him in the fields. © 2005 Moser Baer India Ltd.



Iqbal: Iqbal had received a pair of shoes from his coach as a birthday gift. He thought that his father had burned them, but his sister saved them and gave them to him before he left to play for the state team. © 2005 Moser Baer India Ltd.



Bhaag Milkha Bhaag: Milkha, alone and looking for his only surviving sister in a relocation camp in India. © 2013 Viacom18 Motion Pictures.

would rather leave viewers with the impression of Mary Kom winning a gold medal.

Common Tropes

Family values is the strongest theme that runs through each of the stories in these six films. In *Lagaan*, we see the support of the entire community and village given to the team on whose back rides their liberation from tax. The families offer support with meals and comfort during training sessions. Iqbal, too, is supported by his mother and sister, and only when his father comes on board with his career as a bowler in cricket does the tension in the film ease off. Milkha Singh is deprived of family, but the strongest element of his emotional makeup is the slaughter of his family. Without the full support of a family, he lives by his wits. It is the army and his career as an athlete that make him a national hero. In *Chak De! India*, we see the girls being dropped off by their parents, being advised by them, and staying in touch with them over the phone. Both Jess and Jules in *BILB* are hamstrung by mothers who cannot understand their girls' choice of soccer as a career; and here too, once they are on board with the idea, the girls can move forward. Despite cultural differences, both mothers would rather see the girls cozily settled with a young man rather than kicking a ball in a field. Like Iqbal, Mary Kom is supported by her mother and later her husband, but has to overcome her father's disapproval.

Poverty and hardship are to be overcome to excel in sports. From the villagers in *Lagaan*, clearly disadvantaged against their British overlords, to Iqbal who tends buffaloes, from Milkha Singh who is left without family and just the shirt on his back to Mary Kom, daughter of a farmer of small means, each of these athletes struggles against the inevitable to excel in their sports. The women's team in *Chak De!* has to deal with biases against them as female athletes and are not taken seriously until they prove themselves to be world champions. Their coach is rehabilitated only after their win. Jess and Jules of *BILB* also struggle against cultural mores to join women's soccer.

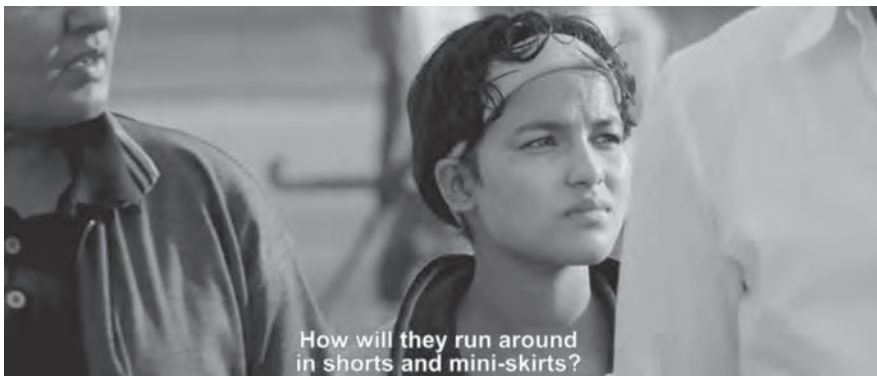
Poverty is visible in the struggle for a pair of shoes, as in the cases of Iqbal, Milkha Singh, Mary Kom, and even Jess. Barefoot champions suffer bleeding feet—Bhuvan, Iqbal, and Milkha Singh—all as part of the game. But what sports do for champions of less privileged homes is lift them up socially and help them overcome traditional outlooks, typified by the cases of obstructive parents who come around eventually.

Corrupt sports officials endemic to the culture are openly portrayed. Both *Iqbal* and *Mary Kom*—and, to a certain extent, *Chak De!*—paint a dismal picture of petty officials claiming more than their due, manipulating the games and ranks, and being generally unsupportive of the very sports they are meant to be promoting. They wield their power like a weapon over the poor athletes.

Trivialization of women's participation is the most odious of attitudes of sports officials. They feed off the performances of these female athletes, yet instead of promoting them, they feel the team has no future, as the place of women is in the kitchen and not on the field exposing their bodies to tens of thousands of spectators. Whatever support is given is almost as if officials are humoring the



Iqbal: The cricket academy coach tries to bribe Iqbal to play poorly so that one of his students will win a place on the national team. © 2005 Moser Baer India, Ltd.



Chak De! India: An Indian sports official belittles the women's team in front of them. © 2007 Yash Raj Films.



Chak De! India: Khan drills the women on the fact that they are now playing for India—not for themselves, or the region they came from. © 2007 Yash Raj Films.

women. To a certain extent, both the mothers of Jess and Jules have a similar mindset in wanting their daughters to cook and be more ladylike rather than play soccer.

Education for women of color is considered more important in *BILB* than sports. The view of Jess's dad is that through education they can gain respect in a racist society. He was not allowed to play cricket with his British friends or join the Cricket Club because of his color, and he is determined not to let his daughter face the same disappointments he did.

Love and marriage are big issues in the case of women athletes, but they hardly come up for males. For the women on the hockey team, their current and future marriages are in jeopardy because of their choice of a sports career. Relationships are tenuous when husbands, fiancées, and boyfriends are unsupportive of women's sports. In *BILB*, the girls' families are totally uncomprehending of their soccer aspirations. But Mary Kom is able to become a champion with the support of her husband.

Patriotism and national fervor are major features of sports films made in India. With the exception of *BILB*, which is a UK production, the remaining films discussed in this paper all fly the Indian national flag high and make Indian audiences proud to be Indian. Intense patriotism is one of the hallmarks of popular Hindi film, and filmmakers have no qualms about historical and factual inaccuracies when creating national fervor, even in biopics or historical films. We see examples of this in the depictions of both Milkha Singh and Mary Kom, where artistic license dictates the sequence of events and inconvenient facts are simply omitted. The main aim is to build the image of the sports champion into that of a national hero, an inspiration to unite the nation and inculcate national pride through their achievements on the international stage. ■

NOTES

1. An ancient game played across the subcontinent and many parts of Southeast Asia, it uses a *danda* (long stick) to strike the *gulli* (a small, oval-shaped piece of wood).
2. The fastest world time for that era is incorrectly depicted in the film. For more details, see Musab Abid, "Milkha Singh: Did He Ever Hold the 400m World Record? 'Bhaag Milkha Bhaag' Makes Major Goof By Claiming He Did," *Sportskeeda*, last modified July 25, 2013, <http://tinyurl.com/zoqplm>. Reportedly, three other runners who were faster than Milkha Singh also broke the world record at the Rome Olympics that same year, 1960, so Milkha placed fourth in this race.

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