

Sports Films for Social Message Communication

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Abstract:

While film as a domain is usually not looked up to as an instrument for social development much, yet a major portion of films produced world over make honest efforts in sending out meaningful messages for the benefit of the society. A trend that is expected to grow in volume in the near and distant future. Further, films with sports genre which are still far less in number than general films are rarely discussed in academic forums or research panels. This paper looks at how sports films as a separate genre can impact peoples' life and thereby effect far-reaching changes in masses' attitude over a period of time.

Keywords: Meaningful message, Women's Empowerment, Conflict

1. Introduction

With development of modern technology and peoples' consciousness, mass media have acquired an overwhelming presence in the life of human beings. The presence of media in one form or the other round-the-clock in one's life has made masses to be dependent on it for entertainment and information more than ever every passing day. This has also made it far more convenient on the part of the media to exert influence on the human minds in an unprecedented way than anything else. The human mind revolves around such images and messages received from media. It has captured a very special place in our lives which none of us can ignore. According to Aggarwal and Gupta (2001) mass media teaches values and behavioural patterns which in turn act as the agent of socialization.

From an overall view it seems to be a simple fact that while mass media influences people in a larger than life way the latter also reciprocates the same to some extent. In an ideal situation this should be a judiciously-balanced understanding. That is, media is influencing the masses towards creation of a better culture whereas masses are guiding the media whenever necessary. Media has become a guiding inspiration for all round development of humanity. With the coming of the latest media technologies the future of the society lies in the hands of the masses on how they can use this important medium in future. The older forms of content transmission have been slowly replaced by the vast transmission of knowledge in less time and space (*Adams and Hamm, 2006*). Film is one such area from which society has a lot to learn. Today's films deal with wide range of themes beginning from love triangles to space expedition, child labour to women empowerment and what not. It has explored every aspect of society which in turn is the sole beneficiary of all media activities. In this paper we shall discuss about how films or cinema – particularly sports films – rather than any other media influence the minds of the masses and causes a change of attitude or outlook for the better or the worse. The authors have chosen 'sports films' because usually this is one area of film that is usually not considered as a popular subject for academic and research discourses.

2. Film as a meaningful message

"Film and television frequently breach the boundaries of entertainment and become virtual teaching and inspiration machines. They educate or create dreams, hopes and fears", Stuart Fischhoff.

Film has been extensively used in diverse fields to teach or to educate, especially in the fields like medical, military, physical education, schools and colleges etc.

"Film is a popular culture making it easier to communicate messages. Learning through films becomes enjoyable as it arouses motivation; therefore it becomes easier to understand and remember the communicated messages," *Bannon and Goldenberg (2007)*.

3. Sports film as a social crusade

Films with the sports theme or genre have been able to achieve great success commercially around the globe. In Hollywood the number of films released with sports theme is more than the rest of the world's films produced in a year on an average. The producers and filmmakers have understood that sports through films serve as an ideal backdrop for communicating many relevant social issues as it is a dynamic metaphor for reality. As a matter of fact sports narratives through films have gained a brighter space in the world of entertainment (*Raney and Bryant, 2006*). Hollywood sports films have been able to depict varieties of sports dealing with relevant issues of the society. Sports as a subject of study have a greater importance because of its cultural significance which is very necessary for understanding a particular society.

"Sports films can create popular consciousness among the audiences which has no limitation to any kind of boundaries," (*Dunning and Coakley, 2002*).

This genre of film-making has huge potential as a highly influential change agent for human mindset. It can generate an immense amount of energy among the masses cutting across all ages and gender while dealing with a number of societal issues like diseases, beliefs, practises, politics etc. "Self-determination, intrinsic motivation and

social involvement which allow the growth of self esteem are some of the brighter scopes of sports films reaching out to the larger audiences (*Deci and Ryan, 2000*).

Researches have found that sports allow people to improve their skills through the enjoyment of the sports they play. It can boost the morale and the working capability of the individual through physical, mental motivations. “The real life actions of people get reflected through such sports films, resembling life to hurdles in which they struggle against man and the environment,” Johnston (*2006*). Sports films provide imaginative possibilities which force people to think about new models, roles and possibilities necessary for human endurance.

4. Diverse language of film

Besides, film is a medium which has a diverse language. It can communicate to the larger audiences in a very limited time and space. Sports is a popular phenomenon in the society and it gets more elevated through films which speak a universal language. Events like the Olympic Games and World Cups has a unique character that blends people hailing from diverse fields without discrimination on the ground of race, caste, colour etc. The only motive of such events is to bring harmony using sports as a common platform. But there is no doubt sports have other major attributes attached to it like the political and the economic gamble which function behind the scene. Christian Metz, pioneer of film theory also stressed on the dynamics of film language which is rooted in ideas. The images are represented in film just like the verbal language to mean deeper sense of meaning (*Monaco, 2000*). Films through its vivid images can persuade and motivate the human thinking process to react to the existing social conditions. A famous Soviet Russian film theorist and director had also said that film as a medium is self explanatory. As an art form and media, cinema can effectively communicate to the target audiences by its visuals and the presence of audio further gives the other dimension of understanding these visuals.

5. Hollywood sports films

Initially we would like to discuss about two films from Hollywood which tackled two important subjects through the medium of sports. First of all – in the film ‘*Annapolis*’, an effort is made to teach discipline and transform a batch of teenagers to full-grown human beings following their induction into the United States Navy. The restlessness, feeling of defiance for authority etc. which are usual occurrences among the youths are being taken into consideration. The narrative structures of sports films generate competitive spirit and intensity to work and accomplish with the attitude of team work. Charles Stone III the director of the film ‘*Drumline*’ states that the power of screen to represent sports that are very effectively understood by the younger generation (*Leonard 2006*). *Annapolis* through its sequences of boxing epitomises amateur boxer and labour, Jake Huard (James Franco) on how hard work and discipline can bring success. The film depicts man as a fighting machine which can go against all odds. The shots and sequences of the different parts of the male body exemplify the power of male in the society.

Another Hollywood film ‘*Glory Road*’ very effectively depicts the heartening story of a team of basketball players with simmering tensions waiting to explode because of the differences between the coloured and white players. The coach – a white – after spotting the inherent talent of the team members does his best to bring harmony to put up a united fight to gain a very prestigious trophy – thereby being successful in taking the team along with him towards the path of glory. The ready to face all the challenges, attitude coming from the team and the organisation and the attitude to come out victorious despite all obstacles exemplifies the courage to handle the realities of life. The film recalls the intersection of the history of the sports with the struggle for equality. The presence of the racial differences in sports has been represented by depiction of the African American players constantly under the scanner of the white players in the team.

While there are many such movies which very beautifully depicts one or the other issue of the society through the sports genre, in the Indian context this is somewhat less in number. Yet, the tempo has increased in the last about one-and-a-half decade or so.

6. Sports films in India

In India too, a number of films have utilized the theme of sports for successfully highlighting various issues and problems of the society – with a deep influence on the target audience. These sports films have ample scope for the younger generations to be influenced and build leadership qualities in them. This includes films which have become highly popular such as *Lagaan*, *Chak De India*, *Iqbal*, *Chain Kuli Ki Main Kuli*, *Striker*, *Awal Number* among others. Through its exaggerated emotions *Lagaan* depicts the Indian society under the colonizers. It recalls the history of British rule in India before Independence and how people had to be captive in their own land. It creates emotional nationalism among the audiences recalling the past history of double taxation, which is a sign of exploitation under the rule of the foreigners. It ignites the questions of global domination of the West in all aspects of human life. The rejection of British rule by defeating them in their own game of cricket sends a clear signal of modern thoughts where liberty of every individual needs to be respected. The mere rejection by Bhuvan (Amir Khan) to marry Elizabeth (Rachel Shelley), sister of Captain Andrew Russell is actually the rejection of the white feministic superiority complex.

And acceptance of Gauri (Gracy Singh) by Bhuvan sends out the message of great Indian tradition and culture on which every individual is brought up with.

While there is no need to discuss about the stories of these films it is worth mentioning the way they have been focussing on different issues in our everyday life. In other words – an adequate effort at expression of our feelings through the theme of sports presented to the wider audiences. In India the issues highlighted by the game of sports through films have been able to reflect peoples' love for sports. The game of cricket which is the decider of double taxation sends out sentiments of nationalism among the masses against the foreigners. It can be mentioned here that real life stories of some of the great players have been highlighted in films to show the sentiments of individuals' love for the country.

Chak de India! plays a role model for many where Kabir Khan (Shahrukh Khan) and his mother were asked to leave their ancestral house because of the anti nationalism attitude shown in the game of hockey played against Pakistan in the World Cup. Kabir Khan, on the other hand has a deep love for his country and the game of hockey for which he struggles keeping aside his deeply-hurt ego even after being termed as 'betrayed' for his past mistake. His adamant decision to train the Indian Women Hockey team for the World Cup proves his disciplined character. He constantly struggled to emerge the winner in the end. He satisfies his inner self through the challenges he faced while making the Indian Women Hockey team the winner. Films like this one depicts religious bigotry, attitudes, the legacy of partition, ethnic or regional prejudice and sexism in the contemporary India through the genre of hockey. (<http://thebabetudeblog.blogspot.in/>). It establishes the leadership qualities in the minds of people to challenge the authorities but with a solid foundation of truth and temperament.

Lagaan symbolized the enterprising spirit of the common people several hundred years from now – people for whom cricket was something out of the blue. The planning and the learning of the unknown game of cricket to fight for their rights and win over them prove the power of self determination of individuals. It also showcases how people across the world have been captured with the blanket of corporatization. It is important to note that the film is a fine metaphor of the prevailing society at present shown with the help of a story set several hundred years ago. Every aspect of human activities speaks about investment, money and profit. The presence of the divisions of people where the rich are always kept on the high esteem and continuous struggle of the common people in the hands of the elite symbolizes the present day situation. The oppressive rule, illogical taxes levied on the common man, in the name of the country's development are reflected in the film. '*Lagaan*' also depicts sentiments of diversities through the use of different settings used in the film. The dry land along with the usage of three dialects (Avadhi, Bhojpuri and Brajbhasha) symbolizes diversity.

The film is also successful in presenting two important aspects to the fore. First of all - that women power in India is also capable of scripting miracles. This is reflected also in the London Olympic Games 2012 where two Indian woman players clinched medals for the first time in history for that particular game. With a constant increase of awareness about the rights and privileges the woman of modern India have realised their potential and importance in the society. Another aspect in this film was the refusal of two of the actors in the film to become stereotype housewives and withdraw from their area of expertise in hockey. Being a country of traditional values and customs this is a strong message aimed at the upcoming young girls serious about making an identity of their own in a world dominated by the men folk. (*Edington and Erskine 2011*).

The film is a metaphor for national unity and identity defining the feminine identity to the face of the world. With women empowerment programmes coming into force in the 21st century, it has pushed the morale and dignity of the womenfolk to newer heights. No woman wants to be left behind and being second in the line of life's activities.

Films like '*Bend it like Beckham*' directed by Gurinder Chadha shows a plot of conflicts with the older tradition of the past and newer thoughts and ideas. Our past which is rooted in the traditional way of believing and practising has to compromise with the modern progressive thought of the society. The pressure from the family to follow the traditional ways at home and the modern life outside has become difficult to cope for many. The youth or the masses are living a dual life to adjust with the situations for bringing harmony. The attitude of Jesminder "Jess" Bhamra (Parminder Nagra) in this movie to roam around and play football with the boys in the field and the feminine behaviour at home depicts the way she tries to tackle the conflicting situations. The relation of Jesminder with a white man and the closet homosexuality all proves the modern phenomena which every individual faces these days. The pressure is on every individual family on how to deal with such terms like lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT). Jesminder's family requesting her not to play football for the sake of her sister's marriage and how the entire drama of marriage are showcased proves the traditional Indian mentality which is rooted in tradition but at the same time looking forward to go along with the changing society. The effort of the people to keep their identity preserved and negligence of being able to appreciate the identity of the others are highlighted in such sports films. Sports films are one of the best examples of struggles of life and how they can be overcome by true sportsmanship, to take the game as a game and not beyond.

There is always a huge amount of energy that is generated from sports films because of the immense power shown through individual hard work, intelligence, disciplines, self-determination etc. Such films can bring about a

change in the attitude to work together and achieve their desired goals. The aggression shown in the average of two-and-a-half hours in sports films defy their sheer attitude to win over their rivals but it can have an endless and enormous impact on games of life which people play for their own existence. Films play with the sentiments of the people and generate a positive aggression to perform better in real field. Now with the sentiments rooted in the Cricket World Cup final, the Indian Premier League (IPL) in cricket has seen how quite a few celebrity women are owning and actively participating in these games. Coincidentally *Chak De India* was produced in 2008, a year ahead from the first session of IPL. In fact there has been a continuous influence of sports in the films as *Chak De India* was filmed by Shimit Amin after the success of the Indian Women Hockey team in Commonwealth Games, 2002.

'*Iqbal*' essays the dilemma of small town talents trying to make up the means of attending sports school or clinics with a meagre family income and innocent guardians who do not have anything to do with such 'costly affairs'. But his self determination and the guidance from an alcoholic coach Mohit (Naseeruddin Shah) with the limited resources available prompted him to think big. It clearly shows how success can be achieved by individual's self confidence, hard work cutting across all odds that we face in our day to day life. Life is not easy for many and for people like Iqbal (Shreyas Talpade) it is all the more difficult to live a normal life. The drunkard coach and the owner of the coaching academy would represent the society which is filled with evils and impurity. All aspects of destiny, fortitude and diligence are seen revealing in Nagesh Kukunoor's film so smoothly that viewers are taken aback by the emotional effects. The politics of sports is also regenerated on the film to give a real sense of happenings and events in the world of sports.

Chein Kuli Mein Kuli depicts two important aspects. First of all – the significance of spotting talent while they are young enough or 'catch them young' and the ability of a leader to take risk of nurturing a raw talent towards a glorious sporting innings. The boy hero around whom the film revolves was an orphan brought up in an orphanage. It was his childlike innocent behaviour that contributes a great deal in re-uniting the elder player's (the mentor) with his own father as his parents were long divorced. A social issue is presented to the people in a well-constructed and well-meaning storyline.

These are just a few of the many sports films made over the decades in India till date. The point the researchers would like to emphasize upon is that sports films as a separate genre have a lot to say to the society and it is better if we can have better academic and social discussions about this genre. It seems that though sports films as a genre was a neglected lot for many long years, over the last few years its acceptance has been growing across the society because of the theme's uniqueness as well as its inherent message to the society. This is a newly-established way of delivering meaningful messages to the masses.

7. Conclusion

Cutting across all that is represented in such films, sports films generate immense energy and power and forms positive attitudes which are very necessary in real life. The game of sports filled with rules and penalties restrict human ideologies to think in the right and correct direction for the society's future improvement. Most of these themes in sports film are regeneration of the events happening around us in real life. Irony is - most of the times people do not have time to think or have ignored them for some reason or the other. But film being a popular media for the masses it uplifts the entire messages to give it a higher and immediate effect. A good sports film is not only about losing or winning on the field, it speaks about the deep meaning associated with the sports itself. Sports films appreciate the struggle of the participants by showcasing losers as the temporary pain to achieve greater rewards in the future. Sports films penetrate into human emotions which results in the positive attitude in the way we think and live in the society. The characters that depict the issues in the sports films transcend the human realities of racism, gender, policies that are very prominent in this fast moving societies of today.

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