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## Dhamma for Sale: Ashoka's Legacy in Bollywood Narratives

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**Abstract:** A historical film serves as an audio-visual representation of a particular time, offering a medium through which the past can be interpreted and preserved. While filmmakers and historians engage with history through different methodologies, their pursuits often intersect as both seek to construct meaningful narratives. Historical films play a crucial role in safeguarding cultural heritage by depicting significant events and employing distinct cinematic techniques to enhance their impact.

For a historical film to function as a reliable reference for those interested in ancient history, culture, and traditions, it must be grounded in thorough research. However, scholars and theorists argue that the twenty-first century, characterised by digital media saturation, is increasingly detached from historical awareness, heightening the risk of repeating past mistakes. In this context, the study of historical films becomes particularly significant, as they possess the power to shape collective memory and public understanding of historical events.

The film *Asoka* (2001) presents an opportunity to examine the mechanisms involved in selecting and constructing historical narratives within commercial cinema. This analysis focuses on aspects of the film that deviate from recorded history, exploring the underlying motivations and implications of such creative liberties in historical representation. This study contributes to the discourse by examining how Bollywood's representation of Ashoka intersects with literary and historical interpretations of his reign. By critically assessing the film's portrayal, this research highlights the complexities of adapting historical figures for contemporary media and the consequences of historical distortion in shaping collective memory.

**Keywords -** Ashoka, Dhamma, Bollywood, Cinema, History, Popular Culture

### I. INTRODUCTION

Cinema, as a cultural and artistic medium, holds significant power in shaping historical narratives and public memory as a creative literary genre through the art of script writing. Historical films, in particular, function as audiovisual texts that reconstruct the past through the screenplay's creative storytelling, often blending fact with fiction to enhance dramatic appeal. The Bollywood film *Asoka* (2001), directed by Santosh Sivan, exemplifies this phenomenon by portraying the life of Emperor Ashoka (r. 268–232 BCE) with substantial deviations from historical accuracy. This study examines the film's historical distortions and its commercialization of **Dhamma**, Ashoka's Buddhist-inspired ethical governance, within the broader discourse of cinematic representation.

### II. HISTORICAL DISTORTIONS IN CINEMATIC REPRESENTATION

The concept of **historical distortion** refers to the manipulation or alteration of historical facts for artistic, political, or commercial purposes (Rosenstone, 1995). While dramatization is inherent to cinematic storytelling, historical films often create an "illusion of truth" (Toplin, 2002), leading audiences to perceive fictionalized elements as factual. In *Asoka*, significant alterations include the introduction of a romanticized subplot featuring Princess Kaurwaki, the simplification of Ashoka's conversion to Buddhism, and the omission of key political and administrative aspects of his rule. These deviations raise questions about the role of cinema in constructing historical consciousness and the ethical responsibilities of filmmakers in portraying real figures.

#### 2.1 Dhamma and Its Cinematic Adaptation

**Dhamma**, as propagated by Ashoka, was a set of moral and ethical principles rooted in Buddhist philosophy but extending beyond religious boundaries to promote social harmony and justice (Thapar, 1961). Ashoka's edicts, inscribed on rock and pillar inscriptions across the Indian subcontinent, articulate the principles of non-violence (Ahimsa), religious tolerance, and governance based on ethical conduct (Strong, 1983). However, *Asoka* reduces this transformative philosophy to a secondary theme, prioritizing Ashoka's military conquests and personal relationships over his ideological contributions. This shift reflects a broader pattern in historical filmmaking, where complex historical narratives are often reshaped to align with commercial cinematic formulas (Bose, 2003).

## 2.2 Commercialization of History in Bollywood

The **commercialization of history** in cinema involves repackaging historical figures and events to appeal to mass audiences. Bollywood, as India's dominant film industry, frequently employs historical themes but modifies them to enhance their marketability (Desai, 2004). The film *Asoka* exemplifies this trend by incorporating spectacle-driven storytelling, romantic tropes, and action sequences that cater to popular cinematic expectations rather than historical authenticity. This practice not only alters public perception of historical figures but also raises concerns about the ethical implications of commodifying history for entertainment.

## 2.3 Theoretical Framework and Relevance

This study employs **historical film analysis** as a methodological approach, drawing from theories of film historiography and cultural memory. As Robert A. Rosenstone (2006) asserts, "history on film is not history as it happened, but history as it is imagined and reinterpreted." Through this lens, *Asoka* is analyzed not as a documentary representation of Ashoka's life but as a cinematic re-imagining influenced by narrative conventions and market dynamics.

### III. REVIEW LITERATURE

The portrayal of historical figures in cinema has been the subject of extensive academic discourse, particularly regarding the tension between historical accuracy and cinematic storytelling. The representation of Emperor Ashoka in Bollywood's *Asoka* (2001) exemplifies the ways in which historical narratives are reconstructed to fit commercial cinematic frameworks. This literature review explores existing scholarship on historical films, Ashoka's legacy, and the impact of cinematic distortions on cultural memory.

#### 3.1 Historical Films and the Politics of Representation

Historical films function as cultural texts that mediate public perceptions of the past. Scholars such as Robert A. Rosenstone (1995) argue that "history on film is a constructed reality, shaped by narrative conventions rather than objective historical fact." Unlike traditional historiography, which relies on documentary evidence, films employ visual storytelling, dramatic structures, and emotional engagement to shape historical consciousness (Rosenstone, 2006). Richard J. Evans (2000) further critiques historical films for their potential to prioritize spectacle over substantive historical inquiry, thus altering public understanding of key events.

Within the Indian context, Bollywood's historical films often merge history with entertainment, leading to selective interpretations of the past (Desai, 2004). Mihir Bose (2003) contends that Bollywood has a history of reshaping historical narratives to align with mainstream audience expectations, frequently infusing romance, action, and melodrama into historical storytelling. This raises concerns about the ethical responsibilities of filmmakers when adapting historical figures for mass consumption.

#### 3.2 Emperor Ashoka: Historical Legacy and Cinematic Representation

Ashoka remains one of the most extensively documented rulers of ancient India. His reign is recorded in both **Buddhist chronicles** such as the *Ashokavadana* (Strong, 1983) and **inscriptional evidence** from his rock and pillar edicts (Thapar, 1961). These records highlight Ashoka's transformation from a militaristic ruler to a champion of non-violence and dhamma, marking a pivotal shift in Indian history.

Scholarly works on Ashoka emphasize his administrative policies, religious pluralism, and efforts to disseminate Buddhist philosophy beyond India (Smith, 1901). John Strong (1983) and Romila Thapar (1997) explore the political and philosophical dimensions of Ashoka's rule, underscoring how his policies were deeply rooted in ethical governance rather than mere religious propagation. Thapar (1961) asserts that Ashoka's inscriptions provide critical insights into his diplomatic outreach, particularly in regions such as Sri Lanka and Central Asia, positioning him as a transnational historical figure.

In contrast, *Asoka* (2001) omits many of these elements, focusing instead on dramatized relationships and military conflicts. The absence of key historical figures such as Queen Devi, Ashoka's first wife and a significant influence in his adoption of Buddhism, further distorts his legacy (Allen, 2012). Such omissions highlight Bollywood's tendency to prioritize personal drama over the broader socio-political impact of historical figures.

#### 3.4 Dhamma and Its Interpretation in Cultural Narratives

Dhamma, as articulated in Ashoka's edicts, represents a unique ideological framework that extends beyond Buddhism to encompass moral and ethical governance (Thapar, 1961). It advocates for non-violence, religious tolerance, and social welfare—principles that contributed to Ashoka's historical significance.

Contemporary interpretations of dhamma in literature and cinema often simplify its complexity. While scholars like Keay (2000) emphasize Ashoka's diplomatic and philosophical contributions, films such as *Asoka* reduce dhamma to a secondary theme, overshadowed by warfare and romance. The film presents Ashoka's remorse over the Kalinga War as an immediate transformation, whereas historical evidence suggests a gradual ideological shift influenced by Buddhist monks (Strong, 1983).

#### 3.5 The Commercialization of Historical Narratives in Bollywood

The intersection of history and commercial cinema raises critical debates about **the commodification of historical figures**. Bollywood's historical films often integrate fictional elements to enhance narrative appeal, altering public perception of history in the process (Desai, 2004). This aligns with Douglas Kellner's (1995) theory of **media spectacle**, which posits that modern visual culture reshapes historical discourse by prioritizing dramatization and emotional engagement over factual accuracy.

*Asoka* serves as a case study in this phenomenon, transforming a complex historical figure into a romanticized warrior hero. The film's emphasis on visual grandeur, action sequences, and romantic subplots exemplifies Bollywood's strategy of reshaping history for mass appeal (Bose, 2003). While such portrayals introduce historical figures to broader audiences, they also contribute to historical misinterpretation, raising ethical concerns about the accuracy of cinematic representations.

### 3.6 Impact of Cinematic Representations on Cultural Memory

The influence of historical films extends beyond entertainment, shaping cultural memory and collective identity. Hayden White (1987) argues that historical narratives, whether in literature or cinema, are inherently subjective, constructed through selective storytelling. Films like *Asoka* contribute to the **mythologization of history**, where fictionalized narratives replace factual accounts in public consciousness (Toplin, 2002).

In the context of Ashoka's legacy, such distortions impact how contemporary audiences engage with his historical contributions. The romanticized and militarized depiction in *Asoka* contrasts sharply with the ethical and philosophical dimensions emphasized in historical texts, demonstrating the power of cinema to alter historical legacies (Jha, 2004).

## IV. CRITICAL ANALYSIS

### 4.1 Historical Background of Emperor Ashoka

Ashoka, the third ruler of the Mauryan dynasty, ascended the throne around 268 BCE following a period of internal conflict. He expanded the empire, subjugating regions like Kalinga, where the devastating war reportedly resulted in over 100,000 deaths. The sheer brutality of this conquest led to his transformation and adoption of Buddhist principles, as reflected in his rock and pillar edicts spread across the subcontinent (Thapar, 1961).

Ashoka's governance, documented in these inscriptions, emphasized non-violence, religious tolerance, and social welfare. His role in propagating Buddhism beyond India, particularly in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, is well established (Strong, 1983). Unlike many other rulers, Ashoka left behind an extensive primary record of his policies, making it possible to study his reign with relative accuracy.

### 4.2 Narrative Structure of the Film *Asoka*

The film *Asoka* presents a dramatized account of Ashoka's early life and conquests. Starring Shah Rukh Khan as the titular character, the movie follows his journey from a warrior prince to a remorseful emperor. However, the film focuses significantly on a fictionalized romance between Ashoka and Kaurwaki (Kareena Kapoor), who is depicted as a princess of Kalinga.

Key aspects of the film's plot include:

1. **The Exile and Romance Narrative** – The film suggests that Ashoka, while in exile, falls in love with Kaurwaki, a fabricated character absent from historical texts (Allen, 2012).
2. **The Kalinga War** – The film dramatizes Ashoka's conquest of Kalinga but simplifies the war's impact, presenting his remorse as an immediate realization rather than a gradual transformation.
3. **The Role of Buddhism** – While the film acknowledges Ashoka's conversion, it fails to depict the full extent of his Buddhist policies and administration.

These elements raise questions about the balance between historical fidelity and creative liberty in historical films.

### 4.3 Historical Inaccuracies and Artistic Liberties

Although *Asoka* attempts to portray the transformation of the Mauryan emperor, it takes significant creative liberties, including:

#### 4.3.1 Romanticized Relationships

The introduction of Kaurwaki as Ashoka's love interest is historically unsubstantiated. No historical texts mention her existence, let alone her being a princess of Kalinga (Smith, 1901). While Ashoka had several wives, including Devi, who played a role in introducing him to Buddhism, she is conspicuously absent from the film (Keay, 2000).

#### 4.3.2 Chronological and Political Discrepancies

- The film suggests that Ashoka was exiled and spent time in Kalinga before becoming emperor, which contradicts historical records. There is no evidence that Ashoka lived in Kalinga before the war (Thapar, 1997).
- The portrayal of Kalinga as a monarchy led by a princess is historically inaccurate; Kalinga was a republican state (Kosambi, 1956).

#### 4.3.3 The Kalinga War and Ashoka's Transformation

- The film simplifies Ashoka's transformation into a Buddhist ruler, depicting it as an immediate consequence of the war. However, historical sources suggest that his adoption of Buddhism was a gradual process influenced by Buddhist monks over time (Strong, 1983).
- The Ashokan edicts emphasize his commitment to social welfare, religious tolerance, and non-violence—elements largely absent from the film (Allen, 2012).

## V. RECEPTION AND CRITIQUE

Upon its release, *Asoka* received mixed reviews. While praised for its cinematography and performances, it was criticized for its historical inaccuracies.

### 5.1. Scholarly Criticism

Historians have raised concerns about the film's deviations from historical facts:

- Scholars in Odisha (formerly Kalinga) expressed discontent over the misrepresentation of Kalinga's history (Bose, 2003).
- The absence of Ashoka's later policies, including his diplomatic relations with Greek kingdoms, was noted as a missed opportunity to educate audiences about his global influence (Thapar, 1997).

### 5.2. Public Perception and Cultural Impact

The romanticized narrative potentially distorts public perception of Ashoka, reducing his legacy to a love story rather than a complex historical figure who shaped Indian and Buddhist history (Jha, 2004).

## VI. IMPLICATIONS OF HISTORICAL DRAMATIZATION IN CINEMA

The representation of historical figures in cinema has long-term effects on cultural memory and public understanding. The following issues arise from dramatized adaptations like *Asoka*:

### 6.1 Misinformation and Myth-Making

When films prioritize entertainment over accuracy, they risk creating myths that overshadow historical facts. Many audiences, particularly those unfamiliar with historical records, may take cinematic representations at face value (Jha, 2004).

### 6.2 Responsibility of Filmmakers

While artistic freedom is essential, filmmakers depicting historical figures should exercise responsibility. Historical films can serve as educational tools if supplemented with accurate information (Bose, 2003).

### 6.3 The Commodification of History

The film industry often modifies historical narratives to increase commercial appeal. In *Asoka*, the inclusion of a fictional romance aligns with Bollywood's market-driven approach rather than historical evidence (Desai, 2004).

## VII. CONCLUSION

Historical films serve as powerful mediums of storytelling, influencing cultural memory and public perceptions of the past. However, the distinction between cinematic history and actual historical events often becomes blurred, leading to significant distortions in collective understanding. *Asoka* (2001), directed by Santosh Sivan, exemplifies this phenomenon, portraying a dramatized and romanticized version of Emperor Ashoka's life. While the film introduces audiences to a pivotal historical figure, it simultaneously alters key aspects of Ashoka's legacy, prioritizing spectacle over historical accuracy. This conclusion synthesizes the key arguments presented, discussing the differences between cinematic representation and real history, the nature and impact of historical distortions, and the broader implications of such portrayals on society.

### 7.1 The Distinction Between Film and Historical Reality

The portrayal of history in cinema differs fundamentally from historical scholarship. While academic historiography relies on evidence-based analysis, historical films construct narratives through dramatic elements, character arcs, and visual storytelling (Rosenstone, 1995). As a result, films often compress timelines, merge characters, or introduce fictional subplots to enhance emotional engagement. *Asoka* follows this trend by presenting a version of Ashoka's life that is tailored for cinematic appeal rather than historical fidelity.

One of the most significant distortions in *Asoka* is the inclusion of Princess Kaurwaki as a central character. Historical sources do not substantiate her existence as a Kalinga princess or as a key figure in Ashoka's life (Thapar, 1961). Instead, Ashoka's real-life wife, Devi, who played a crucial role in introducing him to Buddhism, is entirely omitted from the film (Allen, 2012). This alteration exemplifies how films prioritize romantic subplots over historical depth, reshaping the narrative to fit commercial storytelling conventions.

Another critical difference lies in the depiction of the Kalinga War and Ashoka's transformation. The film presents Ashoka's remorse as an immediate emotional response to battlefield destruction. In contrast, historical records suggest a more gradual shift, influenced by his interactions with Buddhist monks and his long-term reflections on governance (Strong, 1983). The Ashokan edicts, which provide direct insight into his policies, emphasize social welfare, religious tolerance, and ethical governance, aspects that the film only briefly acknowledges (Thapar, 1997).

### 7.2 Distortions in *Asoka* and Their Narrative Justifications

Distortions in historical films often stem from the need to enhance drama and appeal to mass audiences. *Asoka* exemplifies Bollywood's tendency to infuse historical narratives with elements of romance, action, and personal conflict. While such embellishments make history more accessible to viewers, they also contribute to the erosion of factual accuracy (Bose, 2003).

The romantic subplot between Ashoka and Kaurwaki serves as the film's emotional core, yet it lacks historical foundation. This addition aligns with Bollywood's conventional narrative structure, where romance plays a central role in storytelling (Desai, 2004). Similarly, Ashoka's characterization in the film oscillates between a ruthless warrior and a passionate lover, overshadowing his philosophical and administrative contributions. By framing his transformation primarily through personal loss rather than ideological evolution, the film reduces the complexity of his historical journey.

Additionally, the film alters the socio-political structure of Kalinga, depicting it as a monarchy led by Kaurwaki. Historically, Kalinga was a republican state with a decentralized governance system (Kosambi, 1956). Such modifications reshape the audience's understanding of ancient Indian polities, reinforcing monarchical structures that may not align with historical realities.

### 7.3 Impact of Cinematic Distortions on Society

The consequences of historical distortions in films extend beyond entertainment, shaping public memory and influencing societal perceptions of the past. Given that cinema is a dominant medium of historical engagement for many audiences, inaccuracies can contribute to widespread misconceptions (Rosenstone, 2006).

1. **Mythologizing Historical Figures** – Films like *Asoka* contribute to the mythologization of historical personalities, elevating them to near-mythical status while detaching them from their historical contexts. The emphasis on Ashoka's warrior persona and romantic entanglements, rather than his governance and ethical policies, alters how audiences perceive his contributions (Jha, 2004). This selective portrayal risks overshadowing the more significant aspects of his legacy, such as his advocacy for dharma and diplomatic outreach.
2. **Cultural Memory and Identity Formation** – Historical films play a crucial role in shaping national and cultural identity. However, when history is commodified for cinematic appeal, it can lead to the reinforcement of skewed narratives. *Asoka* presents a version of history that aligns with Bollywood's emphasis on grandeur and spectacle, potentially distorting how viewers engage with India's historical heritage (Desai, 2004).
3. **Impact on Academic Discourse** – Historians and scholars often find themselves in dialogue with cinematic portrayals of history, addressing misconceptions that arise from popular media. As Richard J. Evans (2000) points out, films often become primary sources of historical knowledge for the general public, necessitating corrective efforts from academics. In the case of *Asoka*, scholars have criticized the film for its departure from historical evidence, emphasizing the need for nuanced and accurate historical storytelling (Thapar, 1997).
4. **Political and Ideological Implications** – Historical films can also serve ideological functions, shaping narratives to align with contemporary political or cultural agendas. The portrayal of Ashoka in *Asoka* focuses on his warrior image rather than his governance model, subtly reinforcing narratives of power and conquest over ethical governance (Kellner, 1995). Such representations can influence public discourse on leadership, ethics, and historical legacy.

### 7.4 How Cinema Molds Reality

Cinema, as a mass medium, possesses the ability to shape perceptions of history, politics, and identity. The power of visual storytelling means that historical films often become more influential than academic texts in shaping public consciousness (White, 1987).

- **Blurring the Line Between Fiction and Fact** – Audiences often engage with historical films without distinguishing between dramatization and reality. When historical figures are reshaped through cinematic conventions, their real contributions and ideologies may become secondary to the narrative demands of the film (Toplin, 2002).
- **Influencing Educational Narratives** – In some cases, films become part of educational discourse, either as supplementary materials or as widely accepted interpretations of history. However, inaccuracies in films like *Asoka* necessitate critical engagement to ensure that historical knowledge remains rooted in evidence-based research (Bose, 2003).
- **Creating Collective Memory** – Films contribute to the construction of collective memory, influencing how societies remember and commemorate historical figures. The visual and emotional impact of cinema can embed certain images and narratives into public consciousness, even when they deviate from historical accuracy (Jha, 2004).

### 7.5 Final Thoughts and Recommendations

The analysis of *Asoka* underscores the complexities of adapting history for cinematic storytelling. While films serve as accessible entry points into historical narratives, they also carry the responsibility of accurate representation. The divergence between cinematic and academic history in *Asoka* highlights the need for filmmakers to engage with historical scholarship when portraying real figures.

Moving forward, a balanced approach is essential—one that respects artistic freedom while maintaining historical integrity. Filmmakers should collaborate with historians to ensure that dramatization does not compromise core historical truths. Additionally, audiences must cultivate a critical perspective, recognizing that historical films are interpretations rather than definitive accounts.

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