



King Aśoka in Popular Culture: A Critical Analysis of Representations in Today's World

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Abstract

This paper aims to critically analyse the modern-day depictions and representations of the emperor Aśoka in various areas of contemporary popular cultures. By looking at representations in the fields of cinema, television and other ventures of creative and artistic value, the paper will represent a new perspective into the understanding of the emperor which is based in modern-day and is not directly related to traditional academia but plays a pivotal role in the forming of public perceptions about the emperor and his life. This is a very contemporary point of view to look at the emperor and challenges the traditional notions which often lack the idea of public perception and modern-day outlooks. The paper will outline the marked differences in perspectives and outlooks in how the emperor is perceived in the eyes of the popular culture narratives and how these impressions help in the creation of elaborate narratives. From a methodological perspective, the paper makes use of two prominent popular culture products-Asoka (2001), a Bollywood movie, and the TV serial Chakravartin Ashoka Samrat (2015-2016)-against the academic historiography of the Mauryan emperor to identify major differences between the scholarly and popular depictions in terms of architecture, costume, dialogue, structure, and depiction of the change in Aśoka's philosophy/administration. This comparison will open new gates of discussion on how modern-day media and popular cultures have risen to the occasion of framing public perceptions and mass narratives. The significance of this research lies in its implications concerning the distortion of public perception and the need for further collaborations.

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Introduction

The Mauryan Emperor Aśoka is one of the most well-documented rulers of the ancient world; thus, scholars from the fields of history, archaeology, religious studies, and political philosophy have provided a multifaceted perspective to understand Aśoka. Outside of academia, Aśoka has served as an ongoing source of inspiration for popular culture (including film, television series, and digital media) that depict Aśoka's story for mass audiences. The relationship between these two methods of exploring Aśoka's legacy and the tensions in that relationship are the primary focus of this article. This paper inquires representational divergence which means how there exists a significant gap between Aśoka's depiction in popular culture versus how he is defined in academia. This difference has significance aside from artistic modification or simplification of the story. It is also representative of a more significant tension with media that is singularly focused on dramatic appeal, emotional connection, and profits -opposed to actual historical representation, which holds true to the facts of the past; acknowledges the complexity involved; requires thorough contextual examination. Popular culture products like *Asoka* (2001) and *Chakravartin Ashoka Samrat* (2015–2016) reach millions of people - meaning they will serve as the primary framework through which the majority of individuals will understand Aśoka historically (*Asoka*). Therefore, the ramifications of exaggeration, oversimplification, and mythologizing are very significant (*Chakravartin Ashoka Samrat*).

The main aims of the paper can best be outlined in terms of the research objectives that relate to the popular representation of Aśoka. The first of these three objectives focuses on the extent to which popular cultural representations of Aśoka deviate from the scholarly history of Aśoka, by looking at various aspects of how Aśoka has been depicted in popular culture such as: the manner of constructing his character, how his philosophical transformation has been presented, the material and thematic construction around him, his costumes, dialogues, various engagements, and finally, how the trajectory of Aśoka's life is presented within the overall story arc. The second objective will determine the implications of these choices in representing Aśoka and how the distortion of Aśoka's character that is evidenced by the imprecision found in many popular cultural representations of him has led to the establishment of a traditionally mythologised image of the emperor. The third and most important objective of this study relates to fostering an informed discussion about the possibilities and responsibilities of popular historical representations. This will be accomplished through calling for greater engagement between filmmakers, television producers, and historians, and working towards establishing productive relationships between these three communities in the future.

To comprehend this study of Aśoka we must first look at its wider academic context. The issue of how to portray the past through popular works is a longstanding field of study worldwide, which has become increasingly important, given the massive change from printed to visual/digital media for communicating the past. Aśoka's case stands out in particular for two reasons: first, because there is an extensive amount of literature regarding Aśoka to compare the representations in popular literature and historical past and second, because the ideological issues surrounding representations of Aśoka are significant as he has been claimed as a symbol of Indian nationalism, a representation of Buddhist universalism, and a promoter of secular governance. Therefore, a major aspect of this paper is to explore

how these ideological shifts and transformations affect representations in popular media.

Literature around Aśoka exists in various forms and has many different approaches (epigraphy, historical text studies, archaeological digging, historical writing). Any serious examination of Aśoka's representation in popular culture must be based on the prior knowledge of these academic studies. They provide a basis by which to measure the inaccurate representations found in popular culture as Aśoka is a complex and layered character; yet popular representations reduce him to something much simpler and that is wrong. The gap between what scholarship has established about Aśoka and what popular culture has chosen to present is not incidental - it is the organising problem of this paper, and it is a gap that can only be fully appreciated once the contours of the scholarly record have been clearly established.

The rock edicts and pillar inscriptions of Aśoka are the main written resources we have that document Aśoka's reign. Aśoka's policies, intentions, and self-image as a ruler are best reflected in these inscriptions than in any other sources available to historians. As pointed out by Patrick Olivelle in his extensive work regarding Aśoka, it is apparent that Aśoka was remarkably focused on issues of governance, moral reform, and the welfare of the people; these priorities stand in stark contrast to how Aśoka's life has been represented within popular culture, as predominantly a romantic and/or militaristic figure (Olivelle 199). The near-total absence of these inscriptions from popular cultural treatments of Aśoka - despite their centrality to any historically informed understanding of his reign - is one of the most telling indicators of the representational priorities that this paper sets out to examine and critique. Buddhist literary traditions offer large amounts of evidence including the *Mahāvamsa* and *Dīpavamsa*. However, scholars have long recognised that these accounts must be treated with caution, as they contain numerous exaggerations in reference to Aśoka's spiritual practice and generosity.

Romila Thapar's work on Aśoka has highlighted the importance of viewing Aśoka's Dhamma as an instrument of imperial control rather than just his own personal interpretation of Buddhist thought. Thapar's research also indicates that what Aśoka intended by Dhamma was to provide a number of ethical guidelines drawn from many different traditions with the ultimate goal being to enhance social unity and political stability throughout the vast and multicultural empire. In addition, the establishment of Dhamma did not produce any fundamental changes in the way the empire was run or structured, because both military and administrative structures remained centralised and involved in-people (Thapar 31). This nuanced and multi-layered reading is directly relevant to the central argument of this paper, as it exposes one of the most consequential distortions in popular cultural treatments of Aśoka - the representation of his transformation as a sudden, complete, and emotionally driven conversion from violence to pacifism, which collapses the gradual and politically complex process that Thapar's scholarship has so carefully reconstructed.

D.D. Kosambi's Marxist approach to Aśoka is another analytic aspect most popular depictions do not consider and is therefore a significant addition to the discussion. For Kosambi, understanding Aśoka's ethical and moral statements requires assessing agrarian unrest and class conflict throughout the Empire (Kosambi 182). Therefore, from this point of view, the Dhamma was not primarily a religious or philosophical idea but rather an ideological method for responding to structural economic pressures

i.e., it was a calculated effort to stabilise the social order by promoting values such as restraint, tolerance, and deference to authority.

Historian Shankar Goyal added to this idea by stating that historians studying the early Mauryan period need to also consider the larger socioeconomic and political context surrounding the Mauryan Empire, rather than just Aśoka's individualism and spirituality (Goyal 51). The produced narratives from both case studies highlighted in this paper support Goyal's assertion that the representations of Aśoka in popular culture do exactly what he warns against - placing lesser importance on Aśoka's administrative, economic and political aspects than on Aśoka's romanticized sudden transformation and personal journey.

Recent research has very clearly defined the archaeological and material aspects of Aśoka's reign, and those aspects are particularly relevant to this paper and its representations and visual components. Much of Nayanjot Lahiri's work, predominantly in her two monumental studies, *Ashoka in Ancient India* (2015) and *Searching for Ashoka* (2023), extensively cites archaeological and epigraphic evidence that illustrate both the extensive administrative potential of Aśoka's imperial structure and the true religious and cultural plurality of the people over whom he ruled. Lahiri's extensive investigation of the physical landscape of Aśoka's empire, the unique architectural styles of his pillars and stupas, the geographical locations of his edicts, and the general material culture during the Mauryan period gives this work a form of visual language grounded in historical fact that are another aspect of the critical divergence between popular culture representations of Aśoka and their actual historical record (Lahiri, *Ashoka in Ancient India*, 205). The contrast between the archaeological richness of the material and Asoka's (2001) and Chakravartin Ashoka Samrat's visual presentations illustrates one of the most powerful divergences between the actual historical representations and the popular representations.

Scholars like Robert Rosenstone and Natalie Zemon Davis have long discussed the interplay of historical cinema and academic historiography. Rosenstone has in particular taken to notice the "historical film," as he puts it, as a unique way of thinking about history, a way that is carried out with "an image, an emotion and a narrative," rather than argument, evidence, and all the accompanying logic of logic and deduction that comes with such thinking, but which can never just be an inherently irresponsible or dismissive position (Rosenstone 54). The issue, for Rosenstone, is not whether film departs from academic history - it inevitably does - but whether those departures are made thoughtfully and with an awareness of what is being sacrificed in the process.

In the light of the case studies considered in this paper, this framework can show productions that are not just accidentally historically inaccurate but also systematically and consequential choices that subordinate historical fidelity to commercial and entertainment imperatives. This analytical framework is further advanced by Stuart Hall's foundational work on representation, which shows that media texts do not just reflect reality but actively construct it, encoding specific ideological assumptions and values that influence the way audiences make sense of the world.

As Hall relates to the landscape of historical representation, then, popular cultural representations of such figures as Aśoka are never neutral or innocent but always entrenched in contemporary political and cultural considerations that determine which parts of the historical record are elevated and which of the rest are muted (Hall 15). In the case of Aśoka, as this paper will argue, those agendas have produced a figure who serves the needs of contemporary popular culture far more faithfully than he reflects the realities of ancient Mauryan India.

This article takes a qualitative approach which is based on an analysis of comparative textual and visual material. Two main texts chosen to analyse are the Bollywood film *Asoka* (2001; directed by Santosh Sivan; starring Shah Rukh Khan) (*Asoka*), as well as the television series *Chakravartin Ashoka Samrat* (2015–2016; broadcast on Colors TV) (*Chakravartin Ashoka Samrat*). These two works have been curated because they are both known in popular culture and accessible: both have attracted a wide audience throughout India and the South Asian diaspora, and both have had a large, measurable impact on popular perceptions of Aśoka in the contemporary period. In tandem, they represent the two dominant modes of popular historical representation in contemporary Indian media, commercial cinema and long-form television drama, and thus a comparative analysis with implications that reach beyond the texts at hand to broader issues concerning the ways in which history is mediated and consumed in South Asia today.

Choosing these two media texts, however, is also a methodological choice to pursue texts that have enjoyed significant cultural visibility as opposed to those in the more niche or critically oriented categories. Indeed, since *Asoka* (2001) and *Chakravartin Ashoka Samrat* have reached the largest audiences, their representational choices have the most serious impact on public historical consciousness. The emphasis on mass-audience productions is thus not a restriction of the scope of this paper but rather a principled methodological choice grounded in its concern with the relationship between popular representation and public perception.

A comparative historical analytical framework was used, using a historical methodology based on the analysis of media texts by taking into account five core dimensions for each popular cultural text. The first is spatial and architectural representation of these settings and the portrayals made of Mauryan landscapes, urban settings and monumental structures within them. The second is material culture, including costumes, weapons and the visual expression of ordinary Mauryan life. The third is linguistic register: the dialogue's style, tone and content and what they indicate about the assumptions the productions form for their history. The fourth is narrative arc, with sustained attention on the ways the two productions depict Aśoka's transformation from warrior to Dhamma king - the major episode with which both texts plot their stories. The fifth and last dimension is how religious, governance and administrative policies are dealt with, how far these productions deal with the structural and institutional features of Aśoka's reign rather than reducing his legacy to a story of personal spiritual transformation.

In these dimensions the analysis identifies particular points where the popular culture text does not meet the scholarly historical record based on the primary and secondary documents that we examined in the previous part. This form of reference is not designed to impose a highly impracticable academic

level of fidelity on popular cultural production; it has been assumed that film and TV involve creative reinterpretation and narrative discretion. Instead, the purpose of comparison is to detect the process through which systematic distortion takes place: repeated choices that taken together give rise to a consistent set of representational priorities, which consistently favour entertainment over historical accountability. Indeed, it is the systematic and repetitive features of these distortions, rather than any specific inaccuracy, that serves as the main focus of criticism in this paper.

Historical Context and the Reign of Aśoka

The exact date of the birth of Emperor Aśoka is still somewhat of a historical mystery, with scholars generally placing this event at approximately 304 BCE. He was grandson of Chandragupta Maurya, the founder of the Mauryan dynasty estimated to have ruled between 321 and 297 BCE, and son of Bindusāra, under whom the empire continued its expansion across the subcontinent. Aśoka's accession to the throne was around 273 BCE. The Mauryan Empire at its peak under ruler Aśoka ruled across the Indian subcontinent from the northwestern territories of present-day Afghanistan and Pakistan in the west to the plains of Assam in the east, and from the Himalayan foothills in the north to the upper reaches of the Deccan plateau in the south (Lahiri, *Ashoka in Ancient India*, 45). The capital of the empire, Pāṭaliputra - Patna in present-day Bihar - was at various times an epicenter and city of architectural richness and sophistication, including massive wooden palisades, important gateways as well as an initial understanding of urban planning and a sophisticated bureaucratic organization in its administration across its many provinces and territories. It is against this background that Aśoka's administration needs to be grasped, as the immense range and variation within the empire presented a challenging rule.

The first few years of Aśoka's rule were defined by the same expansionist military policies that characterised the governments of prior monarchs. The most significant military campaign of his reign - and certainly the event best remembered in the political history of ancient India - was the battle against the kingdom of Kāliṅga, which bordered the coasts of modern-day Odisha, fought eight years after his accession. As a proud, wealthy and crucial kingdom, Kāliṅga boasted a fertile farm economy, a long coast and abundant shipping interests; and as a vital player in extensive networks of shipping linking the area's territories with those of Southeast Asia and beyond (Olivelle 142). The Mauryan conquest of Kāliṅga exacted a terrible human toll. The ending of the Kāliṅga War is generally regarded as the watershed which ushered in a complete reversal of Aśoka's political paradigm and conduct.

Aśoka created and followed through on the Dhamma policy that would later end up establishing his historical presence in India in the years after the Kāliṅga War. Generally understood as an ethical framework, the Dhamma made a commitment to principles of non-violence, tolerance of faith, compassion towards all life, respect for elders and teachers, and the equal treatment of subjects from all parts of the empire. Aśoka announced this policy in a unique set of public inscriptions where edicts were inscribed on stony rock faces and polished stone pillars at various strategically important points in the empire, the intention being to spread his messages out to the largest number of people, at every point along the empire. The officers appointed to spread and interpret the Dhamma, known as the

Dhammamahāmāttas, provide an indication of the institutional gravitas of Aśoka's policy.

Another characteristic of Aśoka's reign was his emphasis on making significant contributions to infrastructure, social and political welfare, and diplomatic relations. He had spent greatly on infrastructure projects, building and maintaining roads, rest homes, wells, hospitals, and even medical facilities for both humans and animals across the empire, which are inscribed in his edicts as manifestations of his overarching dedication to the well-being of his subjects. He reached out through his political and other diplomatic contacts far beyond his own kingdom, with emissaries dispatched to the Hellenistic kingdoms and Southeast Asia. Aśoka's rule was one of sincere and institutionally expressed pluralism: he is best known for his work in Buddhism, but his policies clearly depict patronage and social support to various religious communities. His architectural tradition included- the pillars, the stupas and rock-cut caves and are among the most permanent material evidence of the breadth and ambition of his imperial dream. Aśoka's reign came to an end with his death around 232 BCE, after which the Mauryan Empire was subsequently riven by a series of infighting, economic strain, and falling apart within half a century from the continuing power struggles generated by regional centrifugal forces.

Aśoka in Popular Cultures: A Critical Analysis

Asoka (2001)

Bollywood film *Asoka*, produced in 2001 and directed by Santosh Sivan, is arguably the most high-profile film-based representation of the life of Emperor Aśoka. Starring Shah Rukh Khan in the role, the film was a hit with local viewers and has become an important cinematic reference point for Asian audiences attempting to grasp Aśoka in the Hindi-speaking world. As a reference against the historical record laid out in the previous sections, the film depicts a systematic process of representational selections that make overt favor for spectacle and emotional drama over historical fidelity - decisions which, as Stuart Hall's theory of the representation of ideas might have held, are never simply aesthetic matters but are imbued with an ideological set of assumptions about who Aśoka was and what he is remembered for; this view was inextricably linked to its ideological underpinnings from before (Hall 16) .

In regards to space and architecture, the film departs from the archaeological and historic record of the Mauryan period greatly. In place of the wood palisades, huge gates, and early urban planning systems that would have come to define the Mauryan capital Pāṭaliputra, the film uses lush tropical vistas that, largely sourced from South India and Sri Lanka, creates a sort of homogenised vision of ancient grandeur that bears very little in correlation with the documented landscapes of Magadha and Kāliṅga. Battles and palace interiors look impressive but replace the documented wooden fortifications and functional administrative structure of the Mauryan period with elaborate stone structures that would be more typical during later medieval Indian dynasties. With regard to Kāliṅga itself, its presentation is especially revealing in this regard - recast in it as a barren and nameless battlefield, it takes away its historical identity as a successful coastal kingdom known for its rich agricultural land, its commerce, its vibrant trading links to the subcontinent with Southeast Asia. The most striking point is that the film omits altogether the physical infrastructure of Aśoka's Dhamma - the rock edicts, the pillars and the

stupas that constituted the most visible and enduring material legacy of his reign. Since Lahiri's scholarship has shown the importance of these structures to any historically informed perspective of Aśoka's governance, and the absence of these symbols from the film's visual vocabulary is not a small mistake but an important representation failure as well (Lahiri, *Searching for Ashoka*).

The film's treatment of both costume and material culture is anachronistic to a larger extent. The clothing of the Mauryan era - the uttarīya, the antarīya and humble tunics in muted tones of cotton, linen and silk - would not appear before grand metallic armor, elaborate headgear and elaborate garments full of motifs of Rajput or Mughal court wear. Shah Rukh Khan's Aśoka in particular is always dressed in a garb that mirrors modern Bollywood values of heroic masculinity, instead of a historically informed wardrobe of ancient Mauryan royal garb. Similarly, the film's soldiers and common people are dressed in bright coloured and heavily embroidered attire unrelated to the textile-like practices of the same period.

The film's conversation also introduces another aspect of historical anachronism, using a register of Sanskritised Hindi (over and above the conventions of contemporary Bollywood melodrama) rather than an encounter with the Prakrit, the Pali, Greek and Aramaic that the Mauryan court lived in communicative terms. The dialogue between Aśoka and the film's female protagonist, the character Kaurwaki, in particular reveals this tendency, with greater preference going to poetic expression of personal emotion and romantic sentiment than administrative and diplomatic preoccupations that dominate Aśoka's actual inscriptions. There is, however, really no historical evidence to back up the romanticised version of Kaurwaki that the film makes the central focus of its narrative, and Aśoka's inscriptions as well as what we know from history speak almost largely to administrative policy and governance and not so much to the emperor's personal relationships, and the film's decision to centre romance over statecraft distorts the very aims of his empire.

But it is in the Kalinga War, the war's aftermath on its way to ending that the film suffers the most historical and intellectual distortions in representation. The war is shown in a very cinematic form - stylized slow-motion combat, exaggerated gore, overwrought emotionalism - that reduces one of the military and political great events of ancient India to a backdrop on which to dramatize personal change. More significantly, the film depicts Aśoka's acceptance of Dhamma thereafter as the result of an immediate illumination that occurs as one is shocked by the emotional impact of witnessing the destruction of the battlefield.

This representation is diametrically opposed to the academic consensus drawn by Romila Thapar, which has found that Aśoka's practice of Dhamma was a gradual process over several years based on philosophical contemplation, political calculation and administrative necessity, not the occurrence of some emotional crisis. The movie condenses this process into a purely rapid version, not only as one that historically cannot be accurate, but as one that distorts the essence of Dhamma itself, erases both the administrative and political aspects of it that Thapar's scholarship has proven necessary for a full understanding (Thapar 31). And indeed, the film's geographic purview is extremely limited to Magadha and Kalinga while fully neglecting the far northwestern reaches of the empire - the locations of present-day Afghanistan where many of Aśoka's edicts have been discovered - in addition to his engagements with southern kingdoms and his missionary campaigns to Sri Lanka, Central Asia and Southeast Asia.

Together these omissions reduce the scope and intricacy of one of the ancient world's great empires to the size of a personal drama.

The film's treatment of religion compounds this distortion. By recasting Aśoka's transformation as fully and immediately Buddhist in character, the film erases the religious pluralism that was among the most characteristic features of his true reign. As history in general makes plain, Aśoka's empire was a home to the followers of Buddhism, Brahmanism, Jainism and the Ājīvika tradition, and his directives cover patronage of various religious groups (Olivelle 226). The film's simplification of this pluralist landscape into a linear chronicle of Buddhist conversion yields a presentation of his empire as effectively non-secular-a caricature that flies in the face of the inclusive philosophy expressed in his own epigraphs.

Moreover, the film barely mentions Aśoka's monumental contribution to governance, infrastructure, economics and diplomacy - the actual dimensions of his reign that Kosambi and Goyal say are core to any credible historical understanding of his legacy. Road networks, trade policies, welfare schemes, legal changes, public health provisions, veterinary treatment and environmental conservation - all of this is documented in Aśoka's edicts - is conspicuously absent from the film's account (Goyal 58). Instead, the film substitutes personal drama and romantic melodrama with an image of the emperor that, while emotionally gripping, is historically impoverished.

Chakravartin Ashoka Samrat (2015-2016)

Chakravartin Ashoka Samrat, which ran from 2015 to 2016 on Colors TV, is the most enduring and popular televisual portrayal of Aśoka's life in the modern era. Although the series plays within the peculiarities of Indian prime-time historical drama as opposed to commercial cinema, its representational options in such practices mirror many of the same systematic patterns of distortion as pointed out in the study of Asoka (2001), and in some respects exacerbate and perpetuate those distortions in mythologisation and melodrama.

Its set design and architectural construction mirrors that of the film, with rich, decadent palace interiors populated by grand golden pillars; elaborate and ornate carvings; extravagant decoration that suggests the most significant changes later in medieval Indian history than the characteristic ornamental techniques used in Maurya, whereas Mauryan times often included larger building and architectural features. Battle scenes are set against generic open landscapes with heightened visual effects instead of the physically documented landscapes of Magadha and Kalinga, and the series too makes no reference to Aśoka's rock edicts, pillars or stupas -elements of his Dhamma's architecture that Lahiri's scholarship has posited as central to the material history of his rule.

The costume design itself adheres to the same anachronistic logic of the film, with characters in intricately embroidered garments and ornate jewellery worn by elaborate stylised hairdos and ostentatious crowns reminiscent of Rajput and Mughal court aesthetics rather than the functional and relatively simple attire of the Mauryan period. Like all the latter, the dialogues throughout the series are staged and modernised, with lavish, poetic monologues that privilege individual sentiment over governing politics and the narrative devolves in a plot twist completely ungrounded in historical fact, a plot that uses divine

and mythological references liberally.

Where the series differs most much from the film, however, is in its scale of story and approach to Aśoka's early life and the domestic politics of the Mauryan court. The series spends great deal of time on Aśoka's youth and adolescence, portraying the court of Bindusāra as a setting of elaborate and dramatically intensified political intrigue, personal rivalries, and love affairs, which are far removed from anything recorded in the historical record. This narrative approach - which Hall refers to, in his words, as 'encoding' a certain ideological model onto the historical substance - serves to make the narrative, the story of the Mauryan Empire, both personal and domestic, the history of the government and politics, into a family show according to the standards of Indian television (Hall 16). The military conquests of the series are shown in a similar mythologised mood, with extravagant fights and copious visual effects that give the proceedings a feel closer to fantasy epic than historical drama, granting the figure of Aśoka an almost supernatural martial grandeur that has no basis in the scholarly canon.

The way Aśoka's journey from warrior king to defender of Dhamma is represented in the series replicates, and amplifies, that very basic distortion of the movie. The adoption of Dhamma is depicted as a moment of epiphany of emotion, not a slow administrative and philosophical process as Thapar's work would have you believe. In short, this instant change is portrayed more as emotion and personal grief and psychological suffering than as reflective-thinking and administrative reform, and indeed mythologises Aśoka the way Rosenstone warned about- as a figure whose relevance is perceived more in emotional than in an intellectual or political sense. The same goes for the religious aspects of Aśoka's empire which the series flatten to an all-Buddhist perspective, omitting the Ājīvika, Jain and Brahmanical communities who are well-known in the epigraphic record, and representing the religion of the empire in a way that reflects more hagiography and less history.

Aśoka's governing practices, economic policies, welfare measures and diplomatic contacts - the aspects of his reign that Goyal contends to be indispensable in any serious and accurate account- largely disappear from the series' account, which largely focuses on personal conflicts and emotional suspense over the underlying structural realities of Mauryan government (Goyal 64).

Popular Representation and Public Perception

-Combined, the two case studies analysed in this paper illustrate a series of systematic and repetitive representational formations that have shaped - and, as evidenced by this paper, profoundly distorted - popular conception of Emperor Aśoka. Both productions render Aśoka's conversion from warrior to Dhamma king as an abrupt, emotionally charged epiphany - the antithesis of the slow, politically fraught transformation that Thapar's scholarship has delineated. Both homogenize the religious world-work of his empire in an overwhelmingly Buddhist context, obscuring the pluralism that was a major distinguishing and historically salient characteristic in his reign.

Both leave out the architectural, administrative and economic aspects of his legacy for personal drama, romance and martial spectacle. Both express the geographies, attire and the material environment of the Mauryan period through an anachronistic visual language borrowed from later eras of Indian history, re-

sulting in an aesthetic of ancient grandeur that is mythological rather than historical. And both invariably subordinate the political and administrative acumen of one of the most important rulers in the ancient world to the demands of emotional and romantic storytelling. These distortions are not just, it needs to be stressed, simply an example of the limited and technical nature of historical inaccuracy.

As Rosenstone's framework demonstrates, the question is not just whether a historical film or television series gets its facts straight or wrong, but whether its representational decisions honour the complexity and importance of its historical subject (Rosestone 59). In making Aśoka into an emotionally driven, romantically invested, and instantly transformed trope, both Asoka (2001) and Chakravartin Ashoka Samrat create a figure that is, of course, both dramatically more accessible and historically impoverished at once - a figure whose portrayal, in Hall's words, encodes a set of cultural assumptions about heroism, spirituality and personal redemption that are as much a matter of what popular entertainment deems palatable as anything to do with the Mauryan experience of India (Hall 26). The cumulative effect of these representational deciders on public historical consciousness is remarkable: for an audience of millions who have been exposed to Aśoka for the most part or exclusively through such productions, the mythologised image they make has effectively supplanted the more complicated, more fascinating and more historically accurate figure that scholarship has tried so hard to recuperate.

Conclusion

The public perception of Aśoka, shaped by movies and TV adaptations, is usually glossed over and misinterpreted. Such a sensationalized image obscures Aśoka's actual and, in several ways, intricate nature as a bureaucrat, philosopher and strategist and reduces one of the most remarkable figures of history to a demi-god of popular myth. Academic works, on the other hand, present a far more balanced and complex picture of Aśoka and detail the slow adjustments he made to his way of working, the inclusive vision which took in him as an administrator, and all the calculated political manoeuvring which secured one of the ancient world's greatest empires over four decades of his lifetime. The interplay between popular media's entertainment needs and academic demands reveals the need to place historical sources into a critical frame of reference so they do not serve to fabricate and entrench false narratives of history and society.

The examination of the picture of Aśoka through popular culture raises a question of universal interest to us, which is the dichotomy of fact and fiction: whether what we have is history or fiction. Although production upon mass release of plays like Asoka (2001) and Chakravartin Ashoka Samrat has undeniably popularized Aśoka's story to viewers who would have otherwise ignored it, the production also has promoted myths and simplifications that deviate dramatically from what the canon has taught people about Aśoka. In the eyes of Rosenstone, this tension is not confined to the sphere of Indian popular culture but is integral to the structural relationship between historical cinema and academic historiography more generally. The question it poses - of how much creative freedom you can legitimately exercise without misrepresenting historical truth indefinitely- is one that filmmakers, television producers and scholars in general ought to take seriously.

In the case of Aśoka it is the romanticised, sensationalised image(s) explored in this paper that has shifted public perception in ways a) that continually undermine historical accuracy in the service of entertainment for the public interest of the viewer and b) which at its core provides, at times, a partial and fundamentally misleading narrative. The simplified depictions of Aśoka as either a brutal, warrior king or as a compassionate Buddhist king fail to grasp the complex nature of his rule. The scholarly debates highlighted in this article – from Thapar's reading of the Dhamma as a vehicle of an imperial system of rule, to Kosambi's reading of the Dhamma as a product of structural economic constraint, to Goyal's insistence on the need to consider the socio-political context to the larger life of the Mauryan empire – signal that the historical Aśoka refuses to be boiled down to a static story or model. The administrative innovations, economic and social programs, and multi-faceted styles of government that marked his reign require an unprecedented level of popular representation that none of these case studies have managed to yield (Thapar 35).

Hall's observation that media representations are never neutral but always encode certain ideological paradigms is directly applicable to this case (that the popular cultural Aśoka is not merely an evaporation of the historical Aśoka but an image in process that is purposefully reconstructed in line with the commercial, cultural and ideological imperatives of the contemporary Indian entertainment media) (Hall 30). Such work demands to maintain a more careful equilibrium between historicity and artistic storytelling. Popular media need to avoid this form of open fictionalization that makes historical figures unidentifiable to the scholarship, while scholars must acknowledge that history can benefit from telling it in a way that engages the public at large.

One constructive step forward would be to create more collaboration between historians and filmmakers - in the way that we look at history as a process and not from the standpoint of purely a passing exercise (like having to quote "historical consultants", using archaeological evidence or conducting textual analysis). Such a partnership will lead to more vivid, multifaceted stories that respect the historical complexity and will somehow still touch with emotional and imagination a contemporary audience.

Greater historical representation is not just about discipline; it is about larger social value. A public with a more nuanced and more accurate grasp of society's past will be better prepared to engage in informed and critical debates regarding the relationship between history and the present. The better and more responsible way history is presented in popular culture will also help enrich more scholarly research, and public discourse.

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