

## **Cinematic Chronicles: Bhalji Pendharkar's Exploration of Royal Period of Maratha History through Films**

Nachiket B. Paradkar,

Assistant Professor, Department of History,

Chikitsak Samuha's Patkar-Varde College (Autonomous), Mumbai

nachiketparadkar2@gmail.com

### **ABSTRACT**

The Royal Period of Maratha History (1600-1707) saw the Marathas resisting established Deccan powers like the Adilshahi, Mughals, and exploitative sea powers in their pursuit of independence. This historical epoch was propelled forward by the growth of Maratha Historiography grounded in diligent study, as well as the abundance of folk tales prevalent in pockets of the Western Deccan, which served as inspiration for the creation of historical plays and films over the past two centuries. Bhalji Pendharkar emerged as a pioneer in bringing this era to a broader audience through cinema in the latter half of the 20th Century. While many of his historical films may not be readily available, those that continue to captivate audiences today. The inherent flaws common to all historical films are equally applicable to his productions. However, when compared to modern historical films set in the same period, Bhalji's works stand out significantly. This paper critically examines and evaluates Bhalji Pendharkar's history films - *Chhatrapati Shivaji* (1952), *Maharani Yesubai* (1954), and *Maratha Tituka Melavava* (1964) - to illuminate their themes, contemporary influences, and cinematic aesthetics, thereby uncovering their historical value.

**Keywords:** *Bhalji Pendharkar, Maratha History, Influences, Historical Value.*

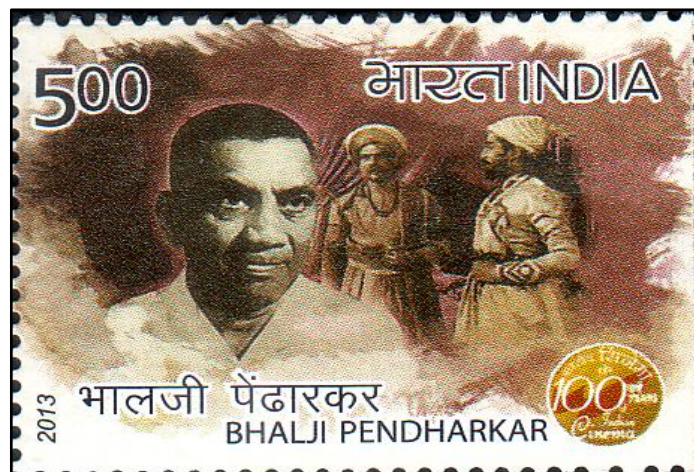
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### **Introduction**

The Royal Period of Maratha History, spanning from 1600 to 1707, stands as a testament to the resilience and determination of the Maratha people against formidable adversaries such as the Adilshahi, Mughals, and dominant sea powers. In this epoch of struggle for independence, the Marathas forged a distinct identity marked by valor and tenacity, laying the foundation for the Hindavi Swarajya in the Deccan region. This historical narrative, enriched by both scholarly historiography and vibrant folk tales, served as a wellspring of inspiration for creative endeavors, particularly in the realm of historical plays and films over the past two centuries. Among the pioneers who endeavored to bring this rich historical tapestry to a wider audience

through the medium of cinema, Bhalji Pendharkar stands out as a luminary figure. His cinematic oeuvre, comprising seminal 'history' works such as *Chhatrapati Shivaji* (1952), *Maharani Yesubai* (1954), and *Maratha Tituka Melavava* (1964), embodies a meticulous blend of historical authenticity, thematic depth, and cinematic artistry. Despite the scarcity of some of his films in the contemporary market, those that endure continue to captivate audiences, serving as a gateway to the glorious past of the Maratha Empire.

In the realm of history filmmaking, inherent flaws are an inevitable companion, and Bhalji Pendharkar's productions are no exception. Film critics and experts labelled his films as chauvinistic, and propagandist. (Rajadhyaksha & Paul, 1998, pp. 106, 176) However, when juxtaposed with modern counterparts depicting the same historical period, Pendharkar's works emerge as paragons of cinematic excellence, offering a compelling synthesis of historical accuracy and artistic vision. Thus, this research paper embarks on a critical examination and evaluation of Bhalji Pendharkar's historical films, delving into the nuances of his cinematic portrayal of the Royal Period of Maratha History. Through an exploration of Pendharkar's thematic choices, contemporary influences, and cinematic aesthetics, this study endeavors to unravel the historical value embedded within his cinematic narratives. By shedding light on the persona of Bhalji Pendharkar and his enduring ideas on history films' making, this paper seeks to illuminate the intersection of history, cinema, and cultural identity in the context of the Royal Period of Maratha History.



**Figure 1: Commemorative Stamp on Bhalji Pendharkar (2013)**

*(Source: Author's Personal Collection)*

## Methodology

This research employs a qualitative empirical research method to critically analyze Bhalji Pendharkar's history films—*Chhatrapati Shivaji* (1952), *Maharani Yesubai* (1954), and *Maratha Tituka Melavava* (1964)—within the context of Maratha history. A comprehensive literature review of scholarly works on Maratha history, cinematic studies, and Bhalji Pendharkar's filmography provides a foundational understanding of the subject matter. Secondly, a systematic analysis of the selected films is conducted, focusing on thematic elements, historical accuracy, ideological influences, and cinematic techniques. Comparative analysis is also employed to juxtapose Pendharkar's films with contemporary historical films set in the same period, thereby highlighting their strengths and weaknesses.

Additionally, hypothetical observation and critical interpretation are utilized to discern Pendharkar's underlying intentions and the interplay between historical facts and cinematic liberty in his works. The findings are synthesized to offer insights into Pendharkar's contribution and broader impact on cultural representations of the Royal Period of Maratha History.

## Bhalji Pendharkar: A Volunteer to Cinematographer

Bhalji Pendharkar, a Dadasaheb Phalke awardee (1991) was born in Kolhapur on May 02, 1898. After failing to complete matriculation, he embarked on a transformative journey across India from 1916 to 1925, during which he met influential figures such as Lokmanya Tilak, Atul Sen, and renowned socialist revolutionaries including Chandra Shekhar Azad, Bhagat Singh, and Rajguru. Meanwhile, he also served in Maratha Light Infantry during the First World War years. In 1925, he ventured into the realm of cinema, marking his directorial and scriptwriting debut with the silent movie *Bajirao Mastani*, produced by the Sharda Film Company (Pendharkar, 1993, p. 70). His film *Shyam Sundar* (1932) was India's first silver jubilee film in the history of Indian Cinema. Transitioning into the 1930s, Pendharkar further solidified his presence in the film industry, serving as a director and producer at Kolhapur Cinetone in Kolhapur. In 1945, he bought Kolhapur Cinetone and renamed it as Jayprabha Studio.

During this period, Pendharkar became embroiled in the tumultuous socio-political landscape of the era, witnessing communal riots and aligning himself with organizations such as the

Hindu Mahasabha under V. D. Savarkar and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangha (RSS) under Dr. Hedgewar and Mr. Golwalkar. Influenced by Savarkar's ideologies of *Desha* and *Dharma*, Pendharkar played a significant role in the Kolhapur Shuddhi movement, the 1945 Shivaji statue movement, and Real Shivaji Book Case (1946) (Pendharkar, 1993, pp. 102, 123-132). His association with Hindu Mahasabha and RSS resulted in adverse consequences, including the destruction of his Jayprabha studio following Gandhi's assassination in 1948. Despite facing setbacks, Pendharkar remained undeterred in his cinematic pursuits. Notably, the recording of his film 'Chhatrapati Shivaji' was destroyed during the upheaval, necessitating a reshoot. These experiences not only shaped Pendharkar's personal and professional journey but also underscored his resilience and unwavering commitment to his craft amidst challenging circumstances.

### **Ideological Influences on Bhalji and Their Cinematic Representation**

Cinema serves as a powerful mirror reflecting the nuances and complexities of society, capturing its aspirations, struggles, and cultural ethos. Bhalji Pendharkar recognized this significance, utilizing cinema as a medium to mirror and illuminate the socio-political landscape of his time, thereby fostering awareness and dialogue among audiences. In his article, he argues:

In times of impoverishment, talkies will serve as the equivalent of fifty lecturers and hundreds of demonstrators, efficiently disseminating high-impact information across vast territories at minimal cost and labor..Within one or two nights, talkies can effectively convey essential knowledge alongside entertainment, offering a swift and accessible means of education and enlightenment to the masses. (Pendharkar, 1993, pp. 224-225).

Hence, his cinemas are the best sources for learning about his ideas about an independent India. While delving into the ideological and contemporary influences shaping Bhalji's 'history' films, it becomes apparent that he espoused nationalist sentiments, aligning closely with the socialist revolution and Savarkar's Hindutva, and lending his support to political movements like Samyukta Maharashtra Movement in 1950s (Welankar, 2018). The convictions permeate the introductory plates of his films, where India is exalted as *Akhand Bharat*; and Samyukta Maharashtra, comprising the Marathi-speaking regions of Western India, is lauded as a holy land of peasants, saints, and warriors. (Pendharkar, 1952, 00:03:17) Interestingly, all his films

started with Maharashtra Geet. Bhalji's reverence for Shivaji is palpable as he positions himself as a devout follower of the iconic figure, particularly evident in his treatment of the theme in the movie *Chhatrapati Shivaji*. He was critical of an ideological current that dismissed Chhatrapati Shivaji as an outdated feudal lord, advocating instead for a reevaluation of Shivaji's legacy as a visionary leader and symbol of resistance against oppression. In his address in Chhatrapati Shivaji Statue inauguration ceremony at Rajaram Rifles in 1945, Bhalji said:

Remembering Shri Shivaraya is not going back in time as some people consider themselves progressive; but remembering Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj's diplomatic politics and his achievements for the benefit of society (is a progressive step). (Pendharkar, 1993, p. 134)

He considered his films as not just a luxury of art or entertainment, but the worship of the epoch-making perfect man (Chhatrapati Shivaji), by his devotee (Pendharkar, 1952, 00:00:30). Through dialogues and scenes in films such as *Chhatrapati Shivaji* and *Maharani Yesubai*, Shivaji is elevated to a divine status, deeply ingraining this perception in the minds of ordinary Maharashtrians. Despite this, Bhalji refrained from denigrating Shivaji's adversaries, notably Aurangzeb, underscoring his commitment to historical nuance. Highly influenced by V. D. Savarkar's Hindutva, he underscored the trinity of *Dev* (divinity), *Desha* (patriotism), and *Dharma* (righteousness), a recurring motif that features prominently in discussions surrounding *Maharashtra Dharma*, further enriching the thematic depth of his cinematic narratives (Pendharkar, 1993, pp. 82-83). On the other hand, Bhalji's cherished values of purity of conduct, patriotism, valour and sacrifice are present in all his films. The test of a man's character was the vital subject of all stories.

### **Narrative Innovation**

Within these historical films, numerous factual inaccuracies can be identified. However, amidst these discrepancies, certain scenes such as the Afzal Khan incident from *Chhatrapati Shivaji* and the portrayal of Sambhaji in *Maharani Yesubai*, introduce novel perspectives to traditional history. In the depiction of the Afzal Khan incident, Bhalji illustrated Shivaji pursuing Khan as during his attempt to flee the camp after sustaining injuries, ultimately beheading him with a *dandpatta* (Pendharkar, 1952, 01:09:54). Conversely, the traditional narrative sourced from Bakhari literature suggests that it was Sambhaji Kavaji, one of Shivaji's soldiers, who delivered

the fatal blow to Khan. Bhalji's portrayal of this event is based on the account presented in Shivbharat, an overlooked historical source authored by Paramananda, a contemporary of Shivaji.



**Figure 2: Chhatrapati Shivaji and Afzal Khan Incident**

*(Source: Chhatrapati Shivaji, 1952, 01:09:20)*

Furthermore, until the 1960s, historians largely regarded Sambhaji, Shivaji's elder son, as an insignificant figure in both lineage and rule. Chitnis Bakhar, an early 19<sup>th</sup> Century period text was the only source for the life sketch of Chhatrapati Sambhaji. Based on Bakhar and folklores, Marathi plays like V. V. Khare's *Gunotkarsha* (1885), Ram Ganesh Gadkari's *Rajsanyas* (1922), V. H. Aundhkar's *Bebandshahi* (1924) and N. K. Sonsukhar's *Thoratanchi Kamala* (1951) portrayed Chhatrapati Sambhaji as a pride follower of Hindutva, but a worthless prince, womanizer and indulged in vices. Bhalji had written a script for the film *Thoratanchi Kamala* (1941) based on a prevalent folklore about Prince Sambhaji and Kamala Thorat. In *Maharani Yesubai* (1954), Bhalji sheds light on Sambhaji's enigmatic personality. Utilizing Chitnis Bakhar as a primary reference, Bhalji carried forward the portrayal of Sambhaji as prone to indulgence in vices and under the complete control of Kavi Kalash. Despite this portrayal, Bhalji endeavored to justify Sambhaji's actions and praises him for possessing a conscience as a king and champion of Hinduism. Through skillful manipulation of limited historical information, he crafted a narrative celebrating the courage and wisdom of Maharani Yesubai, whose astute decision-making ultimately safeguarded Swarajya from the clutches of Aurangzeb.



**Figure 3: Chhatrapati Sambhaji handing over Shikke-Katyar to Maharani Yesubai**  
(Source: *Maharani Yesubai*, 1954, 00:33:00)

*Maratha Tituka Melavava* (1964) delves into the history of the Maval region preceding the advent of a young Shivaji's quest for Swarajya. Combining elements from historical sources with imaginative storytelling, the film portrays pivotal figures such as Jijabai and Dadoji Kondadev, whose influence shaped Shivaji's upbringing and ideals. It was the first major attempt to direct film in the pre-Shivaji period. Central to the narrative is the depiction of the plight of the ryots (subjects), subjected to harassment by local hereditary officials and Adilshahi subehdars (provincial governors). The film illustrated the opposition faced by Shivaji from local Maratha officials entrenched in the existing power structures. As the storyline unfolds, *Maratha Tituka Melavava* culminates with the dramatic capture of Torna, also known as Prachandgad. Notably, in the absence of concrete historical information, the script maintains a simplicity devoid of exaggeration, a testament to Bhalji's commitment to historical accuracy and integrity.



**Figure 4: Young Shivaji with his colleagues taking an oath of Swarajya**

*(Source: Maratha Tituka Melavava, 1964, 00:11:58)*

### **Bhalji's films, Maharashtra Dharma and Hindutva**

Justice M. G. Ranade's discourse (1900) underscored the pivotal role of saints in laying the foundation for Swarajya (pp. 143-144), a theme echoed by Bhalji in his cinematic narratives. In his films, Pendharkar accentuated the influence of saints, particularly Samarth Ramdas and his disciples, in galvanizing socio-religious consciousness among the masses. He promoted unity against injustice, transcending parochial identities through the lens of *Maharashtra Dharma*, a concept championed by Samarth Ramdas in 17<sup>th</sup> Century CE. This recurring motif established a profound Guru-Shishya relationship between Chhatrapati Shivaji and Samarth Ramdas, deeply ingrained in the psyche of Maharashtrians.



**Figure 5: Samarth Ramdas and Jijabai convincing Chhatrapati Shivaji for coronation**

*(Source: Chhatrapati Shivaji, 1952, 02:31:10)*



Amidst the looming Partition, Bhalji voiced criticism against the blind faith in Hindu-Muslim unity, highlighting the dangers of altruistic tendencies and moronic laziness prevalent in society (Pendharkar, 1993, pp. 195-198). He cautioned against sacrificing one's own interests for the sake of others, advocating for a more pragmatic approach to communal relations during a tumultuous period in Indian history. This approach is reflected in a scene from *Chhatrapati Shivaji* where Chhatrapati Shivaji asks Muslim fakirs to stay in Swarajya without harming interests of Hindus (Pendharkar, 1952, 01:28:17).



**Figure 6: Chhatrapati Shivaji in a conversation with Muslim Fakirs**

*(Source: Chhatrapati Shivaji, 1952, 01:28:17)*

Moreover, fictional characters served as indispensable conduits for bridging historical gaps within Pendharkar's narratives. Rather than detracting from the authenticity of the historical context, these characters are employed to critique societal tendencies towards betrayal, helplessness, and complacency. From an aesthetic standpoint, Pendharkar's films offer insights into his life philosophy, encapsulated by the famous Marathi proverb '*Sadhi Rahani, Uchcha Vicharsarani,*' advocating for simplicity intertwined with elevated thinking. His commitment to historical integrity is evident in his refusal to gloss over the shortcomings of his contemporaries, including the unjust conduct of Maratha jagirdars in pre-Shivaji times and Brahmin and Maratha nobles' opposition to Shivaji's coronation. This loyalty to accuracy must be because of his close collaboration with Dr. Balkrishna, a history professor at Rajaram College, Kolhapur (Pendharkar, 1993, p. 126). Leveraging their amicable relationship, Bhalji

seamlessly integrates historical facts with folk narratives, enriching the cinematic portrayal of Maratha history.

Bhalji's films vividly depict his vision of *Surajya*, a welfare state inspired by the values embodied by Chhatrapati Shivaji. Rooted in principles of socialism, his narrative portrays a society where everyone enjoys equal voice and opportunity, guided by the enduring ethos of *Dev*, *Desha*, and *Dharma*. Through cinematic storytelling, Pendharkar championed the idea of a just and equitable society, echoing the noble aspirations of Shivaji's reign.

### **Conclusion**

Bhalji Pendharkar's 'history' films is a golden saga in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Marathi history cinematography. The trinity *Dev*, *Desha* and *Dharma* became key identity of his films and developed its place among masses. His films were distinguished by their simplicity in aesthetics, providing audiences with visually captivating yet uncomplicated cinematic experiences. A distinctive hallmark of Bhalji's films lies in his cinematographic acumen, which seamlessly blends historical authenticity with cinematic storytelling. He adeptly critiqued contemporary vices, utilizing fictional characters and narratives to highlight societal shortcomings and provoke introspection among viewers. Moreover, he refused to conceal historical loopholes, opting instead to incorporate them into his narratives authentically. Additionally, Bhalji's films were characterized by catchy dialogues, which contributed to their overall impact and memorability, enriching the cinematic portrayal of Maratha history. In conclusion, while acknowledging the inherent weaknesses of melodrama, ideological influences, and factual inaccuracies in history filmmaking, it is evident that Bhalji Pendharkar's cinematic contributions transcend these limitations.

Despite facing similar challenges, Pendharkar's films stand out for their meticulous projection of historical facts and the adept use of fiction to cultivate societal awareness among common Maharashtrians. His unique approach to cinema, viewing it as a medium for historical education rather than mere entertainment or profit, underscores his commitment to preserving the cultural identity of Maharashtra. Moreover, Pendharkar's steadfast dedication to maintaining a balance between cinematic liberty and historical accuracy sets a precedent for contemporary filmmakers. By resisting staunch ideological influences and prioritizing meticulous research and storytelling, Pendharkar ensures that his films resonate authentically

with audiences, elevating them above present-day historical productions. To revive the legacy of history filmmaking pioneered by Bhalji Pendharkar, modern filmmakers must embrace his ethos and emulate his rational approach. By understanding the philosophy behind Pendharkar's cinematic endeavors and striving for a similar blend of authenticity and artistic expression, they can contribute to the preservation and celebration of Maharashtra's rich historical tapestry for generations to come.

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