



THE UNTOLD STORY

Supriya Nair on the myth and magic of MS Dhoni

If ever an Indian cricketer merited a splashy, colourful biopic, it is Mahendra Singh Dhoni. In the event, it was very helpful of the company that represents him – the controversial Rhiti Sports Management – to have floated a major Hindi movie production last year, featuring a big-ticket director and a host of stars. Filming for *MS Dhoni: The Untold Story* commenced, following delays, this summer: if all goes well, it will be released before we altogether lose Dhoni the athlete to retirement.

Dhoni has played with many cricketers whose reputation precedes them. Their legends have been made on television screens across India, and many are at home on the small screen, both on and off the field: think of Virat Kohli, the epitome of a face made for Pepsi commercials. Of them all, perhaps only Virender Sehwag came close to Dhoni in embodying the movie-star qualities that go well with the requirements of current cinema: roots in the Hindi-knowing north of the country; a particular kind of male ruggedness very

popular at the box office these days; and the ability to make the bad guys – and the audiences’ – bones rattle from a distance. (How, in retrospect, could these two men not have disliked each other?)

In the mind’s eye, the Dhoni movie unfolds as a series of thrilling moments: the overnight car chase to catch up with a zonal team that selected him for its Duleep Trophy squad but had left him behind; the heroic set of the young Dhoni’s jaw as he trains alone in a stadium in Kharagpur, a Batman whose secret nobody else must know; the gunslinger squint of the eyes before he performs his first helicopter shot; and hordes of women chasing him, since art must imitate life. I’ve chased him myself, and am available to consult on the nuances of the operation.

There is such heart-stopping drama in this spectacle that it would be easy to entirely ignore the shadow play that has accompanied Dhoni’s public career – a grim, grainy story about

white-collar crime with cops in it, as well as gangsters who double up as businessmen. This alternative narrative would unfold in the dingy rooms of investigative bureaus, where the police try to pinpoint a source of the corruption that has hollowed Indian cricket from the inside out. Its close-ups would linger not only on Dhoni’s prematurely grey hair, which has about it something of an honourable war wound, but also on the sweat discreetly beading his brow as he sits under a slow-spinning fan and tells an official that he doesn’t know who his IPL team’s boss really is. With some poetic licence, it could even be a courtroom thriller.

Even the suggestion that the rot engulfing the BCCI and its one-time overlord, N Srinivasan, may have touched Dhoni is liable to hurt and upset many fans. This is, at least partly, because many of us have accepted the stunning *trompe l’oeil* of cricket administration: we now watch, read and write about the facade as though it has any basis in reality. Of course, such illusions are easy to maintain in sport. The act of play itself is so viscerally experienced in body and brain. To experience that even vicariously, as spectators, is to have our notion of reality changed. We don’t recover from that easily.

This is why fans forgive the unforgivable more often than not. Doping, fixing, cheating: these are things that contravene the fundamental pact between players and their supporters. Off the field, there is battery and assault – a specialty of male athletes. Yet baseball, cycling, soccer and American football survive and thrive in spite of sportsmen committing these crimes.

We are so convinced that the rules on the field are different from the rules of the real world that even their breaking does not deter us. As long as we can maintain the belief that these people attempt to be their best and truest selves out in the middle, this universe remains habitable.

Dhoni has been more convincing than most cricketers of his time: indeed, the genius of Dhoni – the thing that made us all giddy when he first arrived on the national scene – was his air of authenticity. He arrived amid a cricketing generation from small towns and suburbs, that made it to the national team without any great historical advantages. For those whose only frame of reference for what a cricket hero should look like were the legates of Shivaji Park and St Joseph’s School, everything about Dhoni was as beautiful as it was surprising – the unpretentious speech and manners, the equanimity, the comfort in his own skin (and hair, unspeakable as it was in his sleaze-metal phase).

The transformation of cricket from a primarily metropolitan sport to a game that represented the “real India” – a term much in fashion in those years – had gathered momentum in the new millennium. On cricket fans from small towns such as his own birthplace, Dhoni’s effect was incalculable. It was not simply that he came from a little-known city in Bihar (now Jharkhand), but the sense that he could never have grown as he did – so unorthodox, yet so sufficient unto himself – in the hothouse capitals of Mumbai or Bengaluru. Perhaps this is true, perhaps not. Yet it is telling that Sehwag’s origins in the supposedly rough-and-tumble



environs of Najafgarh have received far more credit for his persona than Ranchi or the South-Eastern Railways ever got for Dhoni.

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I wonder if it is a coincidence that one of the things we know for certain about Dhoni's intellectual preoccupations is his obsession with military history. When I think of him training alone in that Kharagpur stadium, I can't help but think of other strains of sports history in modern India: of hockey and football and athletics, whose most glorious moments came thanks to people born or made in the country's dustbowls. Many of those early Olympians and World Cup winners migrated to the centre of national consciousness thanks to their associations with the Indian armed forces that fed, trained and sponsored them.

In a sport whose genetic make-up is deeply marked by the patronage of princes and the social aspirations of merchants, Dhoni brought in an air of the regiment team, a set-up in which birth and education were arguably superseded by a certain disdain for individual identity. What mattered here was something more fundamental: character, will, something in a man that could be subordinated to a bigger goal. I don't say that he ever came across as a grunt; just as a man who would never mistake the pointing finger for the moon. It is this stuff – this sense of proportion that drives us crazy about the heroes of military biopics and martial arts dramas – from which the Dhoni movie of our dreams derives its quality.

Two major sports movies released in India in recent years were based on the true stories of regiment athletes. One was the gritty story of Paan Singh Tomar – an army man who distinguished himself in steeplechase running but went on to become a bandit back in his birthplace in the socially conflicted Chambal Valley, and died a grizzly, dishonourable death. The other, glitzier story was that of Milkha Singh, the partition refugee and orphan who went on to become a world-class sprinter, just missing a podium finish in the 1956 Olympics.

A third might join them soon. One of India's biggest film producers has optioned the story of India's hockey legend, Dhyan Chand. Widely acknowledged as among the sport's best-ever, and one of India's greatest athletes, Dhyan Chand was a major in the Indian Army who claimed one of his three gold medals under Hitler's beady eye in Berlin 1936. Few now know what he looked like. There are apparently only two statues of him in India: at the mouth of the stadium named after him by India Gate in Delhi, and another in the small town of Jhansi where he grew up. This is exactly the sort of hero someone like Dhoni might idolise and yearn to emulate.

Track and field sports in India have a particularly fraught relationship with official sports administration; Indian sports movies are almost always about heroic athletes having to bypass Indians in order to find national glory. Both *Paan Singh Tomar* and *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag* are vastly different in their scope and quality, but both illuminate the frustrations of belonging to a time and place in which

reality simply does not keep up with ambition. Both films were released during an extended moment of public outrage over evidence of widespread corruption in government, and both films spoke to the contemporary anxieties of Indians as much as to the deficiencies of the bad old days.

It all seems very different from Indian cricket – a game buoyed by the stupendous amounts of revenue it generates, the multilateral, and sometimes competing, interests in the game's bureaucracy, and the fervid love and attention of a huge number of fans. Yet at the game's heart is the same decadence that animates Olympic officials who wheedle their way onto international trips, or hockey administrators whose ego regularly outstrips every other concern for their teams. The shadow of this corruption has fallen on generations of players, including those from the one just before Dhoni's. In retrospect, the hope that the real India would be able to play real cricket now seems hollow.

Those with the inside track on Indian cricket often use this history to argue that any sins committed are born of circumstance: to survive in international cricket, you must do what its masters demand of you. Better to stick around so you can prove your critics wrong a few more times; allow fans to wail and gnash their teeth at you for not retiring sooner, all the better to regret it when you do say your last farewell; delight a few more people, and feel the best you can about where you ended up, and how far it is from where you started.

A man with Dhoni's commitment to emotional moderation may well have wondered whether obscurity – a dusty statue in his hometown – might not have been a better alternative. But perhaps his last playing days are really meant to reveal that his breathtaking capacity for stoicism has always contained a tendency to inaction and an unwillingness to change, both on and off the field. Suffice to say it would be hard to write a happy ending to a film about that, and Dhoni would never be its hero.

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