

Runs and romances of Dhoni

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ROMANCE: The film also elaborates on a rarely spoken chapter from Dhoni's life, his first love.



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By **Gautaman Bhaskaran**

It is never easy to make a biopic of one who is still breathing. And if that one happens to be a legend, the task of pushing pictures into motion and movement is all the more difficult. It must have called for a lot of pluck for Neeraj Pandey to have helmed a film on Indian cricketer and captain of limited overs Mahendra Singh Dhoni, who — like the Tamil superstar Rajinikanth's early tryst as a bus conductor in Bengaluru — began his life as a railway ticket examiner in Kharagpur, three hours away from Kolkata.

And with the game of 22 players — made popular by the British in the Indian subcontinent who thought it could be an excellent way of warming themselves under the sun in the cold winter months — now a maddening craze in the country, Pandey must have had the shivers when he stepped into the field to make Dhoni: The Untold Story.

But, Pandey by steering clear of controversies in his work has probably saved himself from freezing. To begin with, he told me in the course of a telephone conversation the other day that he would describe his movie as an "inspiring story" rather than as a biopic.

More importantly, he has not mentioned (or just about in the passing) some of the allegations against Dhoni: IPL spot-fixing, rift with Virendra Sehwag and Gautam Gambhir and his steps to remove Saurav Ganguly, Rahul Dravid and VVS Laxman reportedly because of their lazy fielding.

Pandey concentrates on Dhoni's steely resolve to succeed, and this meant going against his father's wish to see him comfortably settled in a government job. And this part has been narrated with splendid ease, and runs almost parallel to what actually happened in the

sportsman's early life in Ranchi, which was then in Bihar. There are no dramatic exaggerations, no frills, but a controlled style, which also shows his great batting prowess. He is a hard hitter, an attacking batsman whose 'helicopter' swings have been an animated talking point.

Mahe, as Dhoni (portrayed by Sushant Singh Rajput) was endearingly called by his friends and family of a father (who was a water pump operator in Ranchi in the 1980s when Mahendra was born), a mother and an elder sister, had a struggling boyhood — when his interest was clearly not cricket. It was football, and in one of the earliest scenes from the film (which is three hours plus), a school coach, Banerjee (played by Rajesh Sharma), chides Dhoni when he tries pushing the cricket ball away — like in the game of football — rather than catching it.

Of course, like the coach, who was smart enough to see the immense potential in the boy and whose passion for cricket was unquestionable, Dhoni had other well-wishers, like, for example, some members in the Board of Cricket Control of India (N Srinivasan, a controversial president of the Board, was reportedly one) and talent hunters, who at one point in time, decide to concentrate on B or smaller cities. And Ranchi came into their view, and with it Dhoni.

But the budding cricketer's travails were far from over. In a nation where parents are obsessed with examination results and careers confined to medicine or engineering or IT, Dhoni's father, essayed by Anupam Kher, is really apprehensive about his son's interest in cricket, let alone a life in the game.

Later, when Dhoni completes his formal education (in one instance, he finishes each of his examination papers with an hour to go so that he can catch a train to a neighbouring town for cricket practice), he is pushed into a job with the Indian Railway. As a ticket examiner in Kharagpur, he has to literally run between two platforms to meet the guards of different trains, and also collect fines from ticketless travellers. Such daily grind leaves him with little energy to practise the game after work, and one fine rain-drenched day, he boards a train from Kharagpur and returns home to Ranchi to a father who is distressed at the turn of events. "But you should not have left your job," he says.

The movie is full of such memorable moments. I was also really floored by the gestures of some of Dhoni's friends (who were not well-to-do either), who chip in with money when he has to travel to Agartala for state-level selections. In fact, they drive Dhoni from Ranchi to Kolkata through the night so that he can take the morning flight to Agartala. But bad luck, he misses it.

The film also elaborates on a rarely spoken chapter from Dhoni's life — about his first love, Priyanka (Disha Patani), who dies tragically in a road accident on Valentine's Day. Their first meeting is interesting. She has a seat next to his on a plane, and is smitten by cricketer Sachin Tendulkar (also on board). Without the faintest idea about who the man next to her is, she pleads with Dhoni to get her Tendulkar's autograph. It is only later she realises that the man is Dhoni.

Some years on, history repeats when Dhoni meets Sakshi (Kiara Advani), who similarly fails to recognise him at the lobby of a star hotel in Kolkata. As part of the hotel's trainee staff, she demands his identity card when he loses his room key. What follows is breathtakingly beautiful. We see Sakshi standing outside Dhoni's door after a while with a sheepish smile and handful of flowers. That they went on to marry is what we all know.

In fact, much of what is seen on screen is well known. So how does the title fit in? I would think that the Priyanka part has been rarely written about. But as Pandey said, "Dhoni felt that it was time we spoke about it". This segment turns out to be romantically riveting, although some friends of mine who are cricket addicts felt that Pandey should have struck to on drives and off drives rather than Dhoni's romantic relationships.

I do not agree with this. Pandey by including these has made his work richer and immensely satisfying. Yes, Dhoni's magnificent sixers and other knocks were terrific, and the romance pushed the runs to dramatic digits.

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