Padmaavat: the epic Indian blockbuster

Posted on



Painting illustrating the set and artistic direction of one of the most important scenes in the temple of Chittor

Amidst much controversy in India, Padmavati, retitled as Padmaavat, was released on the silver screens after intense discussion that created immense interest in the story even before its launch. The story is an epic, set in 14th century India that narrates a tale of love, pain and courage. Having watched Padmaavat in Sri Lanka, it is apparent that this is more than a movie, where elaborate and detailed production designs as well as breathtaking cinematography have created an exceptional experience that transcends the viewer through time and space.

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Photo courtesy Subrata Chakraborty



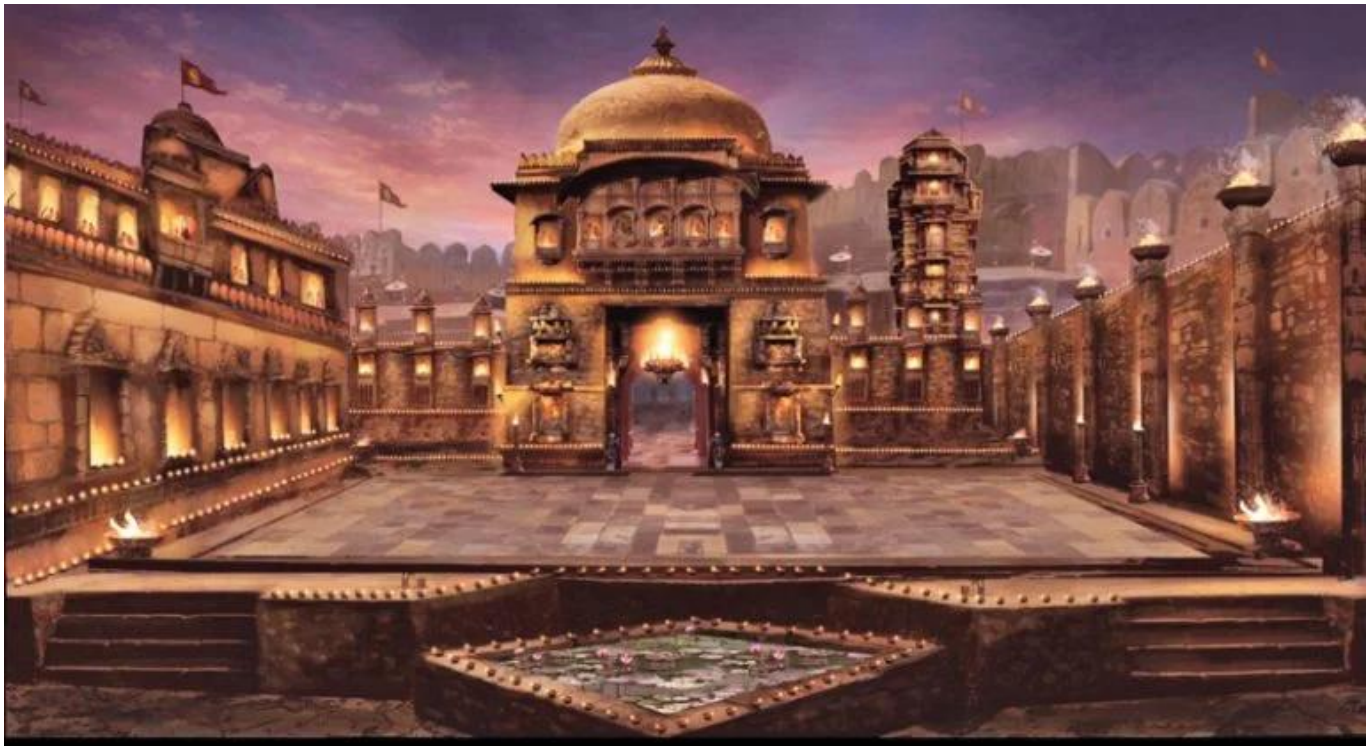


For Subrata Chakraborty and Amit Ray, the production designers of the movie, it was essential to create an authentic look and feel that enhanced the cinematic experience. The first task assigned to them by Sanjay Leela Bhansali, the director of Padmaavat, was to design a set for an elaborate dance scene for which they did 30 drawings in three days. Impressed with what they had created, the director tasked the duo to design and create all the sets for Padmaavat.

As Subrata Chakraborty and Amit Ray are both Fine Arts graduates, their entire team too consisted of artists and not a single architect. Therefore, the project and the research that it entailed was a much enjoyable and educational endeavour. Pre-production work was done over a period of three months. The challenge was that there was hardly any material available for that particular time period. In the case of Chittor, the actual fort had been demolished over time and what could be found was a few pillars and other remnants of architecture that had stood the test of time. Therefore, Subrata, Amit and their team referred to paintings and ancient books from the 16th century, which were in relatively good condition. While this provided them the inspiration to draw and to build the entire Chittor fort, Subrata and Amit stress that the structure is an imaginary depiction where they have attempted to make it accurate in terms of colour and architecture as practically possible.

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The Chittor Fort was inspired by 15th-17th century architecture and also drew inspiration from Ajanta and Ellora, which had similar architecture, pillars, colour and texture. Yellow and red were used for Chittor and ample lighting was provided to give the required brightness to the set. Rough cut stone, wooden carvings and architecture are very much Indian with various textures created with colour.



Set design for the elaborate ‘Ghoomar’ dance scene

Rani Padmavati and Ratan Singh’s chamber is majestic and beautiful to the eye. Mirrors were used to give the special effect and the walls and the interior were painstakingly created with great detail. The director had always emphasided that the sets should feel real and natural and thus during a visit to see the royal chamber Sanjay Leela Bhansali had, while admiring the beauty of the set, wanted marble to be used for the floors. Thus, creating an authentic look. In its entirety Chittor is regal and reflects the stature of Padmavati and Ratan Singh. This chamber was built in 45 days. The mandhir or darbar of Ratan Singh, similar to the entire Fort, is exquisitely Indian.

Jalaluddin’s fort, which is the first visual of the movie, has Afghanistan and Moroccan design and architecture. Red stones and mud textures were utilized, and the same feel was created in Alauddin Khilji’s fort and palace in Delhi though darker

colours such as royal blue, vermilion red, green and pale yellow were used as well. Subrata and Amit say that creating Alauddin’s chamber as well as the buildings of the Khilji dynasty where the Sultan’s Palace was the key, were challenging as the architecture was not Indian. Extensive research was done and the ancient Afghanistan drawings as well as manuscripts were referred to. Alauddin’s darbar was created in this manner and built within a month. There is very much an Afghanistan and Persian feel with rough textures. Pillars, walls and even the throne were rough cut. All structures and elements were in darker shades. The production designers experimented with the Indian cotton cloth known as malmal cloth to draw and create beautiful Afghanistan designs when creating these sets.

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The jungle and cave temples of the Kingdom of Singhal (Sri Lanka) entailed a different thinking process. While there was a possibility of filming the movie in an actual rainforest in India, due to logistical issues this was not practical. Therefore, the director had wanted Subrata and Amit to create a jungle that was magical. This was a very challenging task for the duo as well as required much research. They had to make sure that the jungle was authentic while also being dreamlike. Although all sets were designed by referring to various material available from the period, Subrata and Amit stress that ultimately all sets were done in their own way. Thus, when creating the jungle they used the Rudraksha tree, which looks out of this world in terms of its shape and structure. Furthermore, they researched extensively into the Sri Lankan Buddhist cave temples and recreated these in the sets with serene statues, sculptures and beautiful paintings. As Sri Lanka is a peaceful and Buddhist country, they used subtle and soft colours and textures.

Though the Sri Lankan identity was maintained it was not merely a recreation, but had been given their design style as well. Creating this set had been an interesting process for the team, where 15 artists worked day and night to build the Kingdom of Singhal, which took one month and ten days to complete.



Lighting and colour was used to create the identity of the set

In general, pigment colours were used instead of paint so that the required textures were created. The texture was a very important aspect as it brought out various elements of the architecture. Furthermore, once a set was completed, the filming would be done and then the team would move onto the next design. As Subrata and Amit are both artists, the director always preferred to see their designs as hand drawings. As such the duo created beautiful and detailed drawings of the sets. They used only their laptops when required and while technology supported their work it was not essential as the entire team could draw and paint.

The role of the director of photography (DoP) or the cinematographer is no small task. It is his responsibility to ensure that the various scenes reflect the mood and flow of the story. Lighting and framing are important aspects that highlight production designs as well. Sudeep Chatterjee, DoP, explains that the manner in which Sanjay Leela Bhansali works is that he gives the script and wants the person to read, absorb and interpret it in their own way. While he has a very clear idea of what he wants from the film, he does not share his views immediately as he does not want to influence the thinking of his team. Even for the director, his ideas are continuously changing and evolving, as collaborators the team had to be very sharp to identify the changes that he required.

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Three vastly different worlds had to be captured on camera. As such in terms of cinematography, the Kingdom of Singhal was very unique. It was a dreamlike far away land from which Padmavati came from. Therefore, the lighting, framing and timing had to reflect this magical and peaceful place where the audience could see the entire area and also feel the Buddhist ideology. The world of Chittor, was exuberant, grand and romantic, whereas the world of Alauddin Khilji was very dark, raw and at the same time very attractive. The challenge was to integrate such diverse settings into one cinematographic language so that the film had a coherent look and feel. However, Sudeep says that this happened naturally.

Wide angles and long shots were a key feature in the cinematography as the idea was to show a world that the audience had not seen previously. Sudeep says, while telling the story, it is also important to see what is happening around and also the environment. The movie is set in medieval India, therefore if the DoP felt that a shot should be held on to a longer time period, he would do so, as if the movie or shots are edited too fast, then the finer details of the film such as the sets and costumes or even expressions are missed. It’s not only the actors that tell the story, the surroundings and movements in the background narrate the story too.

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Sudeep explains that in today’s world where everything is moving very fast, it is essential to take things slowly and enjoy each scene. Therefore, the challenge in this type of movie is that it is supposed to give the viewer a grand cinematographic experience. While that is fine it is important to remember that the movie is narrating a story, which should be the focus. Everyone working on the movie has to keep that in mind. The sets, costumes and actors may be beautiful with great cinematography, but eventually the story has to come out. This is an important aspect where the entire team needs to support the director in creating that moment. When a master director works, he brings together all these diverse

aspects together. He tells everyone to interpret the story and their work in their own way and he brings it all perfectly together to create a masterpiece.

In Padmaavat, the movie inspired by the epic poem written by Sufi poet Malik Muhammad Jayasi, all elements come together brilliantly under the direction of Sanjay Leela Bhansali, whom Subrata Chakraborty, Amit Ray and Sudeep Chatterjee describe as excellent and on another level in Indian cinema.

