Social Impact of Indian Cinema – An Odyssey from Reel to Real

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Abstract

The Indian Cinema has unveiled significantly in the recent years, by not restricting itself to just being a source of mere entertainment, but, by experimenting to stride towards showcasing social and responsible cinema" thereby having a stronger impact on the masses. Slowly but steadily the film fraternity is vouching on social issues and is ready to take the ordeal to create awareness amongst the audience. However, a major chunk of the movie makers still follow the traditional movie making formula which may have adverse bearings on the audiences. The research paper aims to cover the holistic effects of Indian cinema on movie buffs through a discussion and box office success of certain movies belonging to realistic cinema. The objective of the paper is to applaud the social initiatives taken by the cinema highlighting the success of the ever evolving showbiz industry. The study showcases that the success of this genre amongst cinema-goers and encourages the budding young film makers and media personnel to bring social issues on mainstream by implementing real aspects into the reel cinema.

Keywords: Social, Indian Cinema, Method acting, Movie, Bollywood, Reel, Box Office, Hindi, Parallel, Realistic, Realism

Introduction

The Indian cinema is one of the most influential and powerful tools in addressing various social issues via the medium of a screenplay. Since its origin in 1913, movies have been a vital medium to communicate social insights and conditions, while continuing to function as an important mode of entertainment to the masses (Gupta and Gupta, 2013). It is very intriguing to comprehend sometimes, whether it is the films that are shaping the society or vice versa (Bhugra, 2006). From mythology to love to comedy to thriller and horror, the Indian cinema has been experimenting with various genres to carve out a successful formula that works well with the audiences as well as makes a mark at the box office.

The concept of parallel cinema, a very strong and positive deviation from the mainstream cinema, has been the most important aid in floating across various social issues to the viewers. Issues such as gender inequality, female feticide, caste system, dowry, awareness on sensitive issues such as AIDS, stigma related to mental illness has been very well brought to the forefront via this alternate form of cinema. However, the success of these movies and therefore the communication of the social message has not always been guaranteed, since there may be a difference been audience expectation and the actual purpose of the art movie. One of the observation as to why this exists could be attributed to the difference in thought process of one set of viewers who assume cinema to be a mere source of entertainment, while the other group

SOCIAL IMPACT OF INDIAN CINEMA anticipating a lot more in terms of socio-cultural values and morals thereby looking forward to cinema aiding in bringing about a positive change in the society (Murthy, 1980).

This paper aims to focus on the following key objectives:

- To appreciate the effort of the movie makers to innovatively bring forward the social causes to the masses via the most influential media – movies
- To highlight the evolving interest amongst cinema-goers towards such cinema thereby emboldening the new film makers to present various social issues on mainstream by implementing real aspects into the reel cinema

Literature Review

Products of media culture provide materials out of which we forge our identities, our sense of selfhood, our construction of ethnicity, race and nationality, of sexuality and of 'us' and 'them' (Dines and Humez, 2003). The most powerful medium of communication in Indian society is commercial Indian cinema (Butalia, 1984). Film and cinema are the most commonly used mass media to communicate with the public. The fact that cinema is a mediator of social realities and personal dreams, collective concerns and individual aspirations make it assume a seminal dimension as a humanistic discourse which has the potential to redirect the cultural and material fabric of our everyday lives (Jain and Rai, 2002).

Since its inception with the movie "Raja Harish Chandra" in 1913 (Pillania, 2008), cinema has been the most dominant and the most influential mode of mass communication across India. The film was a silent movie and had a mythological background (Verma, 2019), which set the trend for the movie makers belonging to that era. The movies at that time reflected the deep and rich Indian heritage through depiction of the grand Indian epics – Ramayana and Mahabharata. It was in 1931 that Indian cinema released its first talkie, Alam Ara, that paved way for the future of Indian cinema (Allemand, 2015). Following this, the industry began to experiment with color films and animation. This period also witnessed venturing across various genres including comedy, romance, action and thriller amongst others.

The industry observed its 'Golden Age' that marked the milestone for Indian parallel cinema. While Raghunath Raina in 1981 mentioned, "What really distinguishes the New Indian Cinema is a definitive set of liberal-humanitarian values, embracing progressive solutions to urgent problems, sensitivity to the plight of the poor and oppressed, a faith in the ultimate movement of man toward change. Drawing its inspiration largely from the neo-realists, it is a cinema of social significance and artistic sincerity, presenting a modern, humanist perspective, more durable that the fantasy world of the popular film." (Raina, 1981). Sunita Chakravarty, 1993, on the other hand, described parallel cinema as "the diversity of approaches and techniques, aims and intentions that informs the works that are included under its rubric."(Chakravarty, 1993)[1]

As new it may sound, the 'realism' in Bollywood did its debut way back in 1920s itself with the movie "Sawkari Pash" by the pioneering Shantaram, however, it was 1940s and 1950s with the movies of Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen and the remarkable Shree 420 by Raj Kapoor, that the genre of art cinema began to establish its footprints in the hearts of the audiences.

Social issues such as famer sufferings, untouchability came to limelight through more meaningful cinema in 1930s, just about the period when time India was experiencing economic and social reforms, alongside the struggle for freedom, which provided themes to the movies such as Mehboob Khan's Mother India (1957), and Bimal Roy's Do Bhiga Zameen (1953), (Murthy C.S.H.N, 2011). This alternate form of cinema, although simultaneous yet distinguishing from the stereotype movies, took an in-depth leap into more socially aware and politically positioned issues with the support of public funding form of cinema from 1970 onwards.

This taste of Indian cinema began to create a new wave, both for the movie makers who had the potential to go beyond musicals and entertainment to bring a social cause or message to the big screen and for the evolving Indian diaspora that was still skeptical about this alternative form of cinema. With increasing popularity of electronic media and the phenomenal success of Hindi movies (also known as Bollywood) among the Indian diaspora (Dudrah, 2006, Uberoi, 1998), it is important to study the role of Bollywood movies in the identity construction of the Indian diaspora.

Unfortunately, however, the alternative movement could not trend for long and began to fade out during 1990s owing to two main reasons, One, although these movies were monetarily aided in some way or the other by the government, back then, however there were certain financial and politic-driven constraints that restricted movie production. Two, since the movie buffs wanted to see more, as these movies lacked the entertainment or so to speak the X-factor, the fiscal support from the government began to dwindle. This led to various next gen movie makers to follow more innovative ways to convey the social message. One successful formula was to amalgamate entertainment with social message which is attributed to the success of movies like Three Idiots, Munnabhai MBBS series, Taare Zameen Par, to name a few.

Discussion

The Indian cinema is the world's largest producer of feature films, producing about 800 to 1000 films annually, double the numbers that Hollywood works on (Sridhar and Mattoo, 1997). "Bollywood", has a major share in Indian cinema industry, focusses on Hindi-language films, with its headquarters in Bombay, now Mumbai. In addition, movies are also produced in regional languages including Bhojpuri, Bengali, Tamil, to name a few. These movies end up doing well locally, but owing to language barrier, block the audiences cross borders within the country.

Considering the diversity and outreach, films are the most effective tool to comprehend and communicate social norms, attitudes and cultural derivatives and behaviors to the audiences. Films play a dual role in reflecting the society that they are catering to, yet simultaneously are crucial in shaping and influencing the society. Since the inception of the Indian film Industry, the film fraternity has tried to convey social messages via experimentation across various genres. Sometimes these experiments failed, while at others, they appealed to the masses so much so that they set new highs at the box office.

This paper aims to take a glance on a few movies that turned out to be chartbusters while having a lasting impact on audiences and at least left them pondering on bringing a change in the society.

Acchut Kanya(1936): Begetting Love Beyond the Barriers of Caste
Set in an era of movies when they were themed on mythology, love and marriage, this movie brought out the issue of falling in love with a low caste woman in a very fresh story. This movie was released just in time when the breeze about treating all castes, including untouchables as equals was raised by Mahatma Gandhi. Although the movie, at that time landed into controversy, yet it embarked upon a crucial social cause of uniting all the communities while emphasizing that love knows no boundaries.

Mother India (1957): A Saga That Portrays The Self Sacrificing Indian Mother
Mother India, 1957, directed by Mehboob Khan, revolved around a widow, played by Nargis, mother of two, struggling to raise her children (Sunil Dutt and Rajendra Kumar), amidst the shackles of poverty, illiteracy and sufferings. The movie showcased the mother as an allegory for respectability and sacrifice (Sarkar, 2013). The movie transcends its time by promoting the idea of equality in male and female characteristics by depicting Nargis as a nurturing yet one with valour (Chakravarty, 1993). In addition to being high on gush of emotions, the movie brought various social issues into limelight that the modern India faces even today such as extortion, poverty and lack of education. The movie also emphasized on keeping justice and honesty above all.

My Brother Nikhil (2005): Kicking in Gay Concept in the country
Same gender love, or popularly called "Gay Love", was for the first time portrayed in this movie, in the year 2005. The movie showcased the subject of homosexuality as incipient from a universal, rights-based standpoint. The film revolves around Goan lifestyle, which is an amalgamation of 'traditional' India and modernized norms that the Portuguese left behind in the territory during the British rule in India.

The movie also very sensitively yet strongly talks about the less discussed taboo concept of sexual safety, HIV transmission and AIDS. The film might not have proved numbers in the box office, but was a revolution for the nation owing to its theme, that aided in bringing about serious concerns out to the audiences that mainstream cinema could not.

Rang De Basanti (2006): Igniting Patriotism in Youth
Released on the iconic day of January 26th 2006, which happens to be India's Republic Day, this movie is an apt example of showcasing history on modern topography. The movie typically was a mix of all the ingredients that a stereotype Bollywood flick would contain: chick college crowd, Punjabi mother, perfect song mix, romance and everything that a movie needs to hit the box office. But what set it apart was the youth awakening and youngsters standing up for justice against the death of their friend who was a flight lieutenant in the Indian Air Force who died in a plane crash accident owing to machinery malfunctioning. When the gang felt that the government took no stringent action, despite their silent protests and candlelight wakes, they decided to avenge the death by gunning down the then corrupt Defense Minister whose callousness caused the unfortunate accident.

Further, the movie also revealed, though a fine, but visible streak on varied opinions on Hindu Muslim friendship, owing to generation gap, somewhere conveying, that the modern generation chose friends independent of religious background.

Taare Zameen Par (2007): Appreciating Special Abilities
This movie, based on the medical condition of dyslexia, written by Amole Gupte and Deepa Bhatia, directed by the super talented Amir Khan, was an instant jackpot at the box office. The movie was successful in bringing out the traumas of a dyslexic child(played by child actor Darsheel Safary), who until the age of eight, is unable to read and write and is mistook as being lazy and hence is severely penalized by the parents and the school. The sheer ignorance of the parents about their son's condition makes them decide to forcefully send the child to a boarding school, where he meets his arts teacher (Amir Khan), who rightly diagnosis the child's condition as dyslexia and he goes back to the parents to explain them as to how their child is different from other kids of his age.

The movie conveys a very strong message about this mental condition and how love, care and more attention could help the patient improve and flourish, simultaneously conveying the message that such disabilities should not be looked down upon as a social stigma of mental illness and how such patients may be so specially gifted.

Limitations of These Studies
The parallel cinema is spread across numerous social issues at various strata of Indian diaspora, which may require to discuss at least one movie per concern. Social issues from illiteracy, gender bias, right to equality, Indian political system, same gender relationship, crime against women, female infanticide, stigma related to mental health and awareness, environmental safety, and many more may be beyond the scope of the research in this paper.

Audience perceptions may not be quantified and aptly represented at the box office. History has it that movies that turned out to be a flop actually turned out to be cult. Hence, qualitative reviews would lend a better understanding in terms of success of the movies belonging especially to parallel cinema.

Conclusions and Future Study
The study effectively demonstrates how realistic cinema influences and shapes the social norms and molds the society yet simultaneously receives inputs from the same audience. The perceptions and opinions the people build about social issues that surround our society are largely, if not completely, governed by the way they are portrayed through method acting. Some movies such as 'Rang De Basanti' ended up awakening the masses and raising a voice against the injustice in a real time case of murder of the supermodel Jessica Lal.

Future studies pertaining to the specific research may look at covering a wider range of social issues and also validating on evolving tastes of the new era audiences that wish to see such realistic issues being addressed in a more unbiased and fashion. This audience acceptance would encourage the mushrooming movie makers to create magic on screen beyond the bounds of typecasts and enlightening the cine-goers with more serious issues that need to be dealt with sensitivity and a sense of urgency to evolve the community at large for good.

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