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'Indian Film' as a Socio-Cultural Construct

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The paper deals with the fundamental concepts which make a film a socio-cultural construct. There are some additional factors that come into play as this paper is focussed on the 'Indian Film'. Indian Film is based in a traditional society ushering in certain additional factors. A few examples are taken to substantiate the idea but too many examples would be hampering for the central idea of the paper.

Introduction

Watching a movie is accepted norm of entertainment, big time in India. Song, Dance & Drama have been tried and tested stress busters since ages. When people worked hard throughout the day, the end of the day demanded a means of alleviating their physical and mental exhaustion.

The older versions of dance and song around the village bonfires is a community activity which now has taken on the form of trance music, club dancing around psychedelic lights. The outcome is any which way aimed at mood alleviation and is deeply escapist in nature.

When compared to dance which can be created and improvised in an instance, the drama was a much elaborate process of entertainment and would happen with planning at certain celebrations and festivals. For instance, Ram Leela is a drama form which is popular during 'Dussehra', with an elaborately staged 'Ravan ka dahan'.

Invention of Camera

The Drama is the basis for cinema. The enactment on a stage was transformed into the early cinema with the invention of the camera by Lumière brothers.

*In 1895, he (*Auguste*) and his brother, Louis, debuted* (with) *a motion picture they had shot with their revolutionary invention, a combination camera and projector named the Cinematographe. In 1907, the brothers invented the Autochrome color photography plate. ("Auguste Lumière Biography")*

The camera brought the concept of capturing an image or a sequence of images immortally. The drama, since it was elaborate and required lot of preparation in terms of stage, costumes, props and setting was the first choice for filming to be played many times later as the first camera also had an inbuilt projector.

Some have argued that Raja Harischandra cannot be called the first Indian film as Dadasaheb Torne's film Shree Pundalik was released on 18 May 1912 in Bombay, one year before Phalke's film. However, Shree Pundalik is a cinematographic recording of play, using a single, fixed camera; it is one of a number of such Indian films that predated Raja Harishchandra. Additionally, the cameraman for Shree Pundalik was a Briton, and the film stock was processed in London. ("Shree Pundalik")

Following the tradition of Dada Saheb Phalke in *Raja Harischandra,* of choosing and training actors, erecting sets and painstakingly shooting the film for seven months 21 days, the trend of film making took India by a storm. We now boast of a film industry which is a very important component of the world cinema.

Indian Aesthetics

Since Indian Drama is strongly based on the Indian Aesthetics of Navarasas, the Indian commercial cinemas are also carriers of Navarasas within this milieu. Indian Aesthetics propounds that an art form should touch upon all of the human emotions during the enactment to configure as an evolved art form. A complete drama should deal with the following rasas. They are Srungara (Love), Hasya (Laughter), Raudra (Fury), Karunya (Compassion), Bibhatsa (Disgust), Bhayanaka (Horror), Veera (Courage), Adbhuta (Wonder) and Santa (Peace). Every Indian drama followed the Indian Aesthetic theory or Navarasas and so does the commercial Indian Cinema. The mainstream cinema is unabashedly entertaining while the parallel cinema deals with more serious issues.

So there is no particular genre of cinema like the western cinema. The western cinema has dedicated production houses which have gained expertise in producing a particular genre of film taking it to the sophisticated level of catering to a focussed audience. But the Indian cinema needs to have all the rasas and mixing up all the genres has created a niche for itself in the world market.

Cultural Construct

If one tries to define this term in its most basic format then it becomes a cultural construction of human reality. Using archetypes and artefacts of a particular culture a form of reality is constructed. By using artefacts a means of communication is established between those who share the knowledge of what that artefact means. Thus the shared understanding and meaning strengthens the cultural construct.

if one analyse the concept of how each culture treats gender then we have a whole lot of shining examples. Nursing is a woman's job is a cultural construct and medical nursing has many woman professionals with very few men members opting for it. Likewise, teaching also is considered a woman's job with many men not opting for it in the private sector but with an assured income in the government sector it has many takers.

How one dresses up in a particular society is also a cultural construct. If one takes the example of India, the traditional sari for women was a dhoti like attire allowing the woman the freedom of movement similar to that of a man. But the present Indian sari is a cultural construct during the British rule. It had to appease the cultural sense of the British with a 'blouse', 'petticoat' and an overall appearance of a ballroom gown. It is also very limiting on women who wear it, projecting them as incapable of physical athleticism. You apparently couldn't jump a fence in the modern Indian sari hence you need men to take care of it. High heels are also a cultural construct. And we have endless examples.

Social Construct

The dictionary defines this term as

A social mechanism, phenomenon, or category created and developed by society; a perception of an individual, group, or idea that is 'constructed' through cultural or social practice. ("Social construct")

This definition is almost similar to the earlier one but there are certain aspects that come into play when one mentions a social construct. Cultural constructs are deep rooted and defies time and generation. Whereas social constructs are dynamic to that generation and depend on the individual's ability to interact with and understand the social norms of that time.

The concept of 'race' is a social construct. It is not deeply etched into our value systems like culture but has evolved with social dynamics of war, domination and subjugation. We have a body of knowledge which describes a race and its specific features. The concepts like the east and the west, the black and the white, the orient and the occident, the developed and developing and all the high classes and the masses of every country and of every generation.

Foucault's Knowledge & Power

Using these terms and concepts, this paper analyses the different socio-cultural elements that combine to create a film. The idea of a construct seems innocent until we bring into focus Michael Foucault; the French modernist understands that knowledge is a source of power. The relation between power and knowledge is inextricable. Knowledge is generated for exercising power and power determines the knowledge that is pervasive.

There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations (Foucault, p. 27)

So, in a way I am modifying my earlier statement that "The mainstream cinema is unabashedly entertaining" to "The mainstream cinema is unabashedly entertaining and is also

a source of consolidating the popular stereotyping beliefs, thus creating a body of knowledge that reeks of power politics in the Indian milieu."

Film will not just remain film it reflects life and stands as an example in dictating life. We have many films which are inspired by real people and many people who were inspired by the movies. The analysis of this mutual influence can be seen in the alarmingly increasing rate of crime and in most of the cases are physically or ideologically inspired by films.

Film as a Commercial Entity

If one understands the movie making process, one would realise how the process is commercial in its design. Every movie has a producer who invests a large amount of money into it. The design aims at appealing to a larger mass, across the country and overseas with every commercial cinema boasting of number of prints released to weigh its commercial success. Movies are released in theatres on Fridays to cash in on weekend viewing, which is at its maximum.

To appeal to larger audiences certain elements seep in, in a largely traditional and a patriarchal society like India. The elements of man centred themes, furthering patriarchal ideals define the movie making process. The commercial elements which ensure a film's commercial success, making profits to all those who invested in it are, song & dance, romance & fights to showcase heroism.

The first week's collections are analysed with paranoid frenzy and the amount of money a film makes in totality determines the worth of the people who acted in it. So, one hears terms like 'the 100 crore club' echoing through the entertainment magazines and TV shows calling a certain actor as 'successful.'

Film Theatre Design

A sloped floor, a dark room, walls designed not to echo, a projector, a huge screen and a wall mounted speakers are components of a film theatre. The very design of the theatre is a replication of reality trying to create a 360 degree experience.

These components of film theatre design have an innate sense of relation with the audience which is larger than life, one sided, single focussed and a sense of transportation into the constructed reality. The incident of the first film shot by the Lumière brothers, displayed to the audience on a large screen to accommodate more members together is a favourite anecdote to students of film studies. The film was of a train rolling into a station. When the audience watched the action they all were terrified of this constructed reality that they ran out of the room fearing the train might actually crush them. The audience have grown from fear to acceptance.

The sloped floor gives everyone a clear view of the screen making the viewing a very personal experience, along with a false sense of community and collective acceptance of this constructed reality in the presence of audience. The larger than life screen presents the constructed reality imposing on us with the sheer size into acceptance. It is escapist in its design and one cannot choose to ignore the sequence of images brightly and colourfully projected in a pitch dark room. The surround sound alleviates the experience and the sense of reality outside the theatre is consumed by the sense of reality inside the theatre.

Socio-Cultural Concepts of a Film

Some concepts which make the Indian National and regional film a social and a cultural construct are discussed below. These concepts are all socio-cultural categories and have nothing to do with the biological/normal definitions.

The Concept of Masculinity

Majority of Indian commercial cinema has a male protagonist and is supposed to have these qualities. The male protagonist should be able to drive cars, ride horses, fly aircraft, fight multiple villainy, fragile to empathise, tough to fight, flexible to dance and melodious to belt out a song on a short notice. This is a tall order for any normal human being including a man. A super human role model has a sphere of influence among the youth. It is a good thing to strive towards that kind of perfection but, one shouldn't lose touch with the reality too.

The Concept of Femininity

The female protagonist, if we can really call her that, who receives less pay and prominence to the male lead actor, has a reduced role limiting herself to song and dance sequences and to romance. There are certain women centred roles which have lead to the movie's commercial success but they are limited to a few as opposed to hundreds of male centred films. The colourful clothes, the skin show, the heavily made up faces, the ever smiling and meek roles with no validity attributed to their action or words make femininity a stereotype component of the film construct.

The Concept of Comedy

Humour is to let out forbidden thoughts and feelings that the conscious mind usually suppressed in deference to society – Sigmund Freud

As opposed to the surreal depictions of a man and a woman the film gets in touch with reality as close as possible through its comedy trails and its comedians. The comedians are people like you and me and this normalcy is made into a subject of ridicule in film. The national cinema has in a way evolved out of this stereotype in majority of cases but a very strong depiction can be seen in regional cinema. The comedians are usually the anti picture super human hero. They in their contrast enhance the qualities of the protagonist. Skin tone,

weight, height, hair, aspirations and many more human elements are ridiculed, and the audience gulp down this inhuman treatment. They burst into guffaws to prove that they are no way close to the comedians and align themselves with the male or female protagonists.

The Concept of Romance

Romance is a fantasy that off members of this traditional society can harbour. We all feel that fantasy is acceptable in secrecy that courting someone openly. A man is not supposed to even stand close to his wife in the presence of elders in a traditional milieu. That repressed idea of romance is projected onto the hero's romance of the heroine. So is it applicable to the women members also. Through the projection of their repressed ideas the open romance of the hero and the heroine is validated. There is a scope for further analysis of this aspect using Lacan's concept of 'The Gaze', Jung's concept of 'The Collective Consciousness'.

The Concept of Justice

It is an extension of the depiction of romance. Each of go through life with its ups and downs. There are often, times when we complain of injustice but the social law and order stops us from taking up crime. There is a sense of compromise in dealing with those injustices. When the hero on the screen bashes up 10 men and gives the chief villain a gory end, a repressed idea is projected onto the protagonist and the audience experience a sense of purgation and catharsis leaving the audience with the feeling that the justice has been meted out.

Hindi Films

Rajshri Productions are known for their movies which depict the stereotypical roles for women, men, comedians, romance and the other elements that were discussed in detail. Men in their movies are go-getters, business successes, and the heir apparent to the family business. The women are all home makers with their prime concern towards being shy, cooking food and looking after children. Festivals are a central part of their lives and the ultra loyal servants also double up as comedians.

We also have the comedy genre in Hindi cinema which exploits these stereotypes to the core. The recent 'Grand Masti' and 'Houseful' series casting the top actors take on these stereotypes under the garb of humour. Weaknesses which are a part of the human system are ridiculed and accentuated against the almost perfect hero to create humour. Women are no more than housewives, mistresses or helpless women under a domineering father waiting to be wooed.

The so called liberated cinema also plays around with these stereotypes. 'Ki & Ka' is about stereotype role reversal. The roles remain. The film 'Cocktail' is also about stereotypes.

It is about the good girl and the bad girl. The bad girl gets dumped y the philandering hero for the good girl.

We still are exploring ground to create new dimensions to the gender, race and religion stereotype but since films are commercial enterprises a fair amount of the investment needs to come back hence the taking cover under safe storylines and the item numbers.

Telugu Films

Starting from the classics the kind of knowledge about male, female, comedy and romance which are etched as foundation remain. The mass of Telugu cinema produced is about stereotypes. Experimental and parallel cinema is strongly present but the commercial successes in the rural and semi urban areas are for the mass cinema.

The popular heroes have tie ups with theatres. The success of Telugu cinema is ensured by releasing it in the most number of theatres which do not allow any small film to establish and take roots. The big names in Telugu cinema can make or break a movie as they control the film release centres. These popular heroes have a single point agenda of appealing to their fan base. The fans dictate the themes and other features of their idol's film.

All films of Telugu centrally revolve around a love story. Let us take for example 'Express Raja' the super macho hero stalks, threatens and coerces the heroine into believing and accepting that she loves him. A 2016 film which believes in this concept of women incapable of understanding themselves and taking decisions speaks volumes about the mindsets behind making of these movies.

Brahmanandam (Brahmi), is a popular comedian, who is short in height, thinning hair, dark complexioned, paunch bellied. He almost represents the common comic themes. He has built a reputation of tickling an audience to laughter by his mere presence. Brahmi as a HR consultant, as a software engineer, as a brand designer, or to that matter any human emotions turn comic as if comedians are sub human not eligible to feel human emotions.

There is so much of scope of research in these areas because films affect the cultural milieu and the audience have to be critical of what they watch and to what they react.

Conclusion

The socio-cultural concepts of a film have been discussed in the paper with some of the founding ideas on the construction of film particularly Indian Films. The concepts discussed are only a few representing many more at the microcosmic level. The film, thus, is not just a medium of entertainment. Under the garb of entertainment the politics of power, race, class, gender, religion and human psyche come into play. Those of us who think a film is just a 'three hour time pass' are grossly mistaken because when you give your undivided attention to the happenings on the screen, you agree with some ideas and you disagree with

some. In both your agreement and disagreement you tow along with the popular socio-cultural concepts or misconceptions.

The urban scenario is slowly but surely changing with the educated, emancipated and intelligent audience is fighting back the stereotypes and paving a way for a cinema which is much more moderate and open in its outlook.

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