

Cinematic Milieu and Trauma: Bollywood Cinematic Experience and Socio-Cultural Stratification

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Abstract:

Movies have always been a strong and powerful medium to educate and highlight the societal trends. This study aims to highlight the impact of socio-cultural stratification on Bollywood cinema and, how cinema has over the years presented a true picture of the society on screen. The paper also, shows the depiction of trauma in Bollywood movies and the characters dealing with complex psychological issues. Specifically, the paper aims to elucidate the representation of the socio-cultural stratification and trauma through a cinematic lens. Both of these themes have been analysed with reference to movies and their themes, characterization and narration.

Keywords: Bollywood, cinema, trauma, socio-cultural stratification, characterization.

Cinema has been a powerful medium to educate, amuse and entertain people and the society. It is a source of expression intertwined with culture, traditions and human sentiments. It mirrors the lives of the audience in some or the other way and touches their deep-rooted emotions with subtlety. Cinema has the ability to communicate ideas to the masses and spread a positive message to bring forth an impactful wave of change in the world. It enlightens the audience about their past, makes them realise their present and also offers innumerable possibilities of their future. The multi-dimensional macrocosm of cinema extends a kaleidoscopic view of the society and its trends with the purpose of ushering a transformation in the existing loose-ends.

The powerful and tragic elements and themes of psychological trauma have entered the mainstream Bollywood. In 1980, the American Psychiatric Psychological Association finally gave acceptance to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and added it into a separate

category. Before that trauma was not given formal recognition even after, decades of research and work had been done on it. However, filmmakers and authors have been exploring the horrifying and unforgettable impact of psychological trauma for decades. The film industry has adopted various techniques to capture the wide array of situations and characters that affect the human psyche and leave a scar on the mind. Some movies have experimented with varied symptoms of trauma and some, have even shown how sufferers have survived trauma and lead a new life. The strong narratives of trauma in movies have forced the viewers to think about the consequences of trauma and has, raised awareness related to the issues of anxiety, depression and traumatic memories.

In today's era of technological advancement and learning, films still remain as the greatest source of entertainment and leisure. Cinema presents a picture of the society in which it has originated and the contradictions, the aspirations, the hypocrisies and the failures of any given social order. While concentrating on Indian Cinema, since the advent of the first Indian film i.e. Dadasaheb Phalke's *Raja Harishchandra* (1913) the impact which motion picture created on the masses was immense. The Indian population warmly welcomed this new and creative form of entertainment which connected them with their stories, their legends and their narratives. In 1963, Baldoon Dhingra presented a report for United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation where he quoted Prime Minister Jawahar Lal Nehru who opined, "...the influence in India of films is greater than newspapers and books combined." When film-making began in India, the enthusiasm which people had regarding it was quite high. Under the tyranny of the British empire, people were already fed up of the forcibly imposed laws and regulations by the Britishers. The introduction of Cinema in India was an initiative towards bringing a visible change in the community and the society and to cater sources of learning and amusement to the people showcasing the creativity and talent this nation brewed.

Gradually with time, Indian filmmakers began making films with the purpose of mirroring the society and its trends. They dealt with issues that were quite prevalent in the societal sphere and which revolved around the lives of a large number of spectators. To define the Indian society, it is "regionally diverse (North, South, East and West), communally differentiated, socially stratified (in terms of caste and class) and culturally discrete" (Uberoi, 1993 p.45). The Indian society apart from being identified as a home for diversity is, on the other hand, a victim to the shackles of caste system and poverty since centuries back in time. The caste system in India originated in the ancient era dividing the society into sections on

the basis of one's work, intellect, financial standing and power. The broad categories of this stratification include- *Brahmin* (the superior ones, identified for their intellect), *Kshatriya* (the warriors, identified for physical strength), *Vaishya* (the merchants, identified for wealth and trade) and *Shudra* (the downtrodden, identified for doing odd jobs, the lowest section of society). Apart from the caste- based segregation, the Indian society is also stratified by class. The Higher class comprises of people exercising power and authority (economically, politically and intellectually), the Middle class consists of citizens who possess average authority over other classes; whereas, the Lower class involves people with no authority, they are suppressed and exploited by the upper strata of the society and are financially weak.

In his book *Fundamentals of Sociology*, P.S.J. Gisbert defines social stratification as “the division of society into permanent groups of categories linked with each other by the relationship of superiority and subordinations” (Gisbert,1973). The layers of a society are made up of people and the resources are unevenly distributed throughout these layers in a social structure. The people in possession of more of these resources are representatives of the top layer of the society whereas people with progressively lesser and lesser resources represent the lower strata. According to sociologists, social stratification is a widespread society-based system which makes the inequalities evident. It not only reflects individual inequalities but throws light on systematic inequalities which rest on factors like class, group identity, etc., which in turn create an impact on an individual's social reputation.

When issues like social discrimination are dealt with and amalgamate with an artform like cinema, films become more appealing and relatable to the masses. With the motive to establish relatability and to evoke reality in cinema, filmmakers brought out social issues such as untouchability in the early years of Indian cinema with films like *Achhut Kanya* (1936) where an untouchable (achhut) girl Kasturi (Devika Rani) falls victim to social conventions, is looked down upon because of her status, is betrayed by her lover (an upper caste boy) and eventually sacrifices her life fighting misconceptions brewed against her. Her tragic life ends on the railway tracks thus, intensifying her emotional trauma. Further in 1959, *Sujata* dealt with the same issue which revolves around the life of Sujata (Nutan) a Dalit orphan adopted by a brahmin family who falls in love with a brahmin man Adhir (Sunil Dutt). The plot of the film showcases the difficulties in Sujata's personal and social life because of caste-discrimination which are instilled in the Indian society.

Though it was an essential agenda to address issues like caste-discrimination and untouchability pre- and post-independence, it was equally substantial to raise voices against this in later years as well where casteism still prominently existed in the Indian society. In 1974, Shyam Benegal debuted with his first feature film in Bollywood named *Ankur* which narrates yet another tale of social inequity where a Dalit woman Laxmi (Shabana Azmi) is treated like an object in the hands of the landlord's son Surya (Anant Nag) who sexually abuses her and leaves her to rot in isolation for his wife. Surya not only crushes Laxmi socially but also drains her emotionally and physically. She is a sufferer on multiple levels depicting the plight of women belonging to the lower castes in India. The movie analyses the human behaviour and the emotional and psychological struggles of lower-class women when, they are exploited.

Shekhar Kapur paved a milestone in Bollywood i.e. his film *Bandit Queen* (1994) which unlike the earlier made films was not a work of fiction but was based on the life of Phoolan Devi, the bandit queen of Chambal. The story throws light on the brutal masculinity which preyed on Phoolan Devi who belonged to the lower caste in her village and was incessantly abused by men not only belonging to her caste but also the upper caste. She was molested and raped multiple times by the police officials to whom she went for refuge.

Delving into the representation of caste-system in off-beat and mainstream Bollywood cinema, it can be observed that the stories of the predicament of lower caste citizens centre largely on the lives of women. Farrukh Dhondy, the writer of the film *Bandit Queen*, opined in one of his interviews, "...but gender and caste could not be separated...The fact is that Devi was raped because she was lower caste and those men thought they could get away with it. A woman's life in India is very much defined by caste."

"Samjho sabse pehle toh, rang hote akele toh indradhanush banta hi nahi

Ek na hum ho paaye toh, anyay se ladne ko hogi koi janta hi nahi."

(Firstly, we need to understand if all colours were singled out, there would be no rainbows,

In the absence of unity and togetherness, there would be no people to fight injustice.)

These lines sung by Mohan in the movie *Swades* (2004) bring out one of the dominant themes of this movie i.e. social inequality. This movie showed us the social divide and bigotry that exists in the country. The movie tried to remove the boundaries of casteism by

gathering the kids of all castes together to sing, dance and further study together. Lighting a bulb was creating a hope in the minds of people. The movie shows the cultural stratification by bringing out the contrast between the Western and the Indian culture. Mohan, played by Shahrukh Khan works in U.S.A. and when he visits his mother in India, through his eyes we witness how the lower caste people are supposed to live separately and are not allowed to mingle with the upper caste people. One instance that brings out this theme in this movie is where Mohan goes to the house of a man belonging to the lower caste and requests them to send their children to school in order to give them their basic rights.

Masaan (2015) is a deformed version of the Sanskrit word “*shamshaan*” which means ‘crematorium’ in English. Like the title of the movie suggests, this movie starts with a death and ends with a death. But the movie is much more than that and raises a number of issues prevalent in society. While on the surface the movie deals with issues like love and loss, the film is themed around the evils of casteism. Deepak (Vicky Kaushal) belongs to a lower caste family that cremates dead bodies on the Ghats of Varanasi. Deepak is fully aware that in India you are not judged by your capabilities but on the basis of your caste. The people turn silent the moment society raises these taboos on inequality. Everyone is aware of caste division but no one dares to challenge it. *Masaan* actually talks about these caste divisions and understands the ways in which it disintegrates people’s lives. The movie reflects the tussle between individual choices and societal constraints happening around us today. It actually shows an era where Bollywood starts asking “*Kon jaat ho?*” (What is your caste?). At the same time the movie also, explores the relationship between memory and loss. Deepak loses his love Shalu in an accident and her body comes to his crematorium. Deepak mourns for his love but, his grief finds solace in letting go of her last memory too. He is shown to be brave enough to accept the loss and to let it out into the world to find a home. The film explores the deeper meaning of human relationships and the trauma of losing a loved one.

Anubhav Sinha’s film, *Article 15* (2019) is one of the strongest indictments of the caste system in contemporary Hindi cinema. Ayushmaan Khurana stars as an I.P.S. officer who investigates the murder of two lower caste minor girls whose bodies are found hanging on a tree. The movie aims to give voice to the marginalised section of the society. The movie shows many visuals where one can see the atrocities faced by the lower caste. One of the striking scenes is where Ayushmaan in the role of Ayaan asks his officers their caste. This scene reveals the various ways in which casteism still divides the hierarchy of men wearing the same uniform. A monologue in the movie points out the dependence of India on the

bahujans and *harijans* for menial jobs and their inability to see them as just “*jans*” (citizens) is haunting. It shows that Hindi cinema aims to give more to the audience than mere entertainment. This movie resonates the traumatic tale of Dalits and the hardships they have to endure. It forces us to think on many deeper levels.

The movie *Super 30* (2019) is based on the uplifting story of a real-life achiever. It is the story of Anand Kumar portrayed by Hrithik Roshan who gives the underprivileged youngsters an opportunity to enter into their dream college, IIT. The movie openly condemns the society that differentiates between an upper-caste and a lower-caste born child through the issue of education. The movie not only presents the struggles of Anand Kumar who himself belonged to the lower-caste but also inspires the audience that education is the basic right of every child irrespective of their financial or social status.

Tracing down these films since the beginning of Bollywood till date, whether it is the character of Kasturi, Sujata, Laxmi, Phoolan, Deepak, Anand or Murad, all they did was dream. They dared to dream to live a normal life they deserved. They wished to fly, they had aspirations that were crushed and thrown away by the powerful sections of the society. They craved for an identity being at a consistent loss of honour and wealth. Despite the hardships life and society threw at them, they struggled constantly to survive. Where characters like Kasturi, Laxmi and Deepak failed; Murad, Anand, Sujata and Phoolan prevailed and broke the chains of inequities and discrimination. These characters rose above the adversities plagued upon them by casteism and fought to achieve what they deserved. Bollywood through these characters tried to confront the frailty in society. These films not only had the purpose of weaving a story of plight and suffering but also wished to incite awareness in the minds of the audience to question the broken and debilitated mindset of the oppressors prevailing in the society.

Even on negating caste-system, the divide in society still remains i.e. the distribution of people into rich and poor. This gap had always existed but it grew more and more with time. The division which existed due to the financial standing of a person, now had additional layers of discrimination based on awareness creation, education, personality, character, power, etc. The films, thus began questioning the lack of harmony between people of different income groups. Filmmakers created movies which made the audience realise the oppressive attitude of the higher classes towards the lower ones. Themes relating to everyday

life were spoken of on screen which involved perks of the regular suppression of the low-class citizens which are somehow the part of most of the society-based films.

Released in 1953, Balraj Sahni starrer film *Do Beegha Zameen* is one such story of an impoverished farmer Shambhu (Balraj Sahni) who is crushed under the debts he had taken from Harnam Singh, a powerful zamindar in pursuit of collaborating with a businessman to construct a mill on the land of Shambhu. Shambhu struggles to save his land and in the same tussle he faces the hardest of times and toughest of circumstances where he eventually loses his land to the zamindar, his pride, his only source of earning, the essence of his being and is left with nothing but hopelessness and despondence. India, with approximately a third of its citizens as poor; though being one of the greatest democracies struggled and still struggles to get rid of these superficial trends made by society.

Mother India (1957), another landmark movie in Bollywood cinema also concentrated on bringing forth the theme of rich v/s poor and the quest for identity and reputation in society. The protagonist Radha (Nargis) scuffles throughout her life against a rich zamindar to save her dignity while taking care of her two sons single-handedly against poverty. The films were widely-acclaimed for not only its brilliant acting and star-cast but largely because of the themes it garnered to the audience. At the wake of democracy in India, this film highlighted greatly the issues our country was struggling against i.e. poverty, regressive rural conditions, the widening gap between the economically higher class and lower class in a society and the agitation in the hearts of the youth against the consistent oppression.

A few decades later in 1987, *Mirch Masala* evoked similar strains of contest between the societal differences. Here though the story is set in Colonial India, it narrates the prevalent tale of oppression by the Subedar of the village on women and people of lower classes in general. The character of subedar played by Naseeruddin shah exercises his authority and power to crush down the villagers who strive to live a normal life especially women. He attempts to get hold of Sonbai (Smita Patil), a poor village woman, but is slapped instead for his misbehaviour towards her. She escapes to save her life and dignity and takes refuge in a spice factory. Unlike other women in the village who are terrified enough to stand against the subedar, Sonbai takes initiative to bring down the oppressor and save her pride and is thus eventually successful to do so with the help and support of other women of the community. The film spreads the message that the oppressors crush powerless people into the

depths of poverty and misery little knowing that that very force drives their blood towards rebellion.

The representation of this divide in society continued to be showcased in Bollywood several years later in films like *Gully Boy* by Zoya Akhtar. *Gully Boy* (2019) is the story of Murad played by Ranveer Singh who carves out his journey from the slums of Mumbai to become a famous rapper. The movie is about every child surviving in some gully, sleeping with an empty stomach and waking up with no assurance of even a bite. Murad gives them hope and challenges the society by deciding to change his destiny. His voice in the movie “*Apna time aaega*” (Our time will come) is a wake-up call for all those people who have crushed the dreams of the slum dwellers. *Gully boy* highlights the fact that the youth in slums can have a life beyond the gullies and the alleyway. There are powerful vignettes of the poor and the disempowered, the inequities of the society that are brought out through the song *Doori*. “*Awaaz uthane ka*” (Raise your voice) says its protagonist and the audience is compelled to listen to his voice.

All of us live within pre-existing relations of unequal power, status, and economic resources and these unequal relations surround and constrain us. The purpose of stratification analysis is to see how such inequalities persist and endure over lifetimes and between generations. India’s myriad of ethnic, religious and linguistic identities makes it perhaps, the most geographically and culturally diverse nation on the planet. Historians have often tried to consider the narrative of Indian history under a Hindu nationalist light in terms of the influences brought by the invading groups on the subcontinent. Within the currents of Hindu historiography, particularly into 20th century, there was recognition of the legacy of periods of Islamic rule in particular on the inequities manifested by an elite of Muslim rulers subjugating a Hindu majority. However, social and caste division have long existed in India that continued with the British colonial period that added an extra Indian layer to the social stratification. Present day India is still home to numerous ethnic and religious groups with a vibrant film industry as varied as the country itself.

The Indian film industry centred in modern Mumbai, known as Bollywood has historically featured an interesting mix of cultural influences. The Bollywood film industry serves different ethnic and linguistic groups. Since India’s regional entities are so pronounced, the Bollywood film industry has enjoyed a centralising function in the development of a cinematic culture that has been accepted through the entire subcontinent.

The influence of Bollywood cinema has been important for the creation of a hegemonic culture that seeks to attract Indian citizens of all ethnic backgrounds and all castes. Indian cinema presents a diversity of ideas and there has been a development in the themes of the movies from past to present. Bollywood influences the society and people tend to follow what they see in movies. Bollywood not only includes a large variety of films made and viewed in Mumbai but also has gained worldwide recognition from viewers globally. The issue of socio-cultural stratification has been a dominant theme in Bollywood since long. However, the approach over the years has undergone a change.

Though the intention and reflection of the societal issues continues, the victimized characters who were portrayed as the unheard, are now shown to be voicing their opinions out loud in the face of adversity and also shattering orthodox and oppressive ideologies of suppression meanwhile, inspiring numerous victimized voices. These movies have shown characters dealing with complex psychological issues created by the external forces as well as, their internal turmoil. Some of these movies have depicted traumatizing events and how the characters struggle to deal with them. The filmmakers have made a brilliant attempt at showcasing trauma and how the responses to the different traumatic events vary thus, making the portrayal realistic and grave.

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