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Celluloid India: Cinema as a Mirror to Society

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Abstract

Cinema plays a dual role in its relationship with society. On one hand, it reflects the societal norms, values, and realities, acting as a mirror to society. On the other hand, it is also influenced and shaped by the exact societal norms, creating a dynamic interplay between the two. It is a fascinating blend of art and technology, that influences our values, echoes our socio-cultural beliefs, and impacts the way we perceive the world. Cinema is beyond entertainment; it informs, reflects values, opens doors for new ideas, and often impacts our belief system. It creates an emotional connection with audiences and has the power to break stereotypes and propel social change. With the advent of technology, there has been a paradigm shift in the film-viewing experience. Watching films was once a community experience but with the rise in streaming platforms like Netfilx and Amazon Prime, ZEE5, SonyLiv, Hotstar to name a few, it has become a more personal experience. The transition of film viewing from 35mm and 70mm reels in theatres with the public, to television, VHS, VCR, and DVD players at home with family and presently to on-demand curated experience on OTT platforms has been remarkable. The medium has evolved with time and technology and so

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have the tastes and preferences of audiences. In this chapter, we will study the journey the films over the years their role in society, and their impact on the lives of their audience.

Keywords: *#cinema, #society, #socialchange, #audience #paradigmshift #theatre #OTT.*

Introduction

The relationship between cinema and society is a long-standing one, dating back to the early days of filmmaking. At the outset films were perceived as a novelty, with short films showcasing everyday life, comedic skits, and historic events. Those films showcased the societal values and norms of that era. With the passage of time the quality of cinema evolved, filmmakers started focussing on varied and complex socio-economic issues like poverty, crime, and social and economic inequality. The emergence of new wave film movement and counterculture cinema marked a significant shift in the relationship between cinema and society. Some path-breaking storytelling and techniques adopted in films like Vittorio De Sica's **Bicycle Thieves** and Jean-Luc Godard's **Breathless** paved the way for worldwide film movements. Films like **Pather Panchali**, **Aparajito** and **Apur Sangsar** (Apu Trilogy) directed by the renowned director Satyajit Ray presented the social realities and inequalities of that time whereas films like **Devi** and **Nayak** explores the complexities of identity and challenged mainstream values set by the Indian society at that time. Filmmakers like Mrinal Sen, Ritwik Ghatak gifted the world some cult-classics like **Bhuvan Shome**, **Interview**, **Meghe Dhaka Tara** and **Subornorekha** which remained relevant beyond time and space.

The journey of cinema: From global to local

The journey of cinema from the global stage to the Indian context has been a fascinating one. From the early days of cinema, when Indian filmmakers were influenced by global cinematic trends, to the rise of Indian cinema as a distinct entity, the journey has been marked by a gradual shift from globalization to localization. As Indian cinema evolved, it began to reflect the country's diverse cultures, languages, and experiences, giving rise to vibrant regional film industries like Bollywood, Tamil, Telugu, and Malayalam. The global era of cinema can be traced back to the late

nineteenth to early twentieth century with the Lumière brothers' *Cinématographe* released in 1895. Hollywood dominated global cinema, producing films that appealed to a broader audience. With time there have been interesting international collaborations resulting in co-productions among filmmakers across borders. Notable films like *Rashomon*, a Japan-India co-production, directed by Akira Kurosawa in 1950 to The *Lunchbox*, an India-France-Germany co-production, directed by Ritesh Batra in 2013 have enthralled the audiences with their engaging and relatable storytelling.

The mid-twentieth century witnessed a rise of film movements at the national level, with the likes of critically acclaimed directors Jean-Luc Godard, François Truffaut, Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak, Mrinal Sen to name a few, films became an effective tool of mass communication creating works that reflected local cultures and concerns and issues that concerned the majority of the population and thus striking a chord with the audience immediately. The New Wave filmmakers made a profound impact on the cinematic landscape, revolutionizing the art of storytelling and filmmaking. By rejecting traditional narrative structures and embracing innovative techniques, they infused cinema with a fresh sense of realism, experimentation, and creative freedom. Regional film industries also flourished over time, with Bollywood (India), Nollywood (Nigeria), and Hong Kong cinema becoming significant players. Governments also recognized the potency of cinema as a tool for disseminating information, shaping public opinion, and influencing minds, and soon began to use it as a tool of propaganda by extending financial support to the local film industries through subsidies, and film commissions. In India, The National Film Development Corporation of India (NFDC) is a central government agency established in 1975 to promote and support the development of Indian cinema, *Manthan* (1976), *Bhumika* (1977), *Mirch Masala* (1987), *Salaam Bombay!* (1988), are some of the notable films produced by NFDC. The 1970s and 1980s witnessed a significant shift in Indian cinema, with the emergence of masala films as a dominant force minting money at the box office. This change was fundamentally driven by the success of films like *Sholay* (1975) and *Amar Akbar Anthony* (1977), which amalgamated action, comedy, and drama to create a

new kind of cinematic experience. Multi-genre storytelling backed by over-the-top performances and larger-than-life characters, melodramatic acting, and dramatic plot twists were the main attributes of these films. Elaborate musical sequences that often drive the plot forward. Films like *Roti, Kapda aur Makaan* (1974), and *Mr. India* (1987) also presented social commentary.

Cinema in India underwent major transformations over the decades. In the 1990s, Bollywood films were heavily influenced by Hollywood, with many incorporating Western-style action sequences and romantic comedies. Films like *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995), *Dil To Pagal Hai* (1997), and *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998) dominated the decade, showcasing romantic relationships and family values. Shah Rukh Khan became a phenomenon of this era. Action films like *Ghayal* (1990), *Khiladi* (1992), and *Karan Arjun* (1995) featured high-octane action sequences, often inspired by Hollywood films. Nonetheless, this period also saw the rise of regional cinema, with industries like Tamil, Telugu, and Malayalam gaining prominence. Tamil films namely *Nayakan* (1987) and *Thalapathi* (1991) resonated with the audiences immensely. Films like *Geetanjali* (1989) and *Shiva* (1990) created a stir in the Telegu film industry in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Around the same the Bengali film fraternity saw the entry and rise of the celebrated director Rituporno Ghosh, his film *Unishe April* (1994) is regarded as a landmark film in Bengali cinema, celebrated for its nuanced exploration of complex relationships, themes, and emotions. Post-2000s, Indian cinema experienced a resurgence, with filmmakers like Ram Gopal Verma, Anurag Kashyap and Dibakar Banerjee pushing the boundaries of storytelling and cinematic style. Films like *Satya* (1999), *Love, Sex aur Dhokha* (2010), and *Gangs of Wasseypur* (2012) revolutionized Indian cinema with its gritty realism, dark themes, and innovative storytelling. The advent of OTT platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime, ZEE5, SonyLiv and Hotstar in recent times has further transformed the industry, enabling creators to produce innovative, niche content and reach global audiences. Today, Indian cinema is a vibrant, diverse ecosystem, with filmmakers continually experimenting with new themes, genres, and formats. As the internet continues to make content instantly accessible, this journey promises to be fulfilling for both audiences

and creators alike. From the audience's perspective, having a vast array of content at their fingertips offers unparalleled convenience and choice. Meanwhile, from the creator's standpoint, the digital landscape presents endless opportunities to craft, share, and connect with audiences through innovative, engaging, and captivating content.

Portrayal of Women in Cinema

The depiction of women in cinema has undergone substantial transformations since its inception. In India, initially male actors used to portray female characters since acting as a profession was not accepted as a noble profession for women in the Indian society. Due to societal taboos and limited female participation women refrained from working in films in any capacity. Actresses like Devika Rani, Leena Chitnis, Nargis, Madhubala and Meena Kumari gained popularity; by mostly acting in stereotypical roles like mothers, wives, and courtesans. These roles of the female characters were often written in a conventional way, subservient to male protagonists. But eventually those characters became household names and the giving stardom to the actresses thus paving the way for future generations. While director Mehboob Khan in his landmark film *Mother India* (1957) presented the protagonist Radha played by Nargis as a strong character, a true feminist to some extent, but the portrayal of the character was also bound by stereotypes like self-sacrificing, submissive, and obedient wife, reinforcing patriarchal norms. Another cult-classic of that era *Pakeezah* (1972) directed by Kamal Amrohi, although known for its stunning visuals, memorable music, and poignant storytelling but the film's representation of women is complex and multifaceted, reflecting the societal norms and values of the time. Sahibjaan played by Meena Kumari was a courtesan who embodies the contradictions of her profession. She was represented as a strong-willed and independent woman who is also vulnerable and trapped in her circumstances. At the same time Satyajit Ray gave us female protagonists like Arati played by Sumitra Mukhopadhyay in *Mahanagar* (1963) an ordinary homemaker turned into an extraordinary working professional when life threw challenges at her. Women in renowned director Mrinal Sen's films *36 Chowringhee Lane* (1981) and *Khandhar* (1984) are represented as far more strong and independent defying some of

the societal norms. These women were not insensitive, they were flawed, and the depiction was in-sync with their reality. Actresses Smita Patil and Shabana Azmi were instrumental in championing parallel cinema, a genre that tackled socially relevant issues and captivated audiences nationwide. Through their powerful performances, they helped bring attention to pressing concerns, leaving a lasting impact on Indian cinema and resonating with millions of viewers. In 2005, director Nagesh Kukunoor likely pioneered the first Hindi film centred on female friendship with *Dor*. The film also focused on empowerment, and social justice, the film creates an impact for its thought-provoking storyline, and social relevance. Despite their vastly different outlooks on life and the tragic circumstances that bring them together, Meera and Zeenat form an extraordinary bond, weaving a spell of cinematic magic that transcends their disparate worlds. For decades, Hindi cinema has relegated actresses to ornamental roles, reducing them to mere props or trophies that embellish the frame without contributing substance to the narrative. Many female characters have been crafted with minimal depth, serving only to enhance the visual appeal of the film rather than driving the story forward. This shift was not confined to Hindi cinema alone, but also permeated regional cinema, where traditionally, male actors had dominated the spotlight, leaving female characters to play secondary roles with a few exceptions in parallel films. The 1970s and 1980s were dominated by masculinity-fuelled action films, where heroes emerged as chivalrous saviours. This trend continued into the 1990s and early 2000s, where romantic comedies and love stories perpetuated the notion of machismo, often portraying men as the dominant force in relationships and reinforcing the idea of male power and control. The 1980s and 1990s also ushered in the rise of iconic female superstars in Indian cinema, who left an indelible mark on the industry and paved the way for future generations of actresses. Films like Chandni (1989) and Tezaab (1988) stood out as female-centric classics, shedding light on the stories and struggles of women. Against this backdrop, Sridevi and Madhuri Dixit ascended to iconic status, embodying beauty, elegance, and youthful energy. Their mesmerizing performances captivated audiences, inspiring a generation of women and cementing their legacies as two of Indian cinema's most beloved actresses. Traditional Hindi masala films have predominantly

perpetuated stereotypical portrayals of women, often relegating them to narrow, conventional roles that reinforce societal clichés rather than showcasing nuanced, multidimensional characters. In 2000, the film Astitva, featuring Tabu, sparked controversy with its fearless and unflinching portrayal of femininity and female desire, shattering societal norms and challenging traditional notions of womanhood and motherhood.

Representation of marginalized community in Cinema

Indian cinema has a long and complex history of representing marginalized communities. The representation of these communities in both mainstream and parallel cinema has been a focus of many discussions. Indian cinema has perpetuated stereotypical, one-dimensional portrayals and reinforced social hierarchies, marginalizing vulnerable groups. But, over the past decade, a notable shift has occurred, marked by a growing sensitivity towards these sections of the society. This increased understanding has led to more nuanced and inclusive representations, signalling a positive transformation in the industry's approach to depicting diverse communities. The representation of marginalized groups in Indian films has undergone significant changes over the years, reflecting shifting societal attitudes and the evolving film industry. During the early years (1930s-1960s), women were often portrayed as submissive, obedient, and domesticated. Films like *Achhut Kanya* (1936) and *Mother India* (1957) reinforced patriarchal norms. Through the 1970s and 1980s women-centric films like *Aandhi* (1975), *Arth* (1982), and *Damul* (1984) emerged, showcasing strong female characters and exploring themes like feminism and social justice. In the recent times, Indian cinema has seen a surge in women-led films, such as *The Dirty Picture* (2011), *Pink* (2016), and Thappad (2020), which tackle issues like sexism, oppression, harassment, and domestic violence.

Although in the early years to the recent past Indian cinema often used transgender characters as comedic relief or villains, perpetuating negative stereotypes their depiction and representation have evolved with time, some of the path-breaking films from this genre are *My Brother... Nikhil* (2005) and *I Am* (2010) marking a shift towards more sensitive and nuanced

portrayals of transgender individuals. Films like *Aligarh* (2016) and *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* (2019) have continued to promote understanding and acceptance of transgender individuals. Over the last few decades, Indian cinema has made significant progress in representing marginalized groups over the years. Nevertheless, there is still a need for more nuanced and inclusive storytelling to promote empathy, understanding, and social change.

Impact of Cinema in our Everyday Lives

The impact of cinema on our everyday lives is profound, influencing our culture, socio-economic dynamics, gender representation, and day-to-day activities in complex ways. Cinema reflects and shapes our cultural identity, providing a window into our history, traditions, and values. It influences our socio-economic dynamics, often highlighting social issues, sparking conversations, and driving change. Cinema also plays a significant role in shaping gender representation, challenging stereotypes, and promoting equality. Through representation, cinema has the power to break down barriers, challenge patriarchal norms, and inspire feminist movements. Cinema impacts our day-to-day activities, from the music we listen to, the fashion we follow, to the way we express ourselves. Movie quotes, dialogues, and characters often become an integral part of our pop culture lexicon, referencing them in our daily conversations. Cinema also influences our relationships, with on-screen romances and friendships often shaping our expectations and perceptions of love and relationships. Cinema has become an integral part of our entertainment, leisure, and socializing activities, providing a shared experience that brings people together.

Celluloid Activism: The agent for social change

Celluloid activism refers to the use of cinema as a tool for social change. Indian cinema has a rich history of using films as a medium to raise awareness about social issues and inspire change. For instance, films like *Mother India* (1957) and *Do Bigha Zamin* (1953) highlighted the struggles of rural India and the plight of farmers, sparking conversations about land reform and social justice. More recent films like *Mrs.* (2025) and *Pink* (2016) have tackled issues like gender roles and consent, respectively, helping

to break down stigmas and challenge societal norms. Some of the other notable examples include *My Name Is Khan* (2010), which explored themes of identity, community, and acceptance. Through celluloid activism, Indian cinema has consistently demonstrated its power to inspire, educate, and mobilize audiences towards creating a more just and equitable society. Hindi cinema has consistently demonstrated a sympathetic stance towards student activism, showcasing its significance and impact through various films. Notable examples include **Yuva** (2004), **Rang De Basanti** (2006), **Gulaal** (2009), **Aarakshan** (2011), and **Raanjhanaa** (2013), which highlight the passion, idealism, and struggles of student activists, underscoring the importance of their role in shaping society and driving change.

New Directions in Cinema and Society

The relationship between cinema and society is complex and multifaceted. As we have explored in this chapter, cinema has the power to shape our perceptions, challenge our assumptions, and inspire social change. The evolving landscape of cinema, with the rise of new technologies, platforms, and voices, offers exciting new directions for the study of cinema and society. The impact of cinema is so profound that governments have leveraged it as a strategic tool for political communication, often using it to disseminate their ideology and propaganda. This phenomenon is evident in Indian cinema, where films like *Roja* (1992) and *The Legend of Bhagat Singh* (2002) have been used to promote nationalistic sentiments and patriotic fervour. Similarly, films like *Swades* (2004) and Toilet: *Ek Prem Katha* (2017) have been aligned with government initiatives, such as rural development and sanitation, respectively, highlighting the significant role of cinema in shaping public opinion and promoting government agendas. In the Indian context, films like Idiots (2009) questioned the conventional education system, encouraging students to think creatively and pursue their passions and in *Padman* (2018) a powerful social message was conveyed in the context of Indian society, highlighting the importance of menstrual hygiene management, breaking taboos and stigmas surrounding menstruation, and promoting women's empowerment and dignity. These films have demonstrated the power of cinema to challenge social norms and promote social

change. More recent films like *Newton* (2017) and *Article 15* (2019) have highlighted the ongoing struggles of marginalized communities in India, sparking important conversations about social justice and equality.

The advent of Internet has given rise to the streaming platforms like Netflix and Amazon Prime in India has also enabled new voices and perspectives to reach a wider audience. Web series like *Sacred Games*, *Pataal Lok, Black Warrant* and *Made in Heaven* have pushed the boundaries of Indian storytelling, tackling complex social issues like corruption, patriarchy, and identity. As we move forward into a new era of cinematic innovation and experimentation, it is more important than ever to consider the social, cultural, and political contexts in which Indian films are made, consumed, and interpreted. It is essential that we acknowledge and appreciate the significant impact of cinema on society, while also encouraging filmmakers to adopt a more responsible and thoughtful approach when tackling sensitive topics. Given its immense influence, cinema has the potential to raise awareness, spark meaningful conversations, and drive positive social change, making it a crucial tool for promoting social justice, equality, and progress.

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