

Essay on Violence and Vulgarity in Indian Films

India has one of the oldest film industries in the world. Though the first film advertisement in India appeared in the Times of India on 7 July 1896, inviting people to witness the Lumiere Brothers' moving pictures, "The wonder of the world", was not until in early 1913 that an Indian film received a public screening. 'Rajah Harischandra' was an extraordinary commercial success: its director, Dadasaheb Phalke, who is now remembered through a life-time achievement award bestowed by the film industry in his name, went on to make a number of other films drawing upon themes derived from the Indian epics. Phalke could not find a woman to play the female roles, being turned down in this endeavor not only by 'respectable' women but by prostitutes, and had to resort to the expedient of choosing a young man, A. Salunke, to play the female roles in his early films. Among the middle classes, that association of acting with the loss of virtue, female modesty and respectability has only recently been put into question, whatever degree of emulation actresses might appear to receive from an adoring public.

While a number of other film-makers, working in several Indian languages, pioneered the growth and development of Indian cinema, the studio system was beginning to emerge in the early 1930s. Its most successful initial product was the film Devdas (1935) whose director P.C. Barua also appeared in the lead; the Hindi re-make of the original Bengali film also directed by Barua was to establish the legendary career of Kundan Lal Saigal. The Tamil version of this New Theatres release appeared in 1936. "To some extent", the authors of Indian Film, "Devdas was a film of social protest. It carried an implied indictment of arranged marriage and undoubtedly gave some satisfaction on this score to those who hate this institution". The Prabhat Film Company established by V. G. Damle, Shantaram, S.

Fatehlal and two others in 1929 has also achieved its first successes. Damle and Fatehlal 's 'Sant Tukaram' (1936) made in Marathi was the first Indian film to gain international recognition winning an award at Venice. The social films of V. Shantaram more than anything else paved the way for the directors who took it upon themselves to interrogate not only the institutions of marriage, dowry, and widowhood but also the grave inequities created by caste and class distinctions. Some of these problems received perhaps their most explicit expression in 'Achhut Kanya' ("Untouchable Girl", 1936), a film directed by Himanshu Rai of Bombay Talkies. The film portrays the travails of a Harij girl, played by Devika Rani, and a Brahmin boy, played by Ashok Kumar, whose love for each other cannot merely be consummated but must have a tragic end.

The next significant phase of Hindi cinema is associated with such prominent figures as Raj Kapoor, Bimal Roy, and Guru Dutt. Raj Kapoor, the son of Prithviraj Kapoor; created some of the most popular and memorable films in Hindi cinema.

Awaara (The Vagabond, 1951), Shri 420 (1955), and Jagte Raho (1957) were both commercial and critical successes. Many of his films explore in a rather benign way, the class fissures in Indian society. Bimal Roy's Do Bigha Zamin ("Two Acres of Land". 1954) which shows the influence of Italian neo-realism, explored the difficult life of the rural peasantry under the most oppressive conditions; his film Devdas (1955), with Dilip Kumar playing the title role in a re-make of Barua's film, was a testimony to the near impossibility of the fulfillment of 'love' under Indian social conditions while Sujata (1959) pointed at the problems posed by marriages arranged by parents without the consent of their children. Meanwhile, the Hindi cinema had seen the rise of its first undisputed genius, Guru Dutt whose films critiqued the conventions of society and deplored the conditions which compel artists to forgo their inspiration. From

Barua's *Devdas* (1935) to Guru Dutt's *Sahib, Bibi aur Gulam* (with Guru Dutt and Meena Kumari), the motif of "doomed love" looms large: too many critics, a maudlin sentimentality characterizes even the best of the Hindi cinema before the advent of the new or alternative Indian cinema in the 1970s.

A dramatic shift is taking place in the style of film making due to the globalization of film and this has caused concern with conservative Indians. The Indian film industry which churns out around 800 films per year has come under scrutiny for producing films that were deemed too 'sexed up'.

Bollywood consisted of escapist musicals with common storylines of good vs. evil and boy meets girl. The films were generally family orientated and the plot was kept simple so that even the rural villager would find it easy to relate to. There has now, however, been a gradual shift in film style that has threatened the values and culture of Indian society.

The current Bollywood formula has some causes for concern because the transplantation of western ideas has led to extreme vulgarity with high sexual innuendo and unnecessary violence in the films. This argument begins with the comments made by the Film Federation of India, a regulatory body that presides over film content. They complain that the films made in Bollywood were too westernized and are degrading and diminishing India's true cultural identity.

All six films shortlisted as possible entrants for the Oscars have been rejected by the FFI. The short-listed films were *Koi Mil Gaya*, *Gangajal*, *Janantaram Manantarain* (a film based on Gulliver's Travels), *Jhankar Beats* (Musical Beats), *Andaaz* and *Jogger's Park*.

FFI Chairman, Harmesh Malhotra, was particularly critical of one of

the new releases, Jogger's Park, which was half in English. Mr. Malhotra, speaking to the BBC, regretted that the films were now increasingly portraying only the Westernised section of Indian society.

Another is the case for duplication of popular Hollywood films. If you point to any new Bollywood release you can bet that there existed a Hollywood original somewhere down the line. *Koi Mil Gaya* mentioned above is a befuddled remake of ET and other recent films like Bhoot (Ghost) saw the emergence of an Indian Exorcist and *Raaz* (Secret) was taken from '*What Lies Beneath*'. This highlights the worrying dependency of the Indian film industry.

Films like '*Oops*' and '*Boom*' have caused a lot of controversy in India. *Oops* deals with the story representing two male strippers, a concept so vague and unfamiliar to the Indian audience that there was rioting in some cinema theatres is an attempt to ban the film. *Boom* shows the three main female leads strut through most of the two hour film in little more than bikinis and are frequently the target of crude sexual remarks. One male leads asking a woman to perform oi-al sex under his desk when he works. Elsewhere in the world that might be considered relatively tame stuff, but not in India where even smooching in public can still cause outrage.

This, therefore, raises questions about India's anxiety about the influence of the West i.e. Hollywood. If the industry is producing films that are too westernized and deemed too sexy by the regulatory bodies like the FFI then it begs to ask why filmmakers are increasingly producing such films.

Rashika Singh is a producer and upcoming director who has worked on many film projects as assistant director including *Devdas* which won critical acclaim at the Cannes Film Festival. She believes that

filmmakers in India are increasingly targeting a minority youth audience who are based in cities. She comments that “the younger viewers want their idols to dance like Michael Jackson, swagger like Tom Cruise, fight like Jackie Chan—and still croon to their beloved in Swiss meadows, and deliver rhetorical dialogue with panache! It is like having your Indian cake and licking the forbidden western icing too.”

Therefore, it can be speculated that there is a westernised audience that is catered for but what about the traditionalists with opposing values. India’s rural population of farmers and villagers provides a vital contribution to the economy of the film industry. They cannot possibly understand the values and issues expressed in a Hollywood style.

The criticism of the change in film style also comes from the religious groups and separatist groups who feel that Bollywood films are degrading traditional values. Recently separatist guerrillas in India’s north-east have called for a ban on the screening of Bollywood films, claiming they are too racy for young people and threaten local culture. Nine rebel groups, all fighting for independent homelands in seven States in the region, say the film industry is a bad influence because of its “erotic song and dance” and the imposition of Indian culture. Manish Pandya, a local Hindu priest in the UK agrees with the view adopted by the religious far right in India. He argues that “Young people are not interested in their traditions any longer and the lifestyle portrayed in films is the root of the problem” he asserts. “ Yes, you can be westernized and make films of high quality but not by portraying a culture that diminishes out our values and traditions.”

Young British Asians living in the UK can be taken as ideal examples of an audience that has had to cope with merging their traditional

and westernized values. You would have expected British Asians to welcome the idea that Bollywood films are more westernized and in tune with the changing culture. A few of them revealed that there were some young British Asians who felt that films with sex and nudity distorted traditional values.

The globalization of both east and west film styles can be seen to be a success when Hollywood takes on the ideas of Bollywood. When Australian director Baz Lurman was filming Moulin Rouge he commented that his intention was to apply the Bollywood masala' formulae. When director Shekhar Kapur shot 'Elizabeth' he insisted that it have all the kinetic color of a Bollywood film. Kapur was also the producer for the recent Bollywood style romantic comedy "The Guru" complete with dance numbers and dream scenes. New releases like Bollywood Queen and Bride and Prejudice also intend to apply this formula.

The Indian industry should learn a lesson that when they stick to their own techniques, films like Lagaan are produced to get nominated for an Oscar. The current duplication and imitation only produce excessive and unnecessary sex and violence which does not sit well with the majority of the Indian audience. The Indian cultural ethos and its people are not as flexible as the west, therefore, films deemed too westernized will always be rejected, regardless of the extent of the globalisation of cultures.

Concerning with over growing violence in films, the government told the Raj ya Sabha it was considering seeking a review of the guidelines of the Central Board of Film Certification. Stating the government did not have much role to play and it was for the Censor Board to curb sex and violence in films, Information, and Broadcasting Minister Ravi Shankar Prasad said that last year the Censor Board cut as much as 12,000 meters of film reel in 942 Indian films. Maybe, there is a requirement to review the guidelines of

1991. I am thinking in these terms though the government does not come into the picture,” Prasad said while stating that there had to be a blend of both creativity and censor cuts. The freedom of expression should also be taken into consideration while undertaking any cuts in the films, the minister said.

Prasad said, “The consultative committee of the Central Board of film censor had at least two women members to monitor objectionable portions in films.” “If there is any uncalled for domestic violence in films, the consultative committee would deal with it,” he said.

Actor Anupam Kher who has just been appointed Chairman of the Censor Board plans to bring TV under censorship riles. “I have discussed with the Information and Broadcasting Ministry to bring TV under the Cinematographer’s Act,” Kher said. “TV will be my main concern,” said the actor, who is also chairman of the National School of Drama. “Television is a medium where families get together. Sometimes when I watch TV programs related to films or remix videos makes me cringe a little. I don’t think the picturization of these videos should cross the limit of decency,” he said. TV videos like Kaanta Laga and Chadti Javani, among others, have recently been the subject of much controversy owing to their alleged vulgarity.

On common issues that have come under the censor’s knife in the past: kissing, violence, skimpy outfits, Kher remains noncommittal. “It’s too early to talk in finality. We will select people from different walks of life for the board. They will be properly briefed and I do not expect them to be rigid,” said Kher, “I am from films and understand the medium of expression. The response will depend upon the intention of the filmmaker. Out of 300 films a year, only two or three-run into controversy and we remember only those.”

On his part, Kher is clear that double standards are unacceptable. “I

have no fixed ideas on how films should be censored," he said, "But I understand Indian ethos and feel that what applies to our home, should apply to our culture."

"If your mother can watch the film with you, even if it has nudity, vulgarity, and violence, then your film will get its due consideration as per its intentions."

With the appointment of Anupam Kher as Chairman of the Censor Board, Mid Day asked filmmakers and producers what are their expectations from him. Mahesh Bhatt, whose film Zakhn on Hindu-Muslim differences stirred controversy due to censorship, said it's the best thing to have happened. He (Kher) comes from the National School of Drama and has 20 years of solid experience in feature films. He has an understanding of the Indian ethos. But what's unique about Anupam is that he's still a practicing actor and not a once-great taken from the shelf. As a practicing actor, he lives with the concerns and aspirations of filmmakers. a lie will probably have problems with filmmakers like me but he has the conviction to standby his beliefs and should not spare even me.

British Nandy, whose film Hazaon Khwaishen Aisi (Sudhir Mishra) recently landed into censor trouble. "Anupam brings with him the experience and exposure of contemporary cinema all over the world. I'm sure someone with his kind of knowledge and experience will completely transform Neanderthal censorship practices prevailing in India. I'm sick and tired of censorship issues. If anybody is qualified to bring about a critical change, it will be Anupam.

Anupam is a highly intellectual, liberated thinker. I hope he can translate this attitude to help upgrade, if not abolish, archaic censor guidelines. He should work towards liberating the thinking process of members of the Censor Board, which is a set of convoluted

ideas of various people who are not always clear and focussed. He will have to get more involved in the work on a policy level.”

Children are also molded on what they are fed, not just physically, but also mentally and emotionally. Children’s tastes are built by what they are exposed to. Superficial forms of entertainment are always quickly digested, just like junk food. A healthy, balanced diet of wholesome entertainment is the need of the hour. The present-day picturization of sex and violence in films is not only against the long-cherished Indian traditions , but also affecting the young generation and the children of our country adversely. The increase in sex crimes and other criminal activities are the result of sex and violence supplied through the films to a great extent. To save the young generation from this deprivation and degeneration, some suitable resulting actions are required to be initiated urgently.