

INDIAN CINEMA: ADDRESSING UNTOUCHED TOPICS AND BREAKING TABOOS

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Abstract: Cinema is said to be the mirror of the society, portraying what culture, traditions, customs are followed in a society in a particular era. On the other hand, society also seems to get affected by what is shown on the big screen. The relationship between the two is unique and has been into existence for long. Since, movies are a reflection of reality or somewhat revolve around the prevalent social norms, some issues have always remained untouched by the Indian cinema, due to the issues being considered unwanted or as taboos. The tags of 'unacceptable' and 'acceptable' are always labelled along with every topic.

Of late, the Indian movies portrayed a shift from safe and acceptable topics to the untouched and neglected topics. The topics which were considered taboos or if not taboos, at least not considered worthy of giving a thought, are now portrayed through the art of cinema, creating a hook in audience's minds and leaving an impact on them. A movie like 'Padman' brought the topic of menstrual hygiene onto Indian screens and homes, which was considered a taboo in the society. Movies like Toilet: Ek Prem Katha, Lipstick Under My Burkha, Pink, Piku, Lakshmi, Dear Zindagi proved that the Indian society is changing and it must change with regard to the mindsets borne by the people.

The study will aim at analysing the recent movies with contemporary and liberated ideas in order to explore the impact that Indian cinema can create in broadening the mindsets and bringing a much desired social change. By focusing on the content of the above mentioned movies and their success and failure at the hands of the Indian audience, the study will explore the potential of present day Indian cinema in addressing issues of prime importance and their acceptance by the Indian audience.

Keywords: Taboos, Indian cinema, social change, contemporary.

INTRODUCTION

Cinema is an immensely powerful tool of expression and depiction of events, whether they are real, fictional, animated or mythological. The art of cinema brings life on the screen in such a way that it creates a highly strong impact on the audience, thereby influencing their mindsets. Cinema and society are always seen in a unique relationship, with movies, to some extent, portraying the story and characters in line with the prevalent social norms, values, cultures, traditions and beliefs, and in turn, the society also seems to get influenced or affected by the kind of depiction on the screen. With the changing times, the change in the Indian cinema has always been evident. For instance, the movies of Pre-Independence time and Post-Independence time were different in their approach and story.

The predicament of the people of a country at a particular time determines the types of movies that are made and shown. If a movie like Prem Rog by legendary actor-director Raj Kapoor released in the 1980s showed the plight of a young widow, raped by her brother in law and her ordeal of dealing with widowhood in a society where a widow is considered no less than a stigma, it reflected the mindsets that people had at that time, with regard to widows and love marriages. Movies like Salaam Namaste and Cocktail portrayed live-in relationship, which is a less discussed topic. These movies released in the 21st century and people accepted them. Had it been in the 80s, the society wouldn't have given the consent to the movie. This is because of the development and the passage of time, with which there comes a change in the perceptions and thinking of the people. In today's time, when there is no Sati practice or Jauhar, then the movies also don't hint about such topics at present. So, society and movies are always in a close relationship, with one influenced and impacted by the other.

It's not that in the present times, there is nothing which is not hidden or considered a taboo. It's just that time brings everything to change and every era or period has its own challenges. There was a time when in majority of the movies, women were only meant to add the glamour quotient or to play the love interest of the male lead. But later, movies started showing women in the main lead with role of substance and not just to glorify the movie. The change stimulated more women oriented movies to hit the screens and their acceptance by the society. So, when cinema is used to depict the changing societal perceptions, then the acceptance of the change speeds up among the society.

Indian Cinema has greatly evolved over time with technological, portrayal, dramatic and execution changes. With regard to movies made with social messages or intent to create a positive impact, there was a time when poverty, unemployment, child

marriage, widowhood, alcoholism, plight of women, nation's independence and the likes were taken up as the subjects of movies. Later, with development, the issues changed, but there have been several topics which have still remained untouched due to them being considered taboos.

Over the past few years, Indian Cinema has opened up with regard to the subject of the movie. Movies like Vicky Donor, where the protagonist is a sperm donor, Lakshmi, which raised the issue of forced prostitution, Margarita with a Straw, which showed the challenges of a girl with cerebral palsy, Piku, which addressed constipation in a humourous way and Ki & Ka, that showed gender role reversal, have shown how movies can be an effective medium of social change, impacting the masses through cinematic expression.

This paper deals with analysing the contemporary movies that have attempted to pick up subjects which are not touched, talked or discussed openly. Movies like Toilet: Ek Prem Katha, Padman, Pink and Lipstick Under My Burkha released in recent years dealt with subjects that are considered taboos in India even in the contemporary times. This paper aims to study the representation of such subjects in the Indian movies released in the past 3 years and analyse how they are dealt with and performance of such movies on the box office. 5 movies: Pink, Toilet: Ek Prem Katha, Dear Zindagi, Padman and Lipstick Under My Burkha, have been taken up and analysed to achieve the aims of the study.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research methodology adopted in the study is content analysis. Content analysis of the mentioned movies of the past 3 years is done with an aim to study how bold and untouched subjects are taken up and represented in Bollywood. The movies were selected on the basis of the subjects taken up and issues addressed thereof to strike people's minds with such topics which were unheard and not discussed till now. The movies are made on specific subjects, with an objective to entertain, spread awareness, bring a topic into discussion or highlight an issue of social importance or to bring perceptual changes among the members of the society. The movies chosen reflect subjects of societal importance, which have been taken up to bring a positive change in the mindsets of the people. By analysing the depiction and treatment of subject in such movies, it is aimed to ascertain how untouched topics have been taken up and how they have been received by the society. This will facilitate in ascertaining the role of Cinema in being the driving force for social change.

ANALYSIS OF CONTENT

PINK- Addressed the issue of women's rights and protection

Pink movie released in the year 2016 broke the stereotypes and made a mark by addressing the quintessential and untouched topic of women protection and rights. Quite contrary to the stereotypical Indian movies where in female actors were only meant to glam up the scenes or add sizzle and sensation to the movies and songs, Pink portrayed women as strong individuals who have the right to protect themselves against the injustice and violence inflicted upon them by the male section of the society. Due to the highly significant issue of women safety, dignity and rights, the movie's special screening was held at Rashtrapati Bhawan and also invited by the United Nations for the special screening at its headquarters in New York.

'No means no' - this actually started making sense after people watched the movie Pink. It clearly stated that when a girl says no, it simply and strictly means no, and does not need any excuse, reason, clarification or explanation. This emphasised the importance of women's consent, which is never given any importance because it is considered trivial.

The dialogues of the movie became popular as quotations, stating the bitter truths of male chauvinistic society and dealing with them in the right manner. The portrayal of 3 female friends and the way they are dragged into court by the boys who themselves approached the girls with wrong intentions and the brave fight that the girls put up to get justice is commendable. The presence of Bollywood's legendary actor Amitabh Bachhan gave significance to the movie. Pink also proved that movies with social topics can also do well at the box office and are not necessarily made with small budget, intended to be labelled as 'art movies', left to be watched only by the critics and not the mainstream audience. The movie won several awards and did extremely well at the hands of the critics as well as the audience. It challenged all the self made notions of the Indian society wherein women are supposed to follow rules on how to speak, walk, dress up, present or behave while men have all the liberty to do whatever pleases them just because of the virtue of being males.

TOILET: EK PREM KATHA- Addressed the issue of open defecation

When the entire country was raising slogans and governments allocating funds for construction of toilets, to deal with the problem of open defecation, Indian Cinema gifted the nation with a unique film which struck the right chords with the audience. Toilet: Ek Prem Katha, right from its title, grabbed public attention, as it promised to challenge the existing mentality of not having a toilet inside the house. It addressed the most crucial and prevailing issue of the country, i.e., open defecation but not in the typical philosophical manner. Connecting the issue with marriage and a woman's dignity was a clever way to project it on the screen as it managed to reach the audience in the most impactful manner. Had it been in a mere statistical form, as every other

news article or government reports state, it would have failed to grab the attention and rush of audience, thereby failing to create an impact for bringing the desired change in the mindsets.

The movie, directed by Shree Narayan Singh, starred Akshay Kumar in the main lead, which increased the popularity and impact of the movie manifold. The actor has recently done quite a few films on issues of social importance and has been instrumental in promoting the respective social causes as much as the movies, through different platforms. The movie hits hard at the patriarchal notion of maintaining a 'Ghoonghat' as expected from the females, while at the same time urging them to defecate in the open. The self generated superstitions of not having a toilet in the home as 'Jis aangan mein Tulsi hai, usi mein Shauchalaya kaise ban sakta hai', do prevail in some parts of the country, which is why India has not yet been able to achieve the target of becoming an 'open defecation free' country. Treatment of the subject in the film has gone well with the audience, as the movie received immense praise and did great at the box office. It stressed upon the idea that it's high time that movies are made to create a positive impact for initiating a social change.

DEAR ZINDAGI- Addressed the importance of mental health

In 2016, Gauri Shinde's directorial movie Dear Zindagi gave Bollywood a reason to smile and audience to let go of their stress. For once, did any movie come up with the subject of mental health, giving a message that it is absolutely normal to think about your mental well being, that it is not a taboo to visit a psychiatrist and that if you go to a doctor to seek mental therapy you are not abnormal or mentally ill. The movie is actually an answer to all those suicide attempts that keep on happening due to depression, anxiety and closed doors of communication. Alia Bhatt, playing the lead character in the movie, is seen consulting a brain doctor, which is played by Shah Rukh Khan, who helps her in coming out of her restricted shell, opening up about her fears and eventually conquering them, so that she could live in peace and without anxiety. The movie rightly addresses the issue of mental health which is never paid heed to in the society. The shyness, awkwardness and reluctance among the people to consult a doctor to get mental health assessed are highlighted by the protagonist in the most impactful manner. There are so many people who succumb to stress, depression and anxiety, landing themselves in complete darkness which is acceptable by the society but going to a doctor or therapist to solve all these problems is considered a taboo. What an irony!

As Alia's character puts it, talking about your fears and anxiety to a doctor is considered a stigma in the society and you are labelled as insane. It is true! Despite living in the 21st century, reaping the benefits of all latest technologies, people's mindsets are still shallow. Is brain not as much a part of one's body as is any other organ? Can't brain be under some pressure? Rather it is the first one to feel that pressure. But, that does not mean that one is weak. There is stress in everyone's life, which doesn't let them concentrate on life's important aspects and pleasures. It may not always lead to depression or anxiety but sometimes there are some chapters of life which leave a deep mark on an individual so what's the harm in discussing that thoroughly so that their existence starts diminishing. This uneasiness and differential attitude towards the health of the most important part of human body, i.e. brain, need to be wiped off. That is where the movie takes the audience and establishes the fact that it is as normal to go to a psychiatrist as it is going to a physician for fever or any other medical expert for any reason. Gauri Shinde deserves the loudest applause for striking the hammer and breaking the bubble of misconceptions associated with mental health. The movie did manage to communicate a very important and needful message to the society and youngsters seemed to have gained a sense of relief, motivation and happiness after watching the movie.

PADMAN- Addressed the issue of menstrual hygiene

Padman released in 2018 chose a topic which has always been considered a taboo in the Indian society. This is the first time that the topic of menstrual hygiene was taken up as a subject of a movie. Because of the mindsets associated with the subject, the movie was a big risk but the response that the movie received at the hands of the audience, was unbelievable. People not only watched the movie, but also accepted it, liked and talked about the subject openly. It is always a great challenge and risk to make movie on a bold subject or against the prevalent societal norms or beliefs. So, from that point, Padman was a bold topic for the Indian audience to accept. Although, the execution of the content and the way the movie progressed could have been better, but it still received accolades as bringing such a subject on the Indian screens was itself an achievement. How people of every age and field of life made it to theatres to watch a movie that dealt with something which is always unspoken in the society, was something different to be witnessed. No protests from the people, no reluctance to watching the movie and the movie's lead actor Akshay Kumar coming out in open, discussing the topic were far from reality in the Indian society.

The movie brought to the fore the real Padman, Arunachalam Muruganatham, on whom the story was based. The movie was successful in highlighting the troubles of women, who cannot afford to buy high cost sanitary pads and thus have to resort to unhygienic means of dealing with menstruation. Such a movie proved that Indian cinema is changing and moving towards more realistic, significant and daring topics so that the art of movie making can be utilised to bring a change in the age old mentality existing in the society. Menstruation is still a taboo in our society which is why Padman was a risk but after the release of the movie, people's reaction stated otherwise and the movie was accepted and well received by the audience.

LIPSTICK UNDER MY BURKHA- Addressed the issue of women's sexuality

Lipstick Under My Burkha was one of a kind movie that took up gender issues, which have always been put on the back burner in the male chauvinistic Indian society. The movie dealt with the issue of women's desires and sexuality, which is otherwise silently kept under covers and has never been able to surface even in discussions let alone an entire movie been based on the same. Ratna Pathak Shah, Konkana Sen Sharma, Aahana Kumra and Plabita Borthakur played the roles of 4 common women whose secret lives, apart from their societal existence, have been depicted remarkably well by Director Alankrita Shrivastava. The film brought the often silenced feministic aspect to the silver screen, thereby grabbing the OXFAM award for Best Film on Gender Equality at the Mumbai Film Festival in 2016, before its release. The film grabbed numerous other awards in and outside country, while it had to struggle for months to hit the screens, having been denied a certificate by the CBFC. The objections raised by CBFC included the movie being revolving around ladies who wish to live life of fantasies. Practically, this was in contrast to the picture of the ideal Bhartiya Naari being painted in the male driven society, where women have no right to pursue their dreams, passions or even open up about their inner desires.

The accolades received by the movie, both in terms of awards and public response proved the movie's mettle. It was successful in giving women empowerment a boost by highlighting the never discussed issue but it didn't receive much appreciation from men as compared to women, the obvious reason of which could be the insecurity of the 'stronger gender'. The issue of women's sexual desires, fantasies and liberty, usually considered taboo finally made way to the screens, paving way for future subjects requiring social awakening.

CONCLUSION

In over 10 decades of Indian Cinema, there have been infinite issues addressed on the silver screen, with debates on the purpose of cinema also surfacing every now and then. There have been movies of varying genres, some meant to depict drama, some for showing the real heroes, some to divert attention towards something significant and some for sheer entertainment. With contemporary movies being made on subjects like mental health, women's rights, menstrual hygiene, sanitation, women's sexuality, homosexuality, prostitution, Indian Cinema has definitely reached heights.

Recent movies like Toilet: Ek Prem Katha, Padman, Pink, Dear Zindagi, Lipstick Under My Burkha, have proved that if a society holds patriarchal, age old, conservative mentality, then cinema is the right medium to challenge the same. It is high time that there is dialogue on issues that matter. It is high time that people break their stereotypical notions and concentrate on what's important today. In a country, where so many youngsters commit suicide due to failure or fear of non acceptance, rejection, depression, then a movie like Dear Zindagi is actually an eye opener. It challenges the stereotypical thinking of refraining from visiting a psychiatrist at a time, when all a person needs is a mental therapy. A movie like Padman brought the issue of menstrual hygiene to the fore in a society, where the natural process of menstruation is a taboo but defecating in the open is quite acceptable. Toilet: Ek Prem Katha compelled people to think which one is a bigger bolt on woman's dignity; not covering her head with Pallu at home or going out in the open to defecate. These movies didn't just come and go; they actually tried and succeeded in creating an impact by the way the issues have been addressed and sides portrayed. Such movies substantiate the fact that 21st century Indian Cinema refuses to take a back seat and is now an active channel of bringing social and perceptual changes.

Even today, when we are rapidly growing as a nation, so many social evils still prevail in some parts of the country like female foeticide, violation of right to education to girls, child marriage and the heinous rapes continue to take place all over the country, irrespective of how small or big town it is. While all this continues to grip our society hard, there are people who cling to 100 years old mindset, refusing to change for the better. So, it is time that these issues are taken seriously and if cinema addresses such serious, moral and social issues, then it can really create an impact or at least sow the seeds of social change.

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