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## Transformation in Bollywood Cinema: A Socio-Cultural Perspective

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DOI - 10.5281/zenodo.8016437

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### **Abstract:**

*It is a common knowledge that Bollywood is one of the largest film industries in the world. It has a glorious history of origin and its development. After the independence, the Indian film industry passed through many changes. It handled several socio-cultural issues in its tremendous past. A sincere study of the Bollywood film industry and the cinema reveals that it was closely associated with the ancient Indian culture, customs, traditions and beliefs. However, the 21<sup>st</sup> century has seen a kind of paradigm shift in the Bollywood cinemas in many aspects. Cinema was not only the medium of entertainment but it was the way of providing knowledge in all the fields of life. It has always performed an important role before the independence and even after the independence. The present paper is an attempt to show this shift in the Bollywood cinema. It also highlights the chronological development in the Bollywood cinema and finally the transformation of society and culture.*

**Key Words: Transformation, Bollywood, Culture, Society**

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Bollywood is not merely the largest film industry in India but also in the world. Bollywood films reproduced the key values and beliefs of Indian society throughout history. It has been the instrument of spreading social awareness and preservation of culture. Bollywood movies perfectly depict the essence of India. They are time capsules, as they fulfilled the need of the audience from time to time. These films have focused almost on all the socio-cultural aspects as the needs of society changed at regular intervals of time. Let us know about the

beginning of the Bollywood industry and its development.

### **Background of Bollywood and cultural significance:**

Bollywood produces Hindi language films. Being India's largest film industry, it produces over 1000 movies each year. It is a billion dollar industry and a significant contributor to India's economy. The cultural significance of Bollywood is tremendous. As discussed above it is not just a film industry, it is a cultural phenomenon. Bollywood reflects India's vibrant and unique culture and is

heavily influenced by Indian society. Throughout its history, Bollywood films have reflected the ever-changing morals and values of Indian culture. Bollywood films incorporate Indian culture in almost every aspect. For example, most films feature Indian weddings, in which actors wear traditional Indian clothing and perform songs in Indian languages. Many stories and film motifs move directly around Indian customs and practices. Bollywood films are so closely linked to Indian culture that they have become part of the celebrations for holidays, as most major films release on important festivals such as Diwali, Holi, Christmas, or Eid.

While Bollywood is significantly influenced by Indian society, the same can be said vice-versa. Indian society is heavily influenced by Bollywood films, songs, and actors. The films, for example, Bollywood movies set new fashion trends, and people look at Bollywood for inspiration in terms of what they should wear. If an actress dons a new style of wedding dress in a movie, it becomes the latest trend for brides in India the following wedding season. Moreover, the young generation attempts to imitate the hair style and the other features of the celebrity. Bollywood music also plays a huge role in Indian culture, as songs from Bollywood movies are played at every wedding, party, or festival. Bollywood has

helped India's economy as it has created jobs and shaped India's international image. Ultimately, Bollywood and Indian society as well as culture are so one with each other that they should go hand in hand.

Bollywood first began in 1913, when the silent film 'Raja Harishchandra' was produced. It was founded on the grounds of America's booming film industry Hollywood. India was colonized by England at the time, so American and British films were present there. People in India saw the popularity and success of English films and decided to create their own versions. The title 'Bollywood' is a blend of the film industry's central city, 'Bombay', and 'Hollywood'. The movies during this early period were mostly based on mythological stories in the Hindu religious texts such as Ramayana and Mahabharata, as Hinduism was the dominant religion in India at the time and society was heavily influenced by religion and spirituality. For many years, the sole purpose and function of Bollywood films was to entertain. The primary audience was the working class. The lower and working classes used Bollywood films as a medium to forget their worries and to enjoy the pleasure. People would go out and see movies as a way to distract themselves and escape from their life's troubles, to say in the words of Aristotle,

to purify their harmful emotions. This is why Bollywood films are mostly colourful and have themes of joy, love, celebration, and fantasy. During the Second World War, the number of film production decreased, as there was a limited number of imports of film stock and because the government placed restrictions on the length of the film.

#### **Transformation to Patriotic Themes:**

During the 1940-1960, along with patriotic films, many historical dramas celebrating India's rich culture were made, such as the blockbuster 'Mughal-e-Azam', which retells the famous Indian folktale of 'Prince Salim'. Following the independence in 1947, many Bollywood films reflected themes of patriotism and told stories about the Indian revolution against the British. A hit movie from this era is 'Mother India', which celebrates fearless Indian women. With new found independence, a sense of nationalism and pride for the homeland rose in India, and therefore, these ideas were represented in Bollywood films as well.

#### **Transformation to Western Aesthetics:**

The period between 1960 and 1980 was known as the Angry Young Man era. It was the screen age dominated by the male action heroes. Most of the films centred around a strong male character, who was painted as a "hero" who defeats a

villain. The trend at the time was for the main character to be an "Angry Young Man". The hero was always very masculine and was shown as an unbeatable force. The films always included some sort of violent action and fighting sequence with the hero, which consisted of guns, bullets, conspiracy, revenge, murders, and violence by local gangsters. The themes of violence, fighting, and bravery represented the expectations that society had of Indian men at the time, as the ideal man was strong and had masculine qualities. It was the age of actors viz. Amitabh Bachchan, Amrish Puri, Prem Chopra, Dharmendra Deol et.al. The role of women in films at this time was limited, as they had to perform the role of entertainer being only a girlfriend, a wife of the hero or a concubine who dances at bar to fulfil her needs. The story lines and gender roles in the films were reflective of India's patriarchal culture at the time, where men were seen as being superior to women and held more power. Many songs contained English lyrics and would be shot in places such a ballroom, bar, or disco, instead of settings that were common in India. The songs also did not feature traditional Indian dances or outfits as much. An example of the type of song sequences at this time can be seen in the song posted above, "My Name is Anthony". The films from this time period mainly featured

Western aesthetics and aspects of European culture. Men wore Western clothing, such as suits, ties, or dress shirts. Women wore dresses, skirts, or pants. Actors would wear heavy makeup to make their skin appear fairer. The Western appeal in these films was due to the dominance of Western culture in India, as India had recently been colonized by the British for several decades. The European colonization influenced Indian culture significantly, and this was reflective in the movies at the time. Thus a significant deviation from the ancient Indian culture can be observed during these couple of decades.

#### **Reforming culture with romantic and patriotic fervour:**

The turn of the century largely focused on young characters, such as college students, as a large group of India's demographic were young adults. Many blockbuster films from the time revolve around themes that appeal to youth, such as college, love, academics, and friendship. The plots and characters in the films were made to appeal to the growing population of the younger generations. The film 'Jo Jeeta Wohi Sikander', 'Jigar', 'Anadi', 'Dil' etc. are the prime examples of the central themes of Bollywood films during this era. The film 'Jo Jeeta Wohi Sikander' is about the college students

who are competing in a cycling championship. After the past couple decades, the aesthetics of Bollywood films started to change again, as the Western trends died down in India. During this time, many movies featured more of the prime aspects of Indian culture such as important practices and customs. The actors also wore more traditional outfits compared to the past era. The movies of this time reflected core Indian values surrounding family and marriage. Song and dance in the films were also dramatically different than the past decades. Most songs were only in Hindi and included traditional dances such as bhangra and garba. They also featured specific Indian festivals, such as the song above, "Bole Chudiyaa", that takes place during the festival of Karva Chauth.

The last decade 20<sup>th</sup> century also produced many cinemas depicting patriotism and the problems in Indian society. The quintessence of this type were the films 'Sarfaroosh', 'Border', 'Roza', 'Bombay', 'Damini', 'Sadak', 'Bazigar', 'Gupt', 'Vastava', 'Mohra', 'Satya' etc. Many of these films adopted the single word titles. They focused either the domestic problems in personal life or the major social issues that needed a CBI enquiry or police procedure. 'Kaho na Pyaar Hai' was sensational blockbuster hit that appeared in 2000. This period was

perhaps the heyday for the Bollywood film industry that had a magnetic capability to attract the huge audience.

### **New Trends in Bollywood cinema and its impact on culture and society:**

With the advent of scientific and technological development, the Bollywood cinema was greatly designed with uncommon innovations. The experimentation was stronger and superior. The animation and telecommunication technology added special effects to the scenes that affected the senses of the audience. Computer, mobile phones, wireless communication systems, detection technology surprised the audience. Imitation of Hollywood cinema was also attempted in the 21<sup>st</sup> century Bollywood cinema. A cultural blend and diasporic presentation of the social issues changed the world of cinema drastically. During this time, Bollywood films took a different approach to storytelling. As the number of Indians had been settled abroad, a steady population of the Indian diaspora had formed in Western countries. In order to appeal to this audience, many of the films from the 2000s focused on the lives of Indians who lived abroad in countries such as the US, Canada, or England. Many of the films presented the Western settings, and this appealed to Indian immigrants in those countries as they could relate to the

surroundings, but it also appealed to Indians living within India, as many Indians had a fascination with the West during this time and wanted to immigrate abroad. Bollywood movies featuring famous cities such as New York, London, and Paris were very popular as it showed Indians a glimpse of the Western world.

The trend developed that affected the Indian society and culture was the perfect representation of realism. Many Cinemas were based on the major national problems like 'National security, class-conflict, religious heterogeneity, regional controversy, natural disasters, terrorism, corruption, crime, judicial system and so on. The film featured above, 'My Name is Khan', precisely showcases the experiences that many Indian immigrants have faced in Western countries post 9/11. The film tackles themes such as Islamophobia and racism and was very well received for its accurate depiction of the diasporic experiences. A blend of both Indian and Western culture has been represented by the characters in the films that still wear Western clothing, but each movie was sure to have some sort of scene, where the characters would wear Indian outfits and participate in their cultural practices, as the culture of India represents in reality. This balance between cultures appealed to both Indians living within India and the Indians who live abroad.

### **Role of women in 21<sup>st</sup> century Bollywood cinema and its cultural significance:**

If we look at the romantic history of the Bollywood cinema, we came to the conclusion that women characters had always been the inseparable element in it. From 2010 to the present, there has been another shift in Bollywood films, as many movies now focus on social issues in India. A strong theme becoming popular in Bollywood films is women empowerment. Since the past few years, more and more women-centric films are being made, featuring lead roles of women and stories about women's issues. A wider variety of roles are being assigned for females and many films are featuring themes of gender inequality, which reflect the rising awareness and movement for women's rights in India. 'Mary Kom', 'Mardani' and 'Dangal' are the terrific cinemas that changed the history of women representation in traditional Indian cinema. It depicted the ability of women as equal to men in all the fields. The movie 'Dangal' resonated with Indian society as many believe that it is high time to fight for women's rights and put an end to gender inequality.

As this new purpose has formed, in the past few years, many Bollywood films have been made that revolve around social

themes such as education, sexual abuse, gender inequality, gang violence, and drug addictions, among other issues of concern in India. The film 'Pink' is a great example, as it is a story that focuses on the issue of rape and the justice system in India.

The film 'Dear Zindagi' is also an example in the new shift in Bollywood stories that is reflective of attitude of Indian society. This film is unprecedented and groundbreaking as it focuses on the issue of mental health and illness, which has been denied and remained neglected in Indian culture for many years. For several years, mental illness was misunderstood in Indian culture and the topic was very taboo to speak about. However, over the years, Indians have become more educated about the realities of mental health and are reducing the stigma around it. Dear Zindagi is the first mainstream Bollywood film to openly discuss this issue and educate audiences on it. The main characters in the film represent the modern Indian who is socially aware and understanding of mental health and illnesses.

### **Conclusion:**

Thus, the above discussion shows a glorious development of Bollywood cinema that always focused the social issues and cultural change in Indian

society. It began on screen as a mute and black and white film but reached the milestone of social and cultural change. The evolution of Bollywood cinema is a result of the ever-changing societal values, morals, beliefs, and mindsets within Indian culture. People showed their love and favour towards the Bollywood because it depicted what they needed from time to time. The Indian culture after independence was consistently under change. It was on the way of forming blended culture, Indian customs with Western interests. Bollywood films are reflective of the interests on Indian society. It delivered everything that society needs, not as it is but in a purified form. Many of these movies were quite inspirational for the young and adults. No doubt, Indian culture and society at present owes much to Bollywood. Though there are other negative impacts found due to recent presentation of culture and society, there is much to take it positively. The cultural significance of Bollywood films is increasing, as the films continue to show

the unique aspects of Indian culture. From the Western influences to the love for the country, Bollywood films have documented each era of Indian society's history and serve as an expression of the culture.

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