

Exploring Folklore in Indian Cinemas: An Analytical Study

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Abstract

Cinema is a creative art form that draws themes from earlier traditions such as oral literature, folk theatre, music, dance, history, etc. So, cinema can touch the people's hearts and has become one of the most indispensable parts of mankind within a short period. The paper aims to introduce a few select cinemas of India belonging to different languages their role in exploring Indian traditional culture, and their impact on the society.

Methodology

The descriptive and analytical methods were used in this paper. Different books, journals, etc. were also taken as secondary sources to complete this paper.

Keywords: Folklore, language, society, cinema, role.

1. Introduction

Cinema is also known as film and movie. Today every one of us is aware of the terms of Cinemas, Films, Movies, Heroes and Heroines, Bollywood, actors and actresses. Most advanced people do not know about their traditions and culture but a five-year-old child can know about the cinema and film. Cinema is a discipline that includes ideas, research, scripts, cameras, computers, designs, makes, and settings. It is one kind of visual communication, which uses moving pictures and sound to tell stories. The main functions of cinema are to inform, enjoy, and educate the people. There is no doubt that cinema is the most popular form of mass media that is deliberated as the 4th pillar of a democratic society. It plays an important role in upgrading the society. Media provides ample opportunity to the people living in the society to know about various hidden issues and events which due to some reasons have not been picked by the people.

Before proceeding to study cinema it is necessary to say something about the two questions that necessitate answers: (i) what is cinema? (ii) What is film? To answer the first question, answers that readily come to our minds are cinema is what Roberge¹ termed, "a powerful medium," "an art form," "a means of telling stories," "a business," and "an entertainment" and possibly several other similar phrases. At the same time as these definitions of the cinema come to mind, there also arises a feeling that cinema is something at once very personal and very social. That is when we think of the cinema we cannot but be

¹Gaston., 1992: The Ways of Films Studying: Film Theory and The interpretation of Film, Ajanta Publications, New Delhi, p.4

reminded of very deep, personal, moments of love, joy, fear, for instance, emotions experienced in the darkness of the movie theater. These experiences share the quality of some of our nocturnal dreams with a difference. In sleep, for instance, we are powerless in front of our mental screen. But in the cinema hall we are allowed to share someone else's dream, - a privilege, indeed- and we remain fully awake to the fact that what we are watching is, after all, "only a movie". Thus, the simple sentiments evoked by the cinema have deep personal resonances. But that is not all; cinema plays quite an important role in our social life too. In the 1930s, Cinema is sometimes referred to as the "art of all arts," as it incorporates elements of various creative forms such as dance, theater, literature, short tales, and architecture"²It was the first industrialized art form and the greatest that had influenced 20th-century culture. KevalJ.Kumar says on 'Cinema' in his book entitled 'Mass Communication in India',

"Louis Lumiere, who along with his brother Auguste pioneered what would eventually become an international culture industry, said that the cinema is a creation without a future. The "cinematographe," a small, portable device that could function as a projector, camera, or printing press with a few simple modifications, was created by the Lumiere brothers. Since they were also professional photographers, they saw cinema as just another way to practice their craft. As such, they tried to document brief "actualities" like trains arriving and departing from stations, workers leaving factories, women taking a sea bath, and soldiers on wheels from a stationary position. These "living photographic pictures" were merely attempts to capture reality, just like still photos. They recreated a location, a time, and an atmosphere rather than telling a story. For this reason, the short copies were called actualities"³

Malhan observes,

"Cinema, of course, is not a means of live communication like, say, the telephone. Good films are like paintings by the Great Masters; it is a means of expression and that is why it is an art. "Cinema is sometimes referred to as the "art of all arts," as it incorporates elements of other creative forms such as dance, theatre, literature, short stories, and architecture. Cinema is the most persuasive. Seeing provides the most direct communication to the mind and images do not need to be translated to be understood."⁴

Therefore, a film can be enjoyed despite the viewer's ignorance of the language used in the dialogue or narrative. However, it can sometimes be harmful to people and hit people hard, especially young children who are inherently exposed to evil, sex, or violence. For this reason, films are sensibly and creatively censored.

Now, to delve into the question of what exactly is a film, we may quote Roberge who writes, "A movie is a product made by the film industry and distributed to viewers by a trade that has the backing of the general public. Movies are made for the largest possible audiences, as a means of mass communication, the film medium has to compete and collaborate with other media, especially television. Films are kept under strict control both during and after their creation by those who direct them and those who have a say in how

² Quoted by Geoffrey, Newell-Smith (ed.),1996: General introduction note, in 'The Oxford History of World Cinema', p. xix Delhi,p.168

⁴ See <https://books.google.com/books?uid=112574005715235505092&hl=en> (P.N. Malhan, 1985, *Communication Media: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow*, p. 54)

society develops, such as politicians, because they are seen to serve significant social functions in our lives, such as providing amusement, information, and education."⁵

Kupaswami says, "The motion picture originated when Edison invented the kinetoscope in 1899. Combining his Kinetoscope with his photographs and recordings, he produced the first synchronized sound film in Paris in 1902, when silent movie theatres had become popular in the world. However, it should be noted that the first public exhibition of a motion picture was in 1896 in the United States and the first full-length picture was exhibited in 1903 again in the United States. In India, the first motion picture was shown by the Lumiere brothers in Bombay in 1896 and the regular feature film show started in Bombay in 1904. Thus, the film was introduced to India almost simultaneously as in Europe and America. By 1910 cinema houses sprang up in all the important cities exhibiting Western films." ⁶

Through the combination of history, image, movement, drama, emotions, dialogue, and language modulation with the capability for visual presentation, cinema has become the "beloving" of all communication media. This is evidenced by the fact that despite the physical inconvenience associated with queuing at the cinema house, thronging just to get tickets. Although television and video provide most of the household ingredients with all the comfort they can offer, still people choose a wide screen to see pictures in crowded halls. In an era of silent films, viewers were loudly involved. In the case of talkies, they are now drawn into an emotional relationship with the characters, feel silent within them, and share their fearful and happy moments. By portraying an identifiable local environment, character, problems, and tried-and-tested solutions, the film can create more animation and generate viewer affinity.

The birth of Indian cinema was started with the *Harish Chandra* produced and directed by Dadasaheb Phalke. P.N. Malhan observes "In India, immediately after the first film was viewed in Bombay in 1896, film making experiments were started by Harish Chandra in Bombay and Hiralal Sen in Calcutta. Both imported movie cameras and made films; the former on wrestling matches and the *Hanging Gardens*, Bombay, and the latter on theatrical performances. It was in 1913 that Dadasaheb Phalke, the father of Indian cinema, screened his first film, *Harish Chandra*, depicting the story of a great legendary votary of truth. *Love of Christ*, a Western movie, served as inspiration for his Puranic tale, which possessed the entire makings of a successful box office production."⁷ Since then, continuous film production began in India, and movie theatres began in all major cities, showing both Western and Indian films.

The twenties saw the all-round proliferation of the Indian cinema. Even during that decade, India was producing more films than Great Britain. In 1971, India overtook Japan to be the world's biggest producer of characteristic movies, with a maximum of 431 titles. Throughout 1975 a UNESCO survey made viewers proved it had been the one Third World country to get a bigger market for indigenous cinema than for shipped films. ⁸ Most of the films produced during this era were related to religious, historical, and social themes. Later stunts, horror, and comical situations were introduced by further diversifying the pictures.

⁵ Gaston Roberge, 1992, *The Ways of Films Studying: Film Theory and The Interpretation of Film*, Ajanta Publishers, New Delhi, p.8

⁶ B. Kuppaswamy, 1976: *Communication and Social Development in India*, Sterling Publication, New Delhi, p. 71

⁷ Ibid, p. 54

⁸ Rajadhyaksa, A., 1996: 'India: Filming the Nation;' in *The Oxford History of World Cinema* edited by Geoffrey Norwell-Smith, p. 678

The Indian film industry reached a significant milestone with the release of its first talkie on 14th March 1931, just two years after the screening of the Universal Pictures talkie film "Melody of Love." Produced by Ardeshir Irani, this pioneering Indian talkie, often referred to as "the living and breathing" film, caused a sensation. Talkies quickly gained popularity in various languages during the same year, leading to the proliferation of language films across India, with production centers emerging in places like Lahore (then part of India), Chennai, Kolkata, and Kolhapur. Drawing on the rich tradition of Indian drama and folk theatre, songs began to play a central role in Indian films. For instance, "Inder Sabha," a film from Madan Theatres, featured a remarkable 59 songs. Over time, playback singers rose to prominence, and music directors became even more crucial than the actors themselves.⁹

As cinema has the influencing power and changed the social and societal trends. New fashions are introduced by them in society also. They are defined as pace-setters. Cinema or film may have an expressive effect on our social life. It plays a major role in raising national awareness as well as skilfully adopting educational, social, and good moral, issues by harnessing the energy of youth for social reconstruction and nation-building and introducing public sentiments. Movies can to a large extent, guide and formulate public opinion. Undoubtedly, films have an educational value besides their entertainment value. One of the chief aims of the producers in recent decades is to present current social problems and to promote the attention of the people towards the problems facing them. One of the main social functions of the film is that film is a powerful form of entertainment. It has the power to sway the masses and thus it is a 'hot medium' according to Marshall McLuhan, a medium that does not need to require sensory perception. People watch feature films mainly for entertainment, and there is little or no education there.

The history of Assamese cinema started with the release of *Joymati* in 1935. Jyotiprasad Agarwalla was the director, a non-Assamese businessman who lived in a small town, Tezpur. He was considered the father of the Assamese film and the icon of Assamese art and culture. Despite many problems and hurdles, he went ahead and made a film and chose a women-centric story for the first-ever movie in the North East India region. The film story is based on the life and struggle of the Ahom princess *Joymati*. She is one of the most courageous women figures and was the wife of Ahom king Gadapani. Lora Raja, who killed a strong man in his kingdom tried to bring and kill her husband too. As per the advice of *Joymoti*, he flew away to the Jayantia Hills. Lara Raja is captured and brought under his custody and tortured by the *chaudhangs* (whose family business is tortured and executed), who are looking for the whereabouts of her exiled husband Gadapani. After two straight weeks of physical torture, *Joymoti* dies without revealing any information. In this regard film critic, Bobita Sharma says, "Jyotiprasad Agarwal's was evident: he aspired to create a film that could communicate a cultural message. To achieve this, he decided to draw upon Assam's rich history, connecting it to a significant past that evoked a sense of pride. His inspiration came from the renowned folk tales recounting the story of *Joymati*."¹⁰

B.Datta observes, "Jyoti Prasad's groundbreaking film "*Joymoti*" stands out for its portrayal of a female protagonist, a departure from contemporary movies where feminism often intersects with deification,

⁹ P.N.Malhan, op.cit.p.56

¹⁰ Sharma, B. 2014: *The Moving Assamese Culture and Assamese Culture*, Oxford University Press, Guwahati, p.56

depicting powerful women as goddesses. The film also broke away from the prevalent theatrical acting style of the time, blurring the lines between theater and cinema. Despite being set in a different era, the characters in "Joymoti" remained relatable. However, the aftermath of the film tells a different story. The ostracization of Aideu Handique, the lead actress, for addressing her co-star as 'husband,' serves as a poignant metaphor for the decline of Jyoti Prasad's vision. Handique coerced into auditioning for the film by her uncle at the age of 16, paid a steep price for her role in a time when women were even prohibited from attending theaters. Shunned by her community, she endured a life of isolation, relegated to a cowshed. It wasn't until 1985 that she had the chance to see herself on-screen, albeit in a few clips from a documentary about "Joymoti."¹¹

Gender representation and discrimination in respect of actors/actresses were also seen in Indian cinema. Dada Saheb Phalke was famous as the father of Indian cinema who used men to act the character of women in his film named *Harichandra* in 1913. Generally, there was a belief among the people of the Indian states that women should not act like a man in theatre and film where men and women have to work and touch together. Touching the younger girls during that time was considered either taboo or impure. Earlier, no women were allowed to act in the theatre. In *Ankiya Naat Bhaona* also men acted in the role of women in Assam. But Jyoti Prasad Agarwala fought and broke the traditional system prevailing in the society and made actual woman actors act in the character of *Joymati*. Aideu Handique, a girl of teenage age at the time took the character of Joymati. Consequently, she was eventually ostracized by her village people in Upper Assam for acting in the film and remains unmarried.

Here, the director took many Assamese folkloric elements like costumes, turban, rituals, *Japi*, and even Bihu songs and dances. *Japi* is an age-old headgear made from bamboo which is used while performing *Bihu*. In *Joymati*, there has been seen decorating in the *Rajkareng* i.e. the royal palace of the Ahom kings. Moreover, *Bihudance* is shown to be performed in the *Rajkareng* in *Joymati*. Rather, a creative dance performed by both male and female performers with some of the gestures of *Bihudance* are used and seen. D. Bezbaruah observes, "Being the first-ever Assamese film, *Joymati* has impacted the formation of popular culture. The film has influenced the practice of *Japdance* performed as *Bihudance* in the later period."¹²

One of the chief aims of the producers in recent decades is to present current social problems and to promote the attention of the people towards the problems facing them. As the film is a powerful form of entertainment it has the power to sway the masses. According to Marshall McLuhan, Cinema is a 'hot medium' that does not need to require sensory perception. People watch feature films mainly for entertainment, and there is little or no education there. Thus, folkloric films not only provide entertainment to the viewers but also serve as a means of educating the masses. The key distinction between locale and emphasis distinguishes folkloric films from other commercial film traditions, as any film has the potential to be recognized as folkloric material and labeled as a "folkloric film". Just like that Anthropologists state some films as "ethnographic" if they effectively explain the ethnographic approach. A genuine folkloric film is characterized by its focus on subjects central to folklore studies, aiming to faithfully represent and

¹¹ See website <http://m.himalmag.com/the-rise-and-fall-of-assamese-film/> (Himal South Asian Journal)

¹² Bezbaruah, D. 2017: *Changing form of Bihu and Media*, Department of Communication & Journalism, an unpublished Ph.D thesis, Gauhati University, p.2

serve the essence of folklore. Such films include films made by himself or by non-folklorists, who are videographers or filmmakers. Simply, the main focus of these films is to document folklore, no matter what makes it. Folkloric films have emerged as a significant area of focus in the field of folklore studies. Sherman notes that many folklorists examining films are influenced by the approaches taken by earlier documentary filmmakers and by the foundational concepts of past folklore scholars". In folklore films, villagers often take the example of the urban population, and the past is more important than the present. However, filmmakers also explore urban scenes as well as contemporary activities.

As the film is the mirror of society it could provide many messages to society. Most of the films produced during the first era were those related to religious, historical, and social topics. Later stunts, horror, and humorous situations were introduced bringing more variety to the pictures. The influence of cinema on society is that it guides the culture of society. It is the most famous method of mass media, and especially in a country like India, where the middle class and lower strata of society cannot afford expensive entertainment like concerts and professional theatre, look up to cinema as the escape route from reality. It is indeed to say that cinema plays an essential role in entertainment, information, propaganda, leisure, and education.

Jawaharlal Handoo suggests that popular Indian films, regardless of the language they are made in, share similarities with modern fairy tales due to their incorporation of folkloric and mythological elements.¹³The essence of this resemblance is evident in both the narrative and structural aspects. While the enchantment of myths and fairy tales may have evolved, traces of it persist in Indian popular cinema.¹⁴Moreover, he identified four overarching genres in mainstream Indian cinema that draw from folklore: complete myth films, partial myth films, films with mythic themes, and films following a fairy tale pattern."¹⁵ Myth films can be categorized into three main types: total myth films, half-myth films, and mythic theme films. Total myth films stay true to conventional myth folktales or their regional variations while maintaining the core plot structure. In contrast, half-myth films blend myth or traditional narratives with a non-traditional plot structure. Mythic theme films incorporate various mythic motifs into their plot, even if the overall structure is non-mythic and contemporary. Additionally, there are classic fairy tale films that follow a similar narrative structure. These movies typically feature a hero who faces trials, defeats the villain, marries the heroine, and lives happily ever after, adhering to the timeless fairy tale formula.¹⁶In addition to the folk narratives, music has always been an important aspect of the lives of Indian people. There are many Indian films where different forms of folk music are exploited by the film makers and composers and fused in their film.

India is a country known for its rich cultural diversity, with each state boasting its own unique traditional music forms. For Bollywood, this music was the key source of music. In many successful films, the composers of the movies used folk songs in their films. In 1934, in Hindi movies, the first Marwari song was first taken in "*Baala Joban*". S. D. Burman was the legend who composed many songs that were

¹³See article Folklorismus: Indian Folklore and Mass Culture at <https://sapientia.ualg.pt/bitstream/10400.1/1277/1/ELO-02-10-JH.pdf>

¹⁴ ibid

¹⁵ ibid

¹⁶ ibid

based upon Folk Music. “*Jane kya tune kaha*” was a folk song in Bollywood films composed by SD Burman and Geeta Dutt sung this song in *Pyasa*, “*dilkaabhanwarkarepukar*” and ‘BombaiKaBabu’s song “*Allah Megh De paani de*” was based on an East Bengal folk song. S D Burman composed and sang this song. Thus, Indian Bollywood pieces of music have drained their inspiration from various folk music sources like *tamasha*, *nautanki*, *part*, and *Ramleela*, other musical traditional sources. Cinema is the medium of cultural exchange. By watching movies we can know the traditions of a particular community, areas, and their livelihood and communication. In the documentation and preservation of the cultural heritage of the world, cinema has been taking a pivotal role.

Do some questions arise if we study Cinema and Folklore? Who makes a cinema? Why do we make it? What do we see and find in the cinema? From these three questions, it is clear that cinema is nothing but a creation of people's idea of observing the experiences of individuals and society as a whole. The filmmakers draw many important different parts of visible things from society with their experiences and give it a different form with the media technologies to enjoy and share with us within the society by watching their cinema. These cinemas may be based on religion, culture, tradition, and ultra-modern themes. So, cinema is not merely a mirror of society but also a reflector of the pain and sorrows of society. The growth of folklore within the society is natural evolution whereas cinema is also created by the people and it helps to transmit folklore. There is a unique relationship between folklore and cinema. Both are grown from each other and both reinforce each other. Without society, there can be no folklore, no literature, and no cinema: on the other hand, without folklore and cinema society is ineffectual. However, documentary films and films that are based on folklore themes or what Sharon R. Sherman observes: "Folklore films aim to capture genuine, unscripted events while also offering insights into a specific culture. They emphasize traditional practices, which are conveyed through human interactions and are characterized by their longstanding formal elements. These films encompass a diverse array of customary behaviors, including rituals, ceremonies, folk art, material objects, games, expressions, songs, and the cultural knowledge shared among various groups based on factors like ethnicity, age, gender, family, occupation, leisure activities, religion, and geographic location."¹⁷

Indian cinema is a reflection of society. Early Bollywood cinemas portrayed concepts that were purely Indian at heart. Throughout the freedom time, cinema has been utilized as a medium for showing voice as well as making judgments against British imperialism. It is seen that the Indian filmmakers focused and exploited on great epics and mythological stories. The Dada SahebPhalke's first film “*Raja Harishchandra*” portrayed a society, that was achievable and desired. In previous times, Bollywood showed India traditionally as vibrant. Besides these, the cultural celebrations and traditional values are the heart of Indian society that was reflected through the cinema during that time. It is indeed to say that Bollywood has tried always to showcase Indian culture. In Indian films, rituals series such as newborn child celebrations, engagements, weddings, and joint family systems are always present. Films like *Na Pyar Hai*, and *Bobby*, are defined as love; *Golmaal* is a film on humour, *LOC*, and *Border* -stories of

¹⁷ Sherman, R.S',1998: *Documenting Ourselves: Film, Video, and Culture*, The University Press of Kentucky, USA,p.63

the supreme sacrifices of soldiers. It is indeed to mention that different Indian culture finds its place in the films.

Another important example of an Indian film entitled “**Toilet: EkPrem Katha**” can be cited. This film is based on the theme of a young educated woman in rural India by pointing out the eradication of an age-old practice called open defecation in the field, jungle, streets, canals, and any other open places. Open defecation is the human practice of defecating outside rather than into a toilet. Despite giving many schemes in the name of the construction of the toilet many of our people are not interest in it. Most of the Indian people living in rural areas still follow open defecation. **Toilet: EkPrem Katha** is an example of highlighting Indian old tradition. Therefore, cinema may be utilized as an instrument to make people aware and get rid of ill practices. It can guide people to go on the right path.

Different kinds of costumes and pieces of jewellery are seen in Indian films. The gestures like *Namaste* i.e. “Hello”. Another most important tradition of Indian culture is Fasting. Many Hindu People follow this custom during any religious occasion like *Diwali*, *Karvachauth*, *Maha-Shivratri*, the birthday of religious saints and preachers, etc. Besides these, the tradition of Indian wives keeping on fasting for the long life of their husbands known as “*Karvachauth*”, Muslim people’s fasting for near about 30 days throughout the Ramazan month is also seen in Indian films. In addition to the above cited above, many Indian regional films are promoting their folklore through film.

Conclusion

There are many festivals in India belonging to different communities that have been celebrated since time immemorial as per their culture, caste, and religion. The most important festivals are New Year, *Christmas*, *Buddha Purnima*, *Mahavir Jayanti*, *Guru Nanak Jayanti*, *Eid*, *Vasant Panchami*, *Dussehra*, *Durga Puja*, *Holi*, *Diwali*, and so on. Nowadays, the Indian younger generation also celebrates Western culture like Mother's Day, Father's Day, Good Friday, etc. Different types of Architecture and Art, handicrafts, foods, and recipes are also found in Indian Bollywood and South Indian movies. Traditional Indian houses and customary rituals along with festivals like marriage ceremonies are shown in this film. The cultural trends of Indian people are popularized through this film and have become a box office hit. The mass media like cinema is not only a vehicle of enjoyment but also has become the key force in giving great emphasis to exploring indigenous elements and patronizing them too.

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