



Indian Cinema and Pop Culture



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Abstract :

Radio, television, film, and the other products of media culture provide materials out of which we forge our very identities; our sense of selfhood; our notion of what it means to be male or female; our sense of class, of ethnicity and race, of nationality, of sexuality; and of "us" and "them." Media images help shape our view of the world and our deepest values: what we consider good or bad, positive or negative, moral or evil. Media stories provide the symbols, myths, and resources through which we constitute a common culture and through the appropriation of which we insert ourselves into this culture. Media spectacles demonstrate who has power and who is powerless, who is allowed to exercise force and violence, and who is not. They dramatize and legitimate the power of the forces that be and show the powerless that they must stay in their places or be oppressed.

Keywords : Indian Cinema, Media, Pop Culture, Mass Culture, Cultural Studies.

Research Paper :

We are immersed from cradle to grave in a media and consumer society and thus it is important to learn how to understand, interpret, and criticize its meanings and messages. The media are a profound and often misperceived source of cultural pedagogy: They contribute to educating us how to behave and what to think, feel, believe, fear, and desire -- and what not to. The media are forms of pedagogy, which teach us how to be men and women. They show us how to dress, look and consume; how to react to members of different social groups; how to be popular and successful and how to avoid failure; and how to conform to the dominant system of norms, values, practices, and institutions. Consequently, the gaining of critical media literacy is an important resource for individuals and citizens in learning how to cope with a seductive cultural environment. Learning how to read, criticize, and resist socio-cultural manipulation can help empower oneself in relation to dominant forms of media and culture. It can enhance individual sovereignty vis-a-vis media culture and give people more power over their cultural environment.

To analyse and to interrogate into this phenomenon, the best tool available is the cultural studies, which has emerged as a set of approaches to the study of culture and society. Cultural studies is a discipline which is interested in the processes by which power relations between and within groups of human beings organise cultural artifacts such as food habits, music, cinema, sports events, celebrity culture and their meanings. "Cultural studies looks at mass or popular culture evaluating its graffiti, comic books, mass cinema(as opposed to art cinema), popular music(as opposed to classical music), the open spaces of the city (as opposed to art galleries), sports etc."

The term 'mass culture' was used pejoratively and had been dismissed as inferior for a long time. The culture of the elite members of society was the only 'true culture' or the 'standard culture'. Hence, academic studies were relegated only to look at 'great works of art' or 'classical authors' which framed the standards of judgment and ideas of taste. Thus, the very term 'culture' came to be associated with a smaller section of the population and their tastes. This resulted in legitimizing certain artifacts as 'culture' and others as inferior. For eg.- the paintings of M.F .Hussain, the writings of Tagore or Shakespeare, the films of Satyajit Ray or Adoor Gopalakrishanan acquired an aura of respectability as 'culture' where as the novels of Sidney Sheldon or Chetan Bhagat, the films of Jayaraj or Kamal were relegated to the realm of 'Popular culture'

Now the entire scenario has changed widely and a change of focus came about in cultural analysis. Due importance has now been given to the culture of the everyday life of the large number of people. The artifacts, which were designed to hold inferior position now, gained significance in the realm of cultural studies. Under these circumstances the cultural meaning of the films which hold a true mirror to mass culture have begun to be read from the scaffold of the cultural studies.

Cultural studies shows how media culture articulates the dominant values, political ideologies, and social developments and novelties of the era. Cultural studies is valuable because it provides some tools that enable one to read and interpret one's culture critically. It also subverts distinctions between "high" and "low" culture by considering a wide continuum of cultural artifacts ranging from novels to television and by refusing to erect any specific cultural hierarchies or canons. Previous approaches to culture tended to be primarily literary and elitist, dismissing media culture as banal, trashy, and not worthy of serious attention. The project of cultural studies, by contrast, avoids cutting the field of culture into high and low, or popular against elite.

Cultural studies allows us to examine and critically scrutinize the whole range of culture without prior prejudices toward one or another sort of cultural text, institution, or practice. It also opens the way toward more differentiated political, rather than aesthetic, valuations of cultural artifacts in which one attempts to distinguish critical and oppositional from conformist and conservative moments in a cultural artifact. For instance, studies of Hollywood film show how key 1960s films promoted the views of radicals and the counterculture and how film in the 1970s was a battleground between liberal and conservative positions.

Culture is not a natural thing, rather it is produced. All cultural forms are linked to institution, the market, consumers and regulatory bodies. Cultural studies believes that we cannot 'read' cultural artifacts only within the aesthetic realm. A novel must be read not only within its generic conventions and the history of the novel but also in terms of the publishing industry and its profits, the community of reviewers, the academic field of literary criticism, the politics of awards and the hype and publicity machinery that sells the book. Likewise, a film has to be analysed as a cultural product by exploring how it is made, marketed and consumed. Since we are immersed from cradle to grave in a media and consumer society with predominant focus on cinema, it is important to learn how to understand, interpret, and criticize its meanings and messages.

Cinema is for entertainment with a clear focus on a plot or a story. What purpose do the item numbers serve in a cinema? What do they stand for? What do they mean to the consumers/audience? How does the audience react to them? What is their value to the culture of the community as a whole? How can it be valued as an artifact? What are the influencing factors of item numbers? All these questions can be and have to be tackled to decode the cultural meaning contributed by analysing the language encoded in the item numbers.

Indian cinema heralded by telling stories from the epics using hand-drawn tableaux images in scroll paintings, with accompanying live sounds strictly adhering to the age-old Indian tradition. In an era of globalisation, Indian themes told the tales mostly from the familiar stories of gods and goddesses. They thoroughly withstood the amorality of the Western filmic tradition and painstakingly

expressed social themes mainly dealing with working-class urban life in India. Young Indian producers also took pains to incorporate elements of India's social life and culture into cinema.

Indian cinema was influenced by the impact of ancient Sanskrit drama, with its highly stylized nature and emphasis on spectacle, where music, dance and gesture combined "to create a vibrant artistic unit with dance and mime being central to the dramatic experience." Sanskrit dramas were known as *natya*, derived from the root word *nrit* (dance), characterizing them as spectacular dance-dramas which has continued in Indian cinema. The *Rasa* method of performance, dating back to ancient Sanskrit drama, is one of the fundamental features that differentiate Indian cinema from that of the Western world. In the *Rasa* method, empathetic emotions are conveyed by the performer and thus felt by the audience, in contrast to the Western Stanislavski method where the actor must become a living, breathing embodiment of a character rather than simply conveying emotion. The rich tradition of Indian cinema began to lose its lustre when the rot or financial amorality seems to have set into India's film industry.

Marketability became the major concern of the film Industry. In the late 1990s, with the proliferation of film songs based television shows, film producers had come to realise that an exceptional way to entice audiences into theaters was by spending excessively on the visualization of songs. Hence regardless of the theme and plot, an elaborate song and dance routine involving spectacularly lavish sets, costumes, special effects, extras and dancers began invariably be featured in a film. It was asserted that this contributed highly to the film's 'repeat value'. Film making which was viewed as a vocation by many a great film-makers thus took the shape of an industry. With the ulterior motive of amassing great profits, the stars along with the production crew began to think about short cuts to ensure the repeat value of the films. This gave illicit birth to the popular genre of today called item numbers. The overall entertainment industry in India thus started taking on professional colours and this brought in a change in the culture of the film industry too.

Looking toward entertainment, one cannot fully grasp the Madonna phenomenon without analyzing her marketing strategies, her political environment, her cultural artifacts, and their effects (Kellner, 1995). In a similar fashion, younger female pop music stars and groups such as Mariah Carey, Britney Spears or Jennifer Lopez, also deploy the tools of the glamour industry and media spectacle to make certain star icons of fashion, beauty, style, and sexuality, as well as purveyors of music. And in appraising the full social impact of pornography, one needs to be aware of the sex industry and the production process of, say, pornographic films, and not just dwell on the texts themselves and their effects on audiences.

Study of the codes of television, film, or popular music, for instance, is enhanced by studying the formulas and conventions of production. These cultural forms are structured by well-defined rules and conventions, and the study of the production of culture can help elucidate the codes actually in play.

Because of the demands of the format of radio or music television, for instance, most popular songs are three to five minutes, fitting into the format of the distribution system. Because of their control by giant corporations oriented primarily toward profit, film and television production is dominated by specific genres such as talk and game shows, soap operas, situation comedies, action/adventure series, reality TV, and so on. This economic factor explains why there are cycles of certain genres and subgenres like Item numbers in the film industry. Corporate conglomeration has intensified and today the global media conglomerates control over the domains of the production and distribution of culture. Hence, the epitomising and lionising of Item numbers are done by conservative corporations of dominant film corporations.

An item number or an item song, in Indian Cinema, is a musical performance that has little to do with the film in which it appears, but is presented to showcase beautiful dancing women in very revealing clothes, to lend support to the marketability of the film. The term is commonly used in connection with Hindi, Tamil and Telugu cinema, to describe a catchy, upbeat, often sexually provocative dance sequence for a song in a movie. Item numbers are usually added to Indian movies in order to generate publicity by featuring them in the trailers. Item numbers are favoured by filmmakers for the reason that since they do not add to the plot, they afford the filmmakers with the opportunity to pick potential hit songs from the stocks. It is thus a vehicle for commercial success, which ensures repeat viewing.

Although, the origin of the term "item number" is obscure, it is likely that it derives its meaning from objectification of sexually attractive women. This is because *item* in filmy Mumbai slang is a sexy woman. The classic meaning of "item number" refers to highly sexualized songs with racy imagery and suggestive lyrics. The "item number" would feature an "item girl" who appear in the film as a dancer, usually in a bar or nightclub, and is only in the film for the length of that song.

Culture, be it high or low culture, is about power. Cultural issues and themes are mediated through questions of economy (profit) and politics (power). Stuart Hall, in his 1980 essay "Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms" (reprinted in the Course reader *Culture, Ideology and Social Process*) concedes about the presence of 'hegemony' or power politics in any concept of culture. The dominant classes legitimize, naturalize and retain power, though in disguise. This is very evident in the case of item numbers.

Reading Item numbers as a text, its meaning can be analysed as being constituted by the operation of certain codes. The production crew with all their apparatuses manipulates the song sequence in their favour. The Item number, which does not contribute any meaning to the plot of the film evidently, turns out to be an inevitable part of the films. This very loudly speaks of the power invested in the hands of the production and marketing crew. They decide the ingredients of the film. With the veneer of entertainment, they are actually exploiting the sexual instincts inherent in man.

With their eyes fixed only on the marketability of the films, the producers are indeed ruling over the morality of the general psyche by offering the audience a sexual gratification of voyeurism.

Earlier, films were of historic or mythological kind. They attached the 'sacred mother' image to women. Female body was seldom exploited, seldom was the intimate scenes like kissing or love making represented on the stage. But the cultural globalisation altered the sense of emotional appeal among Indian people. Not only the Indian cuisine and ethnic wear got globalised but also the cultural artefacts internalised the western radical definition. Many of the roles represented in Indian cinema are similar to that of the roles of women in western film. For example, the women are seen as objects of desire. This relates to the representations of romance and the female figure in Indian popular film.

Kissing was unknown in Indian film for a long time. Public displays of affection are associated with western life. Traditional Indian film used to convey sexuality implicitly by strategic techniques like tribal dress, dream sequences/wet saris, and behind the bush, although more recent films often include scenes of overt sexual relations. Moreover, there are blatant scenes in Indian cinema involving sexuality. And Item numbers do fulfill the need of the sensual mongers appetite by providing voyeuristic pleasures.

An item number, in its earliest avatar, wasn't endorsed by leading ladies. Only vamps or dancers making special appearances graced these tracks until a decade or two ago. Up to the 1970s, Bollywood often relied on the figure of the vamp, usually a cabaret dancer, or a tawaif (prostitute) or a gangster's moll, to provide sexually explicit musical entertainment. While the heroine too did sing and dance, it was the vamp who wore more revealing clothes, smoked, drank and sang in bold terms of sexual desire. She was portrayed not as being wicked but as the naughty, sexually alluring, immodest woman, erotic in her dance performances.

Mass media promotes images of 'an ideal body type'. The British may have left India long ago, but the obsession with fairness and the idolization of foreigners hasn't lessened. Movie stars represent idealized visions of female beauty, which does change through generations. The influence of the Hollywood thoroughly altered the feminine beauty concept. The body ideal of large breasts, thin waist and round buttocks demanded a blend with the Westernized beauty ideal of lighter skin, long hair, and blue or green eyes. Internalizing this western concept of beauty, actresses attempted a thorough make over in their looks as a vamp. Thus, an anglicized concept crept into the beauty consciousness of the Indian community. They not only brought about modernity in their appearance but also in the portrayal of westernised liberated young women, challenging all the patriarchal taboos. The confidence of the liberated woman is echoed in the words of Parveen Babi, a famous Bollywood actress:

Zeenat and I had full-fledged roles right from our first films. They might not have been pivotal roles, but they weren't item-songs and dance numbers either. We were the only ones who broke the trend of the archetypal heroine's role, and even carried off roles of modern dancers in clubs during an age where the audiences' weren't exposed to such things.

The figure of the vamp was explicitly offered to women who were ready to take up the critical arrows of the society. The then orthodox and conventional society refused to accept sexual promiscuity in women. What the conventional society encouraged was to mould a women community who will fit into the frame of ideal womanhood where sex is taboo for women. So the roles of vamp did give the society a glimpse of what a woman should not be. But the feminist revival crept in at this period. The feminist wave tried to resist the patriarchal structures of power that sought to subordinate women's lives, interests, bodies and sexualities. The patriarchal/masculinist constructions of women were looked at as the representational strategies in popular and other cultural forms. The cultural texts like cinema, which operates on the lines of power struggle, naturalises the oppression of women through its stereotypical representation of women as weak/vulnerable, seductress, obstacle, sexual object of the male desire, a procreating device and so on. This power structure has to be demolished, thought the prominent figures of the film industry. Thus, by around the 1980s the vamp and the heroine merged into one figure and the lead actress began to perform the bolder numbers. The vampy item girls were thus outpaced by the heroines performing item numbers. This eventual demise of the vamp marked the increasing social acceptance of sexually explicit dancing for the morally respected heroine.

Change was the rule of these actresses. They were ready to challenge and deviate from the society dictated conventional archetypal roles. By changing the norms of the archetypal feminine constructs, they believed themselves to be the heralds of revolution in the film culture. But little did they know that they were actually succumbing to the male dictated and much sought after role of a whore. Little did they discern that Item numbers purports only gratuitous objectification of the female body; that the song sequence does serve only to present the female body as spectacle.

Capitalism and the lure of money and stardom also appear as the deciding factors behind the popularity of Item numbers. Since item numbers offer a more amenable shortcut to success, as opposed to more traditional roles with no guarantee of eventual stardom, many top stars in Bollywood now embrace item numbers with an open heart. Sensing the worth and the handsome money offered in these songs, the male brigades of the entertainment industry too have turned their face to item songs now. Where the heroines are called item girls when they do these particular songs, the actors are termed item boys when they shake the bodies on these numbers.

Making a gradual progression from cabarets, kothaas, discos and now almost everywhere — even a train top — item numbers have become an essential part of Bollywood. In the new millennium,

every major and minor actress gracing the silver screen has had a special performance — by now known as item number — in her kitty. Sure, there's loads of gloss being introduced but with the sheer number taking over, the one thing that has gone missing is soul. Most of these item songs and item girls enter into the picture for no rhyme and rhythm. Agreed the songs are peppy; the energy is infectious and the girls are fabulous to look at, but very few have a timeless feel to them. Each of these dance numbers was sizzlers of the top order with the most scintillating women appearing in them — yet they lack a sense of reason.

Cultural studies provide the arena to work on by which the hidden ideological dichotomies can be deciphered. Through studies of youth subcultures, an analysis can be made on how culture came to constitute distinct forms of identity and group membership. For cultural studies, media culture provides the materials for constructing views of the world, behavior, and even identities. Those who uncritically follow the dictates of media culture tend to "mainstream" themselves, conforming to the dominant fashion, values, and behavior. Those who obey ruling dress and fashion codes, behavior, and political ideologies thus produce their identities within mainstream group, as members of specific social groupings (such as white, middle-class conservative Americans).

The case of item numbers is the same when considered its impact on the youth culture today. The youngsters of the day do internalise the codes of fashion and dressing of the Bollywood actresses and hold a sense of elitism on emulating the Bollywood dressing culture. They revel in revealing their cleavages believing it will raise them to be a part of mainstream culture. And Item numbers, though expose sensuality, are well applauded by the present consumers. By redefining their own identities and ideologies to match with and to catch up the so-called dominant mainstream culture, the consumers of today are embracing item numbers and its 'cultural value' in all its magnitude.

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