

# Indian Cinema and Women

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## ABSTRACT

Looking at the roots of film history in India, it surfaces that the first feature film was made in the year 1912-13. Dadasaheb Phalke is acknowledged as the father of Indian cinema. He released in 1913, a historical themed movie - Raja Harishchandra. Those were the days when women avoided participation in films. So, male artists had to play the female roles as well. Then a change occurred in 1930 and women from rich families joined the movie industry and changed its face. Devika Rani, Zubeidaa, Mehtab, Shobhana Samarth were the popular heroines of this time. Media also discharged a key role leading to modernization of societies by changing the face of women. Over past decades, Indian cinema has witnessed a significant change in the way women are depicted through films. Modern films represent women as more independent, confident and career oriented. This article deals with the fast changing role of women represented in Indian cinema.

**Key word:** Indian cinema, Bollywood, Films and women.

### 1.0 Introduction

Since Independence, Indian cinema has undergone major changes. For example it has witnessed a remarkable shift from classic mythological blockbusters to "Bollywoodised" remakes of Hollywood's successful films. The Indian film industry is the largest in the world. It produces over 1000 films each year in more than twenty languages. In contrast Hollywood produces less than 400 films per year.

In Indian film industry women have played very significant role in bringing success to individual films. Their roles however have changed over a period of time, from total dependency on their male counterparts to independently carry the storyline forward. Women in Indian film industry have established some magnificent records for example Lata Mangeshkar in the Guinness Book as the world's most recorded artist; and Helen danced in over thousand films. Cinema plays a key role in depicting powerful characters who inspire us in more ways than one. In this context women have not been far behind

### 2.0 Brief History of Bollywood Cinema

In Bollywood cinema "Raja Harishchandra" was the first film. It was released in 1913. The film was directed by Dadasaheb Phalke. In the advent of Indian cinema women avoided to participate in the films. So, male artists used to play the female roles as well. The Bollywood films were soundless till 1931. Ardeshir Irani was the first to introduce sound Women entered the movie business and changed the face of Indian cinema by redefining the importance of women in films. in the films. The first film with sound was introduced by him in the year 1931 and the name of film was "Alam Ara". Then the first coloured Bollywood film "Kisan Kanya" was released in 1937. The film was not much success. Only in the 1950s, coloured films became commercially popular. Film songs and dance were a strong factor in the popularity of a film. Majority of the songs of 1950s era are still very popular. This period witnessed the rise of great Bollywood actors and actresses like Dilip Kumar, Dev Anand, Raj Kapoor, Nargis, Nutan, Meena Kumari,

Madhubala and others. Films discharge a big role to depict and influence the social aspects. In terms of remuneration, status and roles, the leading ladies of that time were at par with their male counterparts.

When beautiful and free-willed Devika Rani, Zubeida, Mehtab, and Shobhana Samarth paved the way for women in films, no one imagined that in coming time actresses will become just a showpiece in films. Zubeida, daughter of Fatima Begum and the daughter of an affluent Nawab, shot to fame with "Alam Ara" and she commanded a high wage. Time got changed. In this context Kangana Ranaut remarked: "Forget the credit, they (male actors) take all the money as well. We don't get paid even one-third of what male actors take home. It's not so much about the money, but it's about (being a) woman."

### 3.0 Changing Image of Female in Indian Cinema

**Period 1913-1980:** In early days, Indian cinema focused on mythological stories and great epics. The first feature film, Raja Harishchandra was a mythological story. Then during the freedom struggle period, Indian cinema became a medium to voice anger and demand independence from British Colonial rule. After independence, Indian cinema took-up social issues and problems and focused to portray a society that was not only desirable but also achievable.

Period 1950s to late 1970s can be considered as the golden era of Bollywood films. In this time films focused on our rich culture, rural sector, family and friendly relationships, customs, norms and ethics. The issues of poverty were also highlighted. The beauty lied in easy identification of audiences with on the screen characters. The women discharged important role in the films. They held a lot of responsibility on their shoulders to sell the films in the market. Women were given an equally dominant role in the films along with the male actors. Some prominent films of this era viz., Kaagaz Ke Phool, Mother India, Pakeezah, Half Ticket, and Padosan can be cited as example.

To illustrate let us discuss the film "Mother India" made in 1957 by director Mehboob. He attempts to combine socialistic ideals with the traditional values. The film Mother India opens with Radha as an old woman being asked to inaugurate a new canal constructed through her village. The men presiding over the function are dressed simple, and refer to Radha as the mother of the village. They refuse to let anyone but her inaugurate the canal.

The film begins with an opening note that Radha is a survivor woman and will lead in the new period of prosperity and development. The film shows the importance of being a woman. The term Bharat Mata (Mother India) is a part of the Indian consciousness. A song in the film proclaims that the woman's fate is to leave parental home after marriage. The lyrics of its songs are very intense. A lyric of the film goes on to state that only "*laaj* is a woman's dharma".

Radha is portrayed as a common woman as an ideal wife and a daughter-in-law. She has a divine for her husband. She is very responsible and intelligent. Women watching this film easily identify with her and the men look at her non-sexually, and identify her as their own wives or mothers.

### 4.0 Bollywood Heroines in the 1980s

Action era in Bollywood films began in 1980s. It brought big changes. The Bollywood heroines lost their strength and space to the hero. She was reduced to a glamorous component of the films. She danced around trees, kidnapped, raped or killed.

An example of action role of women in the Indian cinema is a film, "Mirch Masala" directed by Ketan Mehta in 1989. It is a story of Sonbai (Smita Patil) working in a chili factory in the western part of pre-independence India. Her husband gets a job in the railways and leaves for the city. In the meantime the Subedar (or tax collector) arrives to collect taxes. He gets attracted to Sonbai, and calls village headman, (Mukhi), to bring her to him. But by mistake he brings a wrong woman. The next day Sonbai happened to pass by the Subedar's camp where she was suddenly grabbed by the Subedar. She somehow frees herself and runs into the chilli factory where she works. An old Muslim watchman Abu Miyan (Om Puri)

gives her protection.

The ill treated Mukhi's wife, the Mukhiani, comes to the rescue of Sonbai after learning that her husband has allied with the Subedar to handover Sonbai to him. Mukhiani's protest is ridiculed by the Subedar and his hunchmen. They reach the factory, kill the watchman and break open the factory doors. In the final scene the Subedar approaches Sonbai when suddenly the other women in the factory throw bags of chili powder on his face. This film shows women in glamorous characters, like women dancing and the lustful Subedar looking at them. In another scene the Subedar looks at Sonbai through a telescope.

In the recent history of cinema the female body became a prime element for the success of an actress. Their curvaceous bodies speak of the time they are spending in gym for work outs. As an example, the leading lady of the 1980's, Sri Devi, is known as 'thunder thighs'. Sri Devi, like other female stars, spends hours in the make-up room to portray the aggressive, dominating characters. In "Himmatwala", she out-danced and out-fought the men. She dealt with the villains herself, and defeated them. In "Joshila" (1989) even two top male heroes could hardly hold on to their role when casted against Sri Devi. Showtime, September, 1987 reported 'Is Sri Devi a hero?' The attitude and perception on women had totally changed in this time. Women in Indian cinema have given tremors to traditional society norms. For example, Devika Rani, co-founder of Bombay Talkies studio, was one of the most powerful actresses of her time and gave Hindi cinema's first kiss, and perhaps the longest one.

### 5.0 Bollywood Heroines in 1990s

Then came the period of 1990s. It brought more changes in the Hindi Cinema. The films of this time showed the changing role of female component in Indian Cinema. One such film "Mohra" made in 1994 featured Raveena Tandon (as Roma Singh). Roma's body language depicted her as a very "liberated" woman. Writing in "G" - an Indian film magazine, Monica Motwani observed "the heroine may have metamorphosed over the years, but she still cannot break away from the shackles of certain norms set by Hindi cinema years ago." Women lost the space they had created for themselves. Heroes grabbed the centre stage and the heroines just relegated to a glamorous film component. Their presence contributed nothing to move the story forward. The more India became global the more the Bollywood films regressed. Some filmmakers attempted stories on the empowerment of women, and actresses like Tabu and Vidya Balan got a rare chance to carry it on their shoulders. But such opportunities were few and far between

Some hit films of the post-liberalization era of 1990s, showed a desire for a traditional way of life where women looked after their homes and men earned the bread. Madhuri Dixit stole hearts in the biggest hits of the 1990s, Hum Apke Hai Kaun, she also established the trend of heroines who would never put their own dreams ahead of the aspirations and desires of their family. The caring homemaker role of the women was back in trend. The more recent films of late 1990s, like 'Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gum', 'Kuch Kuch Hota Hai', 'Dil Toh Pagal Hai', 'Biwi No.1', all had women as decorations and as homemakers. None of these films made by contemporary young filmmakers presented women as career women.

Even the film Dil Chahta Hai, known to be a Generation X movie, made by a young director, caught to the traditional role for its female leads. While the three male characters in the film had identities apart from their romantic ones, the females didn't have any identity of their own. Only one character (Dimple Kapadia) is having a career but does not have a happy ending while the man who loves her finds a normal girlfriend. Among the directors of the above-mentioned films, several have studied abroad and their lifestyle is influenced by the western values. They have seen Hollywood films but still returned to traditional Indian values and conservatism through the female characters in their films.

### 6.0 Bollywood Heroines in modern time

Singh (2007) shows how the popular cinema draws heavily upon the Indian mythology for its popular appeal. It mainly shares the interests and values of male prejudice, dramatizing male fantasies of the female. Hence a woman is depicted either as an angel or as a monster.

Sometime afterwards, in the 1990s, the line between the heroine and vamp disappeared. The heroine dressed as boldly and moved as provocatively as the bad girl of old times. Some critics opined that as an effect of globalization and consumerism where mass production demanded heroines to become more ornamental than real woman. She might be shown dancing in snow-covered Switzerland or Australia but basically sticks to the ideal woman Indian males fantasize about which is being a homemaker. The change of images has not been a sudden one but happened slowly.

Some changes in the women's typical characters have been evident in the films. For example Jiah Khan, in "Nishabd" is a fresh change. It focuses on the teenager's growing consciousness of her sexuality. She accepts confidently by reaching out to a man more than twice of her age. It has become possible partly with the entry of small cinema. Encouraged by the multiplex culture, new directors have started to acknowledge the changing time to bring their own dreams in scripts.

Today, when an actress poses in a bikini in a film or for the cover of a magazine, it sets tongues wagging. But, let us not forget that it's not new- Mehtab did a topless bathtub sequence in Kidar Sharma's "Chitrlekha" in 1942. History repeats itself.

### Conclusion:

The debate whether films reflect life or life imitates films can also be examined in this context. Despite a large number of women working both in urban and rural areas, the films more often ignored this reality. It was a challenge to find a strong foothold by women in a male-dominated and patriarchal society. But women in Indian cinema have achieved this feat. At a time when women are breaking free of taboos and stereotypes, filmdom doesn't seem to reflect this changing social trend. In terms of women entering films, the number has gone up manifold, but in terms of screen space, their roles have shrunk drastically. From storyline to end credits, most of the time the male counterparts get undue preference over females. Fortunately, many directors have gained popularity as harbingers of change, among film viewers who aspired a change from the typical story lines. This has afforded opportunity to heroines who want to take a different path away from the typical stereotypes. Indian film industry exhibits history of giving due respect and credit to strong women characters. Women in movie business are found potent contributors to change the face of Indian cinema in a silent, steady, and non-confrontative way.

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