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Portrayal of Indian Cultural Themes in Films

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Abstract

Cinema possesses a unique narrative power that enables it to reflect, interpret, and influence cultural identities across societies. The portrayal of cultural themes in films offers a dynamic medium through which traditions, values, and social structures are communicated to diverse audiences. Indian cultural themes refer to the distinctive set of beliefs, values, traditions, artistic expressions, social practices, and philosophical ideals that have evolved within the Indian subcontinent over thousands of years. They reflect the principles of unity in diversity, spirituality, respect for nature, collective living, and moral duty (dharma). They represent both continuity and adaptation, preserving ancient customs while embracing the influence of modernity. This abstract explores the multidimensional representation of Indian cultural themes in bollywood cinema. To fulfill the objective of this paper different movies have been taken from bollywood films, south Indian movies and Bhojpuri cinema. These movies are of different genres from Indian cinema. The paper will not only serve the purpose of highlighting the cultural themes through the mentioned genres and movies, rather it will also discuss about how these themes in some way or the other shedding light on the positive and the negative side of our culture.

Keywords: Indian culture, Films, South Indian movies, Bhojpuri cinema and Bollywood

Introduction

Cinema reflects society like a mirror, showcasing the changes and developments taking place within it through stories. Films act as cultural documents, capturing the beliefs, values, attitudes and social issues of the time in which they are made. A movie becomes popular when it successfully highlights the social and cultural tensions of its era. However, this does not guarantee success every time, as the popularity of a film depends mainly on how well it connects with the audience.



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Movies strongly influence younger generations and contribute to their social learning. They often reinforce the morals taught at home and practiced in the community. Since people today, especially the youth, spend more time watching films and television than reading books or interacting with peers, they tend to learn about emotions like love and actions like violence from media. Many films glamorize harmful behaviours such as gambling, drinking or extramarital affairs to attract viewers. Because of this, movies are sometimes criticized for clashing with traditional values and cultural ideals.

The Indian film industry is a large blend of different stories and viewpoints. Indian cinema, being a major part of it, also deals with various social and cultural topics, presenting them through creative storytelling. Although it is often accused of showing society and traditions in a negative way, cinema still remains the most powerful medium to spread awareness and influence cultural change.

For Indians, films are not just stories; they are a vibrant combination of art, music and dance. In many ways, Indian cinema continues the old traditions of theatrical performances but in a modern form. Good songs and dance sequences often play a key role in a film's success. *Taking bollywood specifically into consideration there are certain movies which talks about different shades of our culture.*

For instance Oh My God! (2012) is a Hindi satirical comedy-drama directed by Umesh Shukla. This movie in many ways talks about being spiritual, which is mostly counted as the prime trait of our Indian culture. The film follows Kanji Lalji Mehta, a middle-class Gujarati atheist who owns a shop selling Hindu idols in Mumbai. He mocks religious rituals until a mild earthquake destroys only his shop. When his insurance claim is rejected as the damage is classified under an "Act of God," Kanji decides to sue God. No lawyer agrees to help him except Hanif Qureshi, a Muslim lawyer, who files the case against prominent godmen Siddheshwar Maharaj, Gopi Maiyya, and Leeladhar Swamy as God's representatives. The unusual lawsuit draws national attention, and Kanji faces backlash from religious followers, financial loss, and abandonment by his family. He meets Krishna Vasudev Yadav, a mysterious man who later reveals himself as God. With Krishna's guidance, Kanji studies the *Bhagavad Gita*, *Quran*, and *Bible*, discovering that all events occur by God's will, strengthening his case. Kanji eventually suffers a stroke but is miraculously cured by Krishna, who reveals that while He created the world, humans created religion for their own benefit. He destroyed Kanji's shop to expose corrupt godmen who misuse faith for profit. God, he says, does not dwell in temples or need offerings but wishes people to help others in need.



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Kanji wins the case, but ironically, people start worshipping him. Disheartened, he destroys his own idol and urges people to seek God within themselves and in humanity. Finally, he rejects all symbols of blind faith, embracing true spiritual freedom. There are many more movies which deals with spirituality like: PK, Bhool chuk maaf, God Tussi Great Ho, Kedarnath etc.

Secondly, a very popular movie starring Aamir Khan, Soha Ali Khan , R. Madhvan and many more actors entitled Rang de Basanti, deals with the theme of patriotism and unity in diversity as well. In London, film student Sue McKinley discovers her grandfather James's diary, detailing his role in the execution of Indian revolutionaries Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev, and Rajguru in the 1930s. Though a British officer, James admired their courage, inspiring Sue to make a film about them. She travels to India and, with the help of her friend Sonia, recruits Sonia's carefree and cynical friends — DJ, Karan, Sukhi, and Aslam — to play the revolutionaries. Despite their initial disinterest in patriotism, they gradually connect with the story. Tensions ease when their rival, conservative activist Laxman Pandey, joins the project and grows close to them. Tragedy strikes when Sonia's fiancé, Air Force officer Ajay Singh Rathod, dies in a MiG-21 crash. The government blames pilot error, but the group uncovers corruption — Defense Minister Shastri approved substandard aircraft parts for bribes, aided by Karan's father, businessman Rajnath Singhanian. Outraged, the friends organize a peaceful protest that turns violent when police attack them, leaving Ajay's mother in a coma. Disillusioned, they decide to seek justice themselves. They assassinate Shastri, and Karan kills his own father. Branded as terrorists by the media, they seize the All India Radio station to reveal the truth. Karan broadcasts their confession, exposing government corruption. Police storm the station — Sukhi, Aslam, and Laxman are killed, followed by DJ and Karan. Their sacrifice sparks nationwide protests against the government. Ajay's mother awakens, and Sue reflects on how the boys transformed her life. In the end, the friends are seen in an after life with Bhagat Singh. Similarly, Kesari, Kesari2, Lagaan, Diplomat etc are movies which have dealt with the theme of patriotism.

A movie like Dhadak 2 deals with a very harsh but real aspect of our culture that is casteism. It is a 2025 Indian Hindi-language romantic drama film. Neelesh "Neel" Ahirwar, a law student from a marginalized lower-caste background, gains admission to a prestigious law college through the reservation system. Determined to build a successful career, he meets Vidhi Bharadwaj, a classmate from an upper-caste, privileged family. Despite their contrasting social backgrounds, friendship soon turns into love. However, their relationship faces harsh opposition from Vidhi's family. At her sister's wedding, Neelesh is humiliated



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and beaten by Vidhi's cousins for daring to love someone of a higher caste; one cousin, Ronnie, even urinates on him. Though Vidhi's father stops the assault, he warns Neelesh to stay away. Deeply hurt, Neelesh distances himself but later begins resisting discrimination in his daily life. He refuses to sit at the back of the classroom reserved for lower-caste students and takes Ronnie's usual seat, leading to further bullying and Ronnie's suspension. When Neelesh's father is called to college, he too faces public humiliation, intensifying Neelesh's anger. Tragedy strikes when their friend Shekhar, also from a lower caste, commits suicide due to social pressure, bringing Neelesh and Vidhi closer again. Still, her relatives remain hostile and hire Shankar, a caste-violence enforcer, to kill Neelesh. Shankar fails, and overwhelmed by guilt, commits suicide. Realizing Ronnie's role in the attack, Neelesh confronts him but refrains from killing him, instead exposing his cruelty publicly. In the end, Neelesh and Vidhi's love survives, though scarred by violence and loss. Their union symbolizes a fragile victory against deep-rooted caste prejudice. Article 15, Aarakshan, Masaan and many more movies which deals with the same theme.

Many of the bollywood movies have dealt with an another outstanding Indian cultural theme i.e female violence. Although it may sound negative but yes there are lot many movies with certain negative themes of Indian culture. The film opens with Saumya accusing her husband Dhruv of attempted murder at a police station in Devipur, Uttarakhand. Police officer Vidya Jyothi (VJ) recalls receiving an earlier domestic abuse call that was dismissed as a false alarm. Later, Maaji, a maternal figure to Saumya, reveals that she made the call, fearing for Saumya's safety, as Dhruv routinely abused her. Through Maaji's narration, we learn that Dhruv, the son of a minister and paragliding company owner, once dated Saumya's twin sister, Shailee. While Shailee was bold and impulsive, Saumya was gentle and overshadowed by her sister's resentment. Under family pressure, Dhruv married Saumya, but Shailee's interference and Dhruv's violent temper made the marriage abusive. When Saumya mentioned having children, Dhruv's anger escalated, and he once pushed her down the stairs, nearly killing her. Although Dhruv claimed the fall was accidental and Saumya initially supported him, she later planned revenge. During a Holi celebration, Saumya suggested a paragliding trip, mirroring their courtship days. In flight, Dhruv's harness failed, and both survived. Saumya accused him of tampering with her gear, leading to his conviction for attempted murder and domestic abuse. However, VJ notices inconsistencies and discovers that Saumya and Shailee had swapped places before the flight. It was Shailee who sabotaged the harness to frame Dhruv. When confronted, Shailee justifies their actions as retribution for years of abuse and silence. Recognizing domestic violence as a societal issue, VJ lets the case rest, while Saumya finally finds peace. Thappad, MRS(2024), English Vinglish, Parched and many more.



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South Indian cinema, encompassing Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, and Kannada film industries, plays a vital role in portraying and preserving Indian culture. These films beautifully capture the essence of regional traditions, languages, festivals, and social values while reflecting universal themes of love, family, and morality. Rooted deeply in the cultural and spiritual heritage of the South, movies like *Baahubali*, *Kantara*, *RRR*, *Ponniyin Selvan*, and *KGF* showcase not only grand storytelling and visual excellence but also a profound respect for mythology, folklore, and local customs. They highlight values such as devotion, courage, humility, and respect for elders — core aspects of Indian culture. The portrayal of temple rituals, classical art forms like Bharatanatyam and Carnatic music, and rural life further strengthens the connection between cinema and cultural identity. Malayalam films, known for their realism, often depict the struggles and simplicity of everyday life, emphasizing moral integrity and community bonding. Similarly, Tamil and Telugu cinema often intertwine heroism with social responsibility, presenting stories that promote justice, unity, and compassion. South Indian filmmakers also address contemporary issues such as caste, gender equality, and modernization, showing how traditional culture adapts to changing times. Their narratives blend spirituality with progress, ensuring that Indian values remain relevant in a globalized world. In essence, South Indian movies not only entertain but also educate, preserving India's cultural richness while inspiring audiences to stay connected to their roots, making them a powerful medium of cultural expression and pride.

Bhojpuri cinema, deeply rooted in the cultural heartland of India, plays a significant role in portraying the traditions, values, and social realities of Indian life. Emerging from the states of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and parts of Jharkhand, Bhojpuri movies celebrate the vibrancy of rural India, where family, faith, and community form the core of existence. These films beautifully depict the simplicity and warmth of village life through folk songs, festivals, marriage rituals, and agricultural traditions, offering an authentic glimpse into the daily experiences of ordinary people. Movies often revolve around themes of love, family honor, social justice, and devotion, reflecting the emotional and moral fabric of Indian society. Popular Bhojpuri actors like Manoj Tiwari, Ravi Kishan, and Dinesh Lal Yadav “Nirahua” have brought to life stories that highlight respect for elders, the importance of hard work, and the struggle between traditional values and modern influences. The rich use of Bhojpuri language, folk music, and dance forms like *birha* and *kajri* adds cultural depth and authenticity to the storytelling. Many films also emphasize religious devotion and moral integrity, portraying characters who face hardship but uphold righteousness and compassion. In recent years, Bhojpuri cinema has begun addressing social issues such as migration, poverty, and women's empowerment, bridging entertainment with awareness. Overall,



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Bhojpuri movies serve as a reflection of India's rural ethos and cultural identity, preserving its linguistic and traditional heritage while adapting to contemporary social change.

In conclusion, Bollywood, South Indian, and Bhojpuri cinema together form a rich tapestry that vividly portrays the depth and diversity of Indian culture. Each regional industry, while distinct in style and language, reflects shared cultural values such as family unity, spirituality, respect for tradition, and moral strength. Bollywood often presents Indian culture on a grand, emotional, and global scale, blending tradition with modernity and social change. South Indian cinema, rooted in strong regional traditions, showcases mythological heritage, devotion, and social consciousness, preserving ancient customs while addressing contemporary realities. Bhojpuri films, on the other hand, capture the simplicity and authenticity of rural life, celebrating folk traditions, faith, and community bonding. Despite differences in scale and audience, all three industries emphasize the importance of relationships, resilience, and righteousness — the pillars of Indian civilization. Collectively, these films serve as a mirror of India's cultural evolution, documenting its journey from traditional to modern, from local to global. They not only entertain but also educate and inspire, reminding viewers of the strength and beauty of India's cultural roots. Through music, storytelling, and emotion, Indian cinema continues to unite diverse audiences, preserving the nation's heritage while reflecting its dynamic transformation in a rapidly changing world.

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