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Declining rural culture in Hindi cinema: A sociological study

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Abstract
The portrayal of rural culture in Hindi cinema gives ample evidence to know Indian culture and Indian rural society. Indian cinema is a mass medium through which the culture of particular time and space is represented. This work confirms that there is decline in study of rural sociology after 1980s following the same route, rural life as a dominant theme of Hindi cinema has been declined after 1980s for various reasons.

Keywords: Rural culture, Migration, Hindi cinema, Public culture, Village, Agrarian society

Introduction
Cinema, popular or parallel, a visual art of story-telling with rich inputs of music, screenplay, cast and script, mirrors the contemporary society in which it functions. From emotional dramas to candy-floss romances to action-thrillers, cinema derives its sustenance, ideas and imaginations from its surroundings. The images cinema creates, surreal or tangled wave of deceit, need to be in sync with societal aspirations and basic urge of humanity to recreate and have fun and entertainment. In its long journey of more than a century, cinema has transformed itself from being a taboo and absolute no to a virtual way of life.

From Dadasaheb Phalke to Farhan Akhtar, every decade of Bollywood has reflected various hues and aspects of real life on reels of cinema. When Dadasaheb integrated centuries of old mythological narratives with emerging medium of cinema in forms of films like *Raja Harishchandra* (1913) and *Kaliya Mardan* (The Childhood of Krishna) (1919) silent era film was instantly slurped up by audience and showed religious bent of mind of society of those times. Ashok Kumar starred *Kismet* (1943) released during Quit India Movement was a cinematic interpretation of resistance against imperialistic British by Indians.

Post-independence Nehruvian socialist era was the time of Guru Dutt, Satyajit Ray and Bimal Roy, ruthless perfectionists, who vividly captured the growing pains of infant democracy and universality of human emotions in their films. During the time of 70s and 80s, with films like *Ankur* (1974) *Manthan* (1976) etc., art cinema finally came of age and showcased common man's struggle with the system and striving for basics of life. Post 90s, when Indian society woke up to globalisation, liberalisation and privatisation new-age cinema makers too broke traditional Bollywood's definitive cinematic boundaries.

The portrayal of rural culture in Hindi cinema gives ample evidence to know Indian culture and Indian rural society. Indian cinema is a mass medium through which the culture of particular time and space is represented. Different institutions of society like political institutions state and court are represented by police and courtrooms respectively, economic institutions by market, social institutions by different costumes and dressing highlighting the issues of caste, class, region and religion. The power of Cinema lies in the fact that it is effective medium of mass communication to public and image building. Cinema doesn't exist apart from society and untouched by world. The structural compulsions of society produce a particular kind of cinema while cinema in turn too approves existing discourses of the society. It has some ideological and political load therefore a dialectical relationship exists between cinema and society.

Sudhir Kakar and Ashis Nandy believe that the popular cinema has a therapeutic effect on their audience. Thus, Kakar says Hindi movies are contemporary myths which, through the vehicle of fantasy and the process of identification, temporarily heal for their audience,

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the principal stresses arising out of Indian family relationships (Kakar 1981) [8]. Popular Indian cinema draws its themes heavily from its culture and traditional values and aesthetics. Again, Kakar says 'many of these contemporary myths have a continuity which can be traced to ancient models, or in other words Hindi films are modern versions of certain old and familiar myths' [i]

Crane says cinema is a "recorded culture" [ii] and this recorded culture, as the principal empirical referent through which various types of contemporary culture are expressed and thus can easily be explored. Not surprisingly then the primary direction through which the new sociology of culture has proliferated is in areas like art, science, popular culture, religion, media, technology and other social worlds where recorded form of culture is readily accessible. These culture subfields have become the central substantive foci through which the field as a whole has under taken to build theoretical coherence.

The Study of Indian rural culture through Hindi cinema needs some theoretical understanding regarding culture as a whole on the one hand and placing Indian culture in the context of rural Indian society and Indian cinema on the other. So, for this I will begin my discussion with the debates and discussion over culture then will move further towards Indian cinema so that a coherent connection between culture and cinema can be established.

Sociological Understanding of Culture and Cinema

Before going into sociological understanding of culture debates it is necessary to have a glimpse of most appropriate part of the culture which directly represents the cinema that is public culture. India's cinema represents the 'public culture'. 'Public culture' is seen to address the complex and fluid interaction that exist between the categories of high/elite and low/mass culture in India. Whereas the term 'popular culture' implies a more rigid distinctions between two [iii]. Stuart Hall has suggested that the only viable definition of the popular culture positions it 'in a continuing tension (relationship, influence, antagonism) to the dominant culture.' [iv] Indian public culture is not a homogenised whole but is a differentiated field which covers diverse audiences from Ashis Nandy's slum's eye view to the world in *Deewaar* to the middle class eye view in films like *Hum Aapke Hai Koun*. Therefore, public culture too encompasses the middle class, significant sections of small town and rural Indian masses.

From the turn of century until the 1950s, the definition of culture was embroiled in a dialogue between concepts of culture and social structure. Culturalists maintained that culture is primary in guiding all pattern of behaviour, including who interacts with whom, and should therefore be given priority in theories about the organisation of society and this trend was followed by Fraz Boas and B. Malinowski, Mead, Kroeber, Benedict and Tylor. According to Tylor; culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals law, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. Therefore, culture is what distinguishes man from other species. Culture consists of all that is produced by human collectivises that is all of social life. According to Boas, the study of culture patterns helped further the argument that culture, not nature, played the most significant role in governing human behaviour. This position was encountered by researchers of the structural tradition

and was known as structuralists such as A. R Radcliff Brown, Pritchard and Levis Strauss. Structuralist contended that social structure was the primary focus of social science and should be given priority in theories about society because social structure determines pattern of social interaction and thought.

Then another debate over culture is emic approach, where culture is assumed internal and localised through which it produces a distinctive identity for society socializing members for greater internal homogeneity and identifying outsiders. Etic approach to culture that is a generalized theory of cultural pattern.

The high mass culture debate: Mass culture is a dynamic, revolutionary force breaking down the old barriers of class, tradition, and taste and dissolving all cultural distinctions. It mixes and scrambles everything together, producing what might be called homogenized culture that will transform the values of society.

Clifford Geertz defines culture as a semiotic one in search of meaning. He writes 'The concept of culture I espouse…is essentially a semiotic one. Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative one in search of meaning.' [v]

Before going into various debates of culture, it is important to know why the study of culture is important in contemporary time. Modernity gave rise to industrial and technical growth which deteriorates family values, alienation among individuals, disintegration from family/community life and ecological decay. Disenchantment from modernisation led to the postmodernism debate and its paradigm for the study of culture. Singh (2000) argues that 'The system's boundary in the theory of cultural modernization was based upon the assumption of its inherent and universal rationality. Its edifice soon fell as the backwash effects of technological and industrial growth such as ecological decay, decline in family values, sharpening edges of the disguised exploitations, feelings of alienation among individuals and the disintegration in the structure and values of community life took alarming forms. This disenchantment from modernization probably added to the rise of the post-modernist debate, and its paradigms for the study of culture. Its precursor, the cultural analysis paradigm made innovations by studying culture in its symbolic depth; it focussed upon exploration of its latent codes, structures of meanings and semiotic forms. It does not reject totally the notions of structure or system. It, however, recognizes the variations and multiplicity of themes in the cultural space within a single community or a regional group' [vi]

Rural Culture versus Hindi Cinema and declining Rural Studies

Discussing the theoretical boundary of culture now it is important to discuss rural culture. Here rural culture means village culture, village way of living. Rural culture is often seen as epitome of traditions. A rural life is not only smaller in its settlement but also has simpler socio-economic organisation. Smaller settlements enable rural people to know each other intimately and remember past histories of every household which interwove them into community life. Sense of belongingness and identification can be found

stronger in village life. Rural economic life is organised around agriculture which not only provides a mode of livelihood but also a sense of identity and belongingness. Rural settlements also provide a joint household system where under one roof several families jointly live together and extended kinship plays a major role in their personal and family life.

The portrayal of city and village life has been frequent subject of Hindi cinema where both have been shown opposite to each other. The contrast depicted in the films is not between the 'real India' of villages, as Gandhi called it, and the problems of the increasingly over-burdened Indian cities, but is more to do with a contrast between the pre-modern or timeless village and the city as an icon of modernity.[vii]

City is depicted as a grave of hope and village as a temple of despair. City as a grave of hope means city as a place which gives hope to villagers in getting materialist happiness in terms of removing poverty, finding employment opportunity with addition to valueless, immoral, corrupt and unethical society. Village as a temple of despair means village is shown in terms of non-materialist happiness full of moral, ethics, incorrupt and pure with additional to misery, poverty, unemployment, underdeveloped. Here I would like to mention Ashis Nandy to support my argument. He says that the village is usually regarded as the fantasy of a peasant or rural past as a lost paradise, contrasted with fears of the city and its amorality [viii].

Some of the earlier film director depicted village life in a romantic way like Mehboob Kahn's *Mother India* (1957) where most of film is based on village life where city appears in a song only. So, the film starts with romantic image of village in early days with farm workers singing and romancing in the fields then problems come in the form of money lenders, illiteracy, poverty and natural disaster and solutions to these problems are depicted in the Nehruvian modern idea of dam construction. B.R. Chopra's *Naya Daur* (1957) too shows that modern technology comes from city and proves good only when it is owned collectively and doesn't unemployed the person.

Raj Kapoor another film director, producer and actor from 40s to 80s depicted a more romanticised view of village life, although he himself never lived in the village. He has shown village as a pure, faultless India, exemplified by the village women whom he portrays innocent and pure such as in the film *Ram Teri Ganga Maili* (1985) where actress is shown as pure, natural and innocent. Even the name and the role of the actress *Ganga* symbolises river *Ganga* which is so pure and natural that it is worshiped by Indians. On the other hand, the city life represents a place of corruption, immorality, dishonesty and value lessness.

Before going into details, it is worthy to begin from the contributory role of cinema to understand Indian society especially post independent Indian society where it is assumed that the history of India itself comes to an end with partition and independence. Educationist Krishna Kumar writes that for 'Indian children history itself comes to an end with partition and independence. As a constituent of social studies, and later on as a subject in its own right, history runs right out of content in 1947…All that has happened during the last 55 years may filter through the measly civics syllabus, popular cinema and television; history as formally constituted knowledge of the past does not cover it.' [ix]

This work confirms that there is decline in study of rural sociology after 1980s following the same route, rural life as a dominant theme of Hindi cinema has been declined after 1980s for this there might be different possible explanations. These are (1) the market economy (business) of the cinema: as most of the audience can be found in urban areas so the market economy of the cinema suggests to more films on urban issues replacing rural themes. (2) Disenchantment from village life: aspiration of the villagers to enjoy city life: as it has been shown in the movies that city is a place of hope where rural people come to city in search of job, get rid of poverty. Recent changes reveal that inclination of rural people towards non-farm activities, breakdown of traditional joint family system, and of traditional Jajmani relations, which has promoted greater fluidity in the occupational choices and agricultural activities no longer, seems capable of holding rural people back to village life. (3) Village is becoming city, not city is becoming village: the extension of city life not only inspires people to watch cinema over city life but also provides business of cinema in cities. (4) The complex and vast changing urban life: it provides ample themes for films making wherever the simple stable rural life does not provide plenty themes for film making. (5) Experimenting subjects: new and experimenting genres of Hindi cinema can be digested and entertained mostly by urban people and hardly by rural people. (6) New demographic structure: where youth and working population (15-64) is a major portion of population (more than 60% of India's population) they have a passion for urban life styles and not for village life. (7) Subjects of Hindi cinema over rural life got exhausted: plenty of films over rural life on the same issues over poverty, migration and exploitation etc. have been made many times so themes over rural life for Indian cinema got exhausted as changes at village level occurs at slow pace.

Singh (1985) *Survey of Social Research and Social Anthropology* (1969-1979) to shows that during the 1950s and 1960s there was a dominance of rural sociology but during 1970s and onwards village studies become infrequent or out of academic endeavour. Structuralists, Historical and Marxist orientations became out of vogue in rural studies. Further Jodhka too confirms that rural studies are no longer a subject of excitement among academicians. He writes '…virtually all shades of 'rural' and 'agrarian' studies from 1950s to 1980s were, directly or indirectly, linked to the project of 'development' and the 'developmental state'. The growing influence of 'neo-liberal' economic philosophy not only led to an erosion of the 'developmental state' but also changed the priorities of social science research. In this changing environment, India's rural society no longer attracts the kind of public attentions it deserves. The agrarian question no longer generated excitement in university seminars, or in the popular media.' [x]

Such kind of observation provides ample evidence to link cinema and society. Although from the beginning the number of films made on urban life was more than the films made on rural life. There are various possible explanations some of them from cinematic point of view and some of them from rural sociology point of view. From Cinematic point of view 1950s are considered as the golden age of India cinema perhaps because the new system of independent production allowed more flexibility than the studio system. This period also saw the emergence of the most highly regarded directors like *Raj Kapoor*, *Mehboob*

Khan, *Guru Dutt* and *Bimal Roy*; the advent of the 'nightingale of India' Lata Mangeshkar and the rise of super stardom of *Nargis, Madhubala*, *Dilip Kumar, Raj Kapoor and Dev Anand*. With the advent of sound technology and new medium of photography started a beginning of new genre which placed great emphasis on narrative and social concern. At this time the European aesthetic practice of realism became the favoured form of representation and when the advancement of print technology changes forever the depiction of Indian deities [xi]. From rural sociology point of view it is the period of 1950s when the plethora of village studies started. The abolition of *Zamindari* by First Amendment Act, 1951 give way to agrarian reforms. It was also the period of nation building where in 1950 Indian constitution adopted and most of after 1950 the planning commission focused on rural development. And this was also a time when the socio-economic and political structure of India was changing, when power transferred from the British government to India and when Indian nationalism and nation building process started.

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[i] (Kakar 1981:63).
[ii] (Crane 1994)
[iii] Dwyer and Patel (2002: 8).
[iv] Hall (1997:462).
[v] Clifford Geertz (1973:5).
[vi] Singh Y. (2000:27).
[vii] Berman (1983)
[viii] Nandy (1998)
[ix] Krishna Kumar (2004:109).
[x] Jodhka (2012:16)
[xi] Dwyer and Patel (2002:20-21)