

Class Struggle in Bollywood Films

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ASIA 353: Introduction to Hindi Film

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April 21, 2021

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After watching the Bollywood movies from the course pack this term, people can notice a huge gap between rich and poor people in India. Even after India's independence for many years, the huge class gap is still a severe social problem. Facing this problem, the rich selfishly enjoy a luxurious life. They only want to become richer, but they are indifferent to the living conditions of poor people. Instead, the poor's life is difficult, and they are struggling to live every day. Some of them endure all the pain and continue to work hard to ensure their lives. However, another part of poor people chooses to obtain wealth through illegal means to change their living conditions. So, given the fact above, this gap has undoubtedly resulted in many conflicts and contradictions between these two classes. This article will talk about the living conditions of the rich and the poor and their psychological activities and reactions in the face of huge class differences. Besides, it is obvious that song and dance elements are an important feature of Bollywood movies. This article will also analyze that song and dance elements in Bollywood movies are a lubricant between the classes, which can bring relief to the poor class to some extent.

In some Bollywood films, we can notice that rich people are selfish and mean to poor people. So, I would argue that they have no mercy to lower-class people, and they even wantonly squeeze every penny out of the poor's meager labor results to get richer and richer. In *Mother India*, Radha's family had no money to pay for the wedding. So, Radha's mother-in-law borrowed some money from a moneylender, Lala, who is a cunning and notorious rich person in this village. In order to make more money, the cunning moneylender, Lala, colluded with the elders in the village to determine the interest on this loan. After conspiring, Radha's family was forced to pay three-quarters of their crop as interest on the loan of just 500 rupees. In order to

pay the debt, Radha's family worked desperately even though living in poverty. Unfortunately, a severe storm swept across this village and then flood followed, which destroyed Radha's house and ruined the harvest. Radha's son was also dying from hunger. At this time, Lala told Radha that he could provide them with food to save her son's life at the cost of her body. As a rich man, Lala still only considered his own interests when the life of the poor was at stake, and he did not care about whether the poor people could be alive or not. It is extremely hard for the poor, like Radha's family, to live a good life. What they can do is to earn a very low salary and live a miserable life under the oppression of the rich year after year. In *Mother India*, this plot reveals the shameful act of the rich exploiting the poor to make more money to increase their wealth. And they only provide extremely meager remuneration to the poor for their hard work. Just like Lala's selfish and cunning character in the movie, profit is the only goal pursued by the rich class. As stated in the book *Poverty in India* (1971): further if these small gains continue to be monopolised by the upper-middle and the richer sections allowing only a trickle to flow down to the poor, it will take 50 years before everyone is lifted above the poverty line. (p. 25) Therefore, a cruel fact is that some rich people will do everything they can to enrich their wealth greedily and don't care about the hardship of poor people.

Besides, I would argue that some rich people are obsessed with enjoying their luxurious life and are indifferent to the living situations of lower-class poor people, let alone the future of their country. The movie *Shatranj Ke Khiladi* tells a story related to the Indian ruling class's reactions to the British's colonization. At that time, their living conditions were horrible, and they faced double exploitation by the native ruling class and British colonists. However, facing the invasion of the British colonists, the ruling class people were indifferent to the situation and they were still enjoying life every day. In this movie, there are two noble people, Mir and Mirza,

who can embody the ruling class's indifference to lower-class's poverty and the decline of the country at that time. These two men were obsessed with playing chess all day long and they disregarded family life as well as the deteriorating condition of the country. Even when the Indian ruling class collapsed and the British colonists took over India, they did not take any actions to save their country or help any single poor family. Instead, they fled the city and continued to enjoy playing chess. At the end of the movie, there is a very ironic scene that Mir said "Mr. prime minister, you get aside. Queen Victoria is coming" while holding a chess figure. The weakness and indifference of the ruling class allowed the invaders to seize the opportunity, which made the lives of the people at the bottom more difficult. As Pritchett (1986) talked about the Indian ruling class in the book: the narrowness of their specialized Interests makes them hopelessly vulnerable, and the British lose no time in seizing the advantage. The very refinement and cultivation which are part of Lucknow's enduring appeal- a king who would rather be a poet, nobles who live an ascetic life dedicated only to the intricacies of chess- bring about its downfall. (p. 76) From this movie, I believe that the upper rich class of a country should take more responsibility to protect the lower-class people of this country, since the people are the foundations of their ruling status. If they repeatedly remain indifferent to the poor or even oppress the people at the bottom, their status may also collapse one day in the future. The ironic ending of the two nobles in *Shatranj Ke Khiladi* is a typical example.

The above part analyzes the huge gap between the rich and the poor in India from the perspective of upper-class. And below, I will discuss this serious social problem from the perspective of the poor. To begin with, facing the gap, some lower-class people are extremely poor, but they insist on working hard to make their life better. Finally, they gain strong independence and even become a symbol of Indian culture. In *Mother India*, the single mother

Radha lived in a dilapidated and small house with her children. After the flood storming the village, they almost had no furniture and even food was extremely scarce, which led to her youngest child starving to death. However, Radha still worked really hard to raise the other two children. They couldn't afford an ox, so she cultivated the land by herself. Furthermore, she not only had to face difficult living conditions, but also had to endure the oppression of cunning rich people. Through continuous efforts, she gradually raised her two children and basically paid off the loan. As an audience, I can perceive that the hard-working female image portrayed by the director shows the strength of women, which also praises the dedication of women. A strong and independent low-level woman became a symbol of India's independence. There is a passage in Schultz's (2002) book that can fully prove my description of the image of Radha: Mother India is a hymn of sacrifice and suffering, reminding one of the visual aesthetics, film rhythm and ethics of Aleksandr Dovzenko. Idealising the struggle of India's hard working rural population, it represents subsistence as a selfless strive, thus creating the economic basis, and above all the necessary moral foundation for the blossoming of the young Indian nation. (p. 73)

When facing absolute poverty, not all poor people will choose to make legitimate efforts to obtain a better life. In the process of struggling to live, another part of lower-class people chooses to obtain wealth through illegal means to make their lives better. In this paragraph, I will analyze the motivation and final outcome of these poor people who engage in illegal activities in the underworld to make money. I would argue that some social issues such as rigid class hierarchy is the main reason for the poor to choose an illegal way to live. In movie *Awara*, the protagonist Raj lived with his mother in a slum. In order to support her son to study, the mother worked diligently to earn some remuneration. Due to excessive work, it's obvious to see mother's tired and exhausted face. In school, although Raj studied hard, he was bullied by upper-

class children due to his lower-class status. He was eventually expelled for working outside the school. After that, he had no choice but to work for the underworld. There is a thought-provoking sentence in this movie: Children born of good folks turn out good and children born of bandits turn out bandits. There are also many Bollywood movies that reflect the poor people being forced into the abyss by the cruel reality. In movie *Satya*, the protagonist Satya was an orphan with no family's help and no educational background. There is no doubt that he is a representative of the helpless lower class. In the beginning, what he could do is being a waiter in a club. His initial expectation is to have a basic life by earning more salary through his hard work. However, the social reality is cruel. He was bullied by gangsters while serving them. Because young people are more likely to lose mind under anger, he fought against the gangsters. The result is unsurprising, due to his resistance, the gangsters bullied him even more seriously. When he was almost helpless, no one stood out to help him. What's more desperate is that he also lost his job to maintain his basic life. Therefore, he had no choice but to work in the underworld and do illegal things to make money. Finally, Satya died, and there is no doubt that this is a tragic ending. It's a pity that Satya is a very faithful young man and he should have had a great life. But, due to his wrong choice, he was doomed to be a tragedy. As stated by Fisman (2008): Yet the concurrence of violence, corruption, and persistent poverty is so pervasive that it is impossible to separate the study from these other social ills. (p. 15) The huge gap between social classes causes extreme poverty among the lower-class people. When they are desperate, in order to get a better life, the poor often take risks and do illegal things to get money. And once they start doing illegal things, such as working in the gang, they will embark on an irreversible path.

Finally, I have to mention that abundant song and dance elements are characteristic of Bollywood movies. In Hindu movies, no matter what the subject matter, it is often a relaxed and happy melody whenever you encounter a song and dance element, which is an optimistic attitude of Indian people towards life. Due to the huge gap between upper-class and lower-class, poor people's life in India is tough. Watching movies has almost become the only way of entertainment in their lives. Therefore, the song and dance elements in the film can bring comfort to their bitter life. Furthermore, spiritual relaxation can bring them the courage to overcome hardships in their real lives. In this case, I would argue that song and dance element is like a lubricant to bridges the vast contradiction between the two classes to a certain extent. As stated by Ganti (2004), From this involvement came a concern and tendency to depict the lives and troubles of the downtrodden, marginalized segments of society, to point out the exploitative nature of capitalism, and romanticize and valorize the poor. (p. 28) Song and dance elements can encode some implicit meanings that can meet poor audiences' expectations. In *Mother India*, there is a scene that impressed me a lot. After the storm, the fields and houses were destroyed. But at this time, the poor people, like Radha, began to sing cheerful songs. They worked tirelessly to rebuild their homes and cultivate the land. No pain, no gain. Accompanied by cheerful tunes, the camera turns to the crops harvested in bright sunlight. For the poor audience in India, this plot symbolizes hope and the future. They will temporarily forget the hardships of life and look forward to a better future. Even though their life is bitter and the reality is cruel, they are able to find a direction in the dark with the belief brought by the movie. Then they have the courage to overcome difficulties and work harder to make life better. As stated by Booth (2000) in his book: Thus, when a song or dance scene appears in a film (of course, its very appearance is a narrative convention), the conventions inform not only the musical, visual and

kinaesthetic content but also the types of meanings one can expect and the coded elements that will be used to construct that meaning. (p. 128)

In summary, many Bollywood movies show the problem of class struggle in Indian society. The rich and the poor will act very differently because of the huge gap between them. I analyzed the different mental states and behaviors of the rich and the poor when facing this gap. At the same time, I also explained and demonstrated the reasons why they would choose a certain behavior. In addition, song and dance elements in Bollywood films become a lubricant of the gap between the rich and the poor. It is like a bridge built across the huge gap, which can relieve the pain of poor people and encourage them to change their lives by hard work. Therefore, class struggle has also become a unique symbol in Hindu society and culture. I hope this paper can arouse more people to understand and think about the role of Bollywood movies in showing class struggle and bridging class gaps.

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