

Literature Term Paper

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Q. Discuss the status of, and differences between, literature and cinema in the cultural imagination of India? Is cinema considered legitimate culture? How has this imagination of cinema changed since the 1940s?

A. Movies form an integral part of our regular cultural fabric. Bollywood, or whichever local film industry, is the all-pervasive being - playing significant roles in day to day life through marketing, musical output, superstar culture. It is consumed by all strata of society, its pure audiovisual nature removing educational, regional, or other barriers that often come in the way of appreciating cultural output.

Yet, there is a very visible, significant gap between 'literature' and 'cinema' in the cultural imagination of the country. Particularly when considering the "legitimateness" of cultural activity and its role as "high art", the differences become plainly observable. The phrase 'Indian Literature' evokes images of Tagore, of Bankim Chandra, of Premchand. Epics like the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. In recent times, prominent works by Jhumpa Lahiri may come to mind, or the extravaganzas that are the Jaipur and Kolkata Literary Festivals. The term does not raise any negative connotations. Then, we compare it with any utterance on 'Indian Cinema': and with the exception of a few who may think of works by Ray or Ghatak, it's all Bollywood (or the regional language film industries). And while Bollywood itself may vary wildly in terms of the content output from the industry, the overall image received is clearly not the same. With it, one imagines a plethora of colours, elaborate dance sequences, superstars, sensory overload, rampant sexism, dumb plotlines.

The term "legitimateness" of culture has been brought up in the discussion. But what is this so called legitimate culture, really? If one were to learn by means of example, then they may consider the traditional art forms we revere as high culture - carnatic or other forms of classical music, the various classical dances, nobel winning or traditionally expounded works of literature. In a contemporary lens, it is that which tends to conform to and reiterates cultural 'truths' while possessing a certain quality. It has examples of greats, people one can highlight as the physical representation of the art form. It is exclusive. In all of this and many such ways, it is much like (but not the same as) what we call 'high art', but more on that later.

Within this framework, we can start to see that cinema does not fall into the purview of "legitimate" culture. It may be called by some as the most important cultural phenomena of modernity, but unlike other cultural activity it does not have individual greats. And that is because cinema is a technological production, an industry, one of the most capitalist forms of art. One person does not make a movie. A team does. A single actor cannot guide a production to greatness, multiple things have to fall in place starting from the scriptwriter to

the carpenters making the sets and technicians moving the cameras. It is an industry; and as with all cultural phenomena requiring a strong level of industrial backing (like commercial music, or theatre), it faces the issue of not being entirely demonstrable through a single shining virtuoso. It lacks legitimacy.

Cinema is also usually not very exclusive. Due to the sheer expense of production and the industry status of the form, movies that are made need the backing of major studios and shareholders, and more often than not commercial success is invaluable. This level of commercial success entails popularity, and exclusive films with a limited audience are not top priority.

But then again, perspectives on cultural productions change with, well, changes in the culture of a time. Cinema in the cultural imagination of the 1920s is vastly different from the way it is now, and this story is one of greater acceptance, of more inclusion into common social fabric. While the industrial nature of the art may forever be a hindrance to total inclusion in the likes of classical music, or literary works, there has been undeniable progress from Indian cinema's status as the 'corrupting social evil' of the 20s to the central role it now plays as a basic text in modern India's image culture.

The first feature movie in India was in 1913. At the start, especially in the 20s, a majority of the people working in cinema came from local theatre, jatra, nukkad natak, and the like. Such crafts while woven deeply into the social fabric at the time were not considered in the ranks of singing or dancing - natak was, conceptually, the same as selling one's body for money. Acting as a profession had a stigma; respectable persons were not to engage in such activities. When the actors moved from play to cinema, this stigma moved with them and attached itself to the silver screen.

As such, the twenties and thirties were a bad time for cinema's image in popular Indian imagination. Gandhi - quite possibly the most influential person of his time - is recorded to have claimed that "its corrupting influence obtrudes itself upon me every day". Not the best advertisement one may have wished for.

The thirties and forties saw a lot of activity on the movie front. Comprising primarily religious and nationalist themes, the productions were subversively anti-British, casting them in all villainous roles, reflecting the sentiment of the times. The social taboo remained but interest was obviously increasing, as more and more movies were made with every coming year. A studio system was established in several cities - but that broke down with the Partition as the industry by and large relocated to Bombay.

It was this breakdown of the studio system that led to the emergence of what is now commonplace in the industry - the superstar. The 1950s and 60s saw top actors like Dilip Kumar and Raj Kapoor rise to superstardom, using the advent of individual contracts smartly to propel themselves to such heights. And that was not all. Largely regarded as the "Golden Age" of Indian cinema, this period saw the production of romances, melodramas, socials, muslim socials, great songs. Some of the greatest intellectual minds of the nation were working on cinema: writing lyrics, scripts. While it raised again the question as to the status

of cinema as legitimate culture, there was no doubt that more and more people in the country were coming around to the idea.

A distinctive shift was observed in the 1970s. The Emergency had happened. There was major political upheaval. It was the age of the 'angry young man', with multi starring blockbusters with lots of stars, songs, fights. It moved away from the image of the "idealised hero" of Dilip Kumar and Raj Kapoor. Cinema was not legitimate culture, and attitudes towards watching it reflected such - "only couples go to the movies", "good girls don't go to the movies". Yet, these were highly successful blockbusters - evidently something had clicked, even if not across all strata of society.

The industry suffered a series of major blows in the '80s. The introduction of VHS, TV, and the scarcity of theatres meant piracy was rampant. Revenues decreased. Money came in from dubious sources, and the legality of the whole enterprise was under question, And then Indian cinema in the 1990s rebranded itself. It played to the indian diaspora, to the TV viewing audience. With movies like DDLJ, it appealed to the globalised swadeshi spirit rampant at the time, enjoying unprecedented success through so. Riding the TV soap opera sentiment, they exploited the 'joint family' category of films. Watching movies was now a family event. It rode the wave of liberalisation in India, bringing in global players. To attract people to theaters, major set pieces became a thing, such as can 'only be experienced in a theater'. DDLJ ran for over 600 weeks.

Indian Cinema in the 21st century has been a central part of modern Indian culture. It is the association used to recognise the country by many, if not most non Indians. It is a central feature of all cultural activity; any independent act on gaining any sort of popularity is said to have "made it" when featured in Bollywood. Yes, the issue of legitimate culture prevails. Yes, it is not as "significant" as traditional literature may be. But it's a cultural force to reckon with, and in a day where no waking moment is spent away from a screen of some kind, it's here to stay.