



The Influence of Bollywood on Gender Norms Across Traditional and OTT Platforms

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Research Question: How do Bollywood films influence societal norms related to gender inequality, and how does this impact vary between traditional cinema releases and OTT platforms?

Abstract

This research paper examines the role of Bollywood films in influencing societal norms related to gender inequality, with a focus on contrasting traditional cinema releases and OTT platforms. By exploring gender as a social construct and analyzing Bollywood's influence on gender dynamics in India, the paper reveals how evolving media formats impact public perceptions. Through case studies of films like *Laapata Ladies* and *Animal*, the study highlights how traditional cinema often reinforces patriarchal norms, while OTT platforms provide a space for more progressive, inclusive storytelling. This shift holds critical implications for Indian society, as Bollywood's portrayal of gender roles can perpetuate or challenge ingrained cultural assumptions. The paper emphasizes the potential of OTT platforms to foster socially conscious narratives that resonate domestically and globally, advocating for responsible storytelling that addresses complex social issues.

Key Words: *Societal Norms, Gender Dynamics, Indian Cinema, Bollywood, OTT platforms*

Introduction

Does the grandest spectacle of entertainment in a nation shape its social values or merely mirror them? In India, Bollywood does both—shaping and reflecting the evolving fabric of society.

The evolution of theatre in India, especially Bollywood, has not just changed in format from traditional cinema to wide-reaching OTT platforms; the stories now and earlier have also evolved. These changes have importantly altered the framing and understanding of social issues such as gender inequality in India. This brings into play the role of cinema, as a form of media, in social change.

The values and themes expressed through Bollywood movies are not meant only for entertainment value; they can stand to reinforce, or with any luck, challenge the societal norms of the present - some of which may be deemed unjust and unfair. When these films reinforce negative stereotypes about women, they perpetuate gender inequality. However, when they promote women's empowerment and highlight the role of men as allies in this progress, they can inspire positive social change. As Bollywood then navigates through this precarious balance of commercial entertainment and value versus mindfulness and responsibility in the storylines being communicated, all whilst working with traditional cinema and OTT forms, the research question this paper aims to answer is: **How do Bollywood films influence societal norms related to gender inequality, and how does this impact vary between traditional cinema releases and OTT platforms?**

This paper argues that as a form of media, Bollywood films and their respective framing of narratives, characters and storylines have a great influence on the formation and reinforcement of societal norms, particularly those concerning gender inequality. However, some differences are to be noticed and expected depending on the release format, i.e., traditional cinema or OTT.

Literature Review – Gender Dynamics in India and The Potential of Film Media to Impact Culture and Society

Gender theory, from a sociological perspective, is understood as the psychological, social, and cultural differences between males and females (Baligar, 2018). Since ancient times, around 3000 BC to AD 500, there has been a highly functional division of labor in hunter-gatherer cultures: women occupied the roles of mothers, caregivers, and homemakers, while men were hunters and providers. From a functionalist perspective, this division of labor stemmed from perceived biological differences, as noted by theorists like George Peter Murdock, who argued that this sexual division of labor was a rational organizational principle. Talcott Parsons, a key figure in functionalist theory, maintained that gender roles within the family were essential for social stability, as men and women need to complement each other to achieve a cohesive community. Similarly, Emile Durkheim (2008) viewed society as an organism, arguing that gender roles were necessary to maintain social equilibrium.

According to structural functionalism, the development of gender norms reflects the need for stable social structures. Historically defined gender roles for men and women have been seen as crucial to the stability of Indian society,

where cultural norms and historical traditions deeply influence gender dynamics (Bhatnagar, 2024). In traditional Indian society, structured around patriarchy, men were considered the primary breadwinners and women the caregivers (Patil, 2021). Biological arguments and social institutions, including the family and educational system, have long reinforced this division. In particular, the joint family structure has been instrumental in preserving conventional gender roles in India, with men as protectors and decision-makers within the family and women as homemakers and caregivers, roles that reinforce family customs and social standards (Pew Research Center, 2022). Religion, a powerful influence on cultural values, has also played a role in defining gender norms (Sah, 2022). For example, Hindu beliefs emphasize a woman's duty to serve her husband, while patriarchal interpretations of Islam have often marginalized women despite the Quran granting certain rights.

Despite significant shifts driven by modernization, urbanization, and global feminist movements, patriarchal values remain deeply entrenched in Indian society (Pew Research Center, 2022). Traditional gender roles persist, especially in rural areas, where women are expected to prioritize their roles as wives and mothers (Satyen, Bourke-Ibbs, and Rowland, 2024). Social expectations continue to sustain practices such as the dowry system, son preference, and restrictions on

women's sexuality, all of which contribute to gender inequality. Although dowries are legally prohibited, they remain common, with daughters still seen as financial burdens. Additionally, the preference for sons influences sex ratios, rooted in the belief that only sons can carry on the family name and perform certain religious rites (Kaur, 2018). These practices have serious consequences, including female infanticide and sex-selective abortions, which reinforce gender disparities. While legislative advances have provided protections, such as laws against domestic violence and equal property rights, women's agency is still limited by strong traditional expectations (Thomas, 1996).

The media, particularly film, plays an influential role in shaping societal norms and attitudes toward gender. As a tool of entertainment, cinema both reflects cultural and social values and has the potential to challenge them (Hada, 2023). The way stories are framed in film can shape audience perceptions and reinforce existing norms or inspire change (Arowolo, 2017). Through repeated exposure, cinema can influence viewers' thoughts and actions, as explained by Cultivation Theory, which holds that media exposure shapes societal norms (Mohamadi, 2016). While some films challenge social norms and serve as catalysts for social change (University of Minnesota, 2016), others reinforce harmful stereotypes and values. Cinema's power to shape public attitudes on important issues is underscored by Framing Theory, which highlights how narrative structures affect social norms and values (Shah, 2015; Lu, 2023).

Patriarchal structures not only limit women's opportunities but also foster a culture of violence against them (Satyen, Bourke-Ibbs, and Rowland, 2024). In India, gender-based violence, including honor killings, sexual assault, domestic violence, and dowry-related abuse, remains prevalent (Sebastian, 2013). According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), crimes against women have been rising significantly, with many related to domestic abuse. Reports

from UN Women also highlight the pervasive nature of gender-based violence in India (Kaur, 2018). Although legal protections, such as the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (2005) and the Criminal Law Amendment (2013), were introduced in response to high-profile cases like the 2012 Delhi gang rape, enforcement remains weak. The system can often be slow to respond, and many a times, societal stigmatization discourages women from seeking justice.

Victim-blaming attitudes and the normalization of violence against women in media perpetuate damaging gender stereotypes.

From the lens of the feminist theory, these traditional roles are critiqued due to their ability to systematically marginalize women and uphold structures of power that disadvantage them. The theory asserts that patriarchy is not just a set of social interactions but a structure of power that permeates social, political, and economic domains (Sah, 2022). In India, patriarchy reinforces a gendered division of labor that consolidates men's dominance in public and private life, limiting women's access to employment, healthcare, and education and disproportionately burdening them with unpaid household labor (Kohli, 2017). Feminist scholars argue that patriarchal norms contribute to gender-based violence, from sexual harassment and domestic abuse to dowry-related violence, and emphasize the urgent need to dismantle these oppressive structures.

The persistence of patriarchal beliefs in India, supported by the media, family, religion, and other institutions, continues to limit women's rights and fuel gender-based violence. While legislative reforms and feminist movements have challenged these norms, deeper cultural change remains necessary. Achieving gender equality in India requires addressing the social, economic, and political inequalities that keep women on the margins and dismantling the entrenched patriarchal systems that perpetuate these inequalities.

The Evolution of Bollywood and the Rise of OTT Platforms

Bollywood is the Hindi-language film industry based out of Mumbai, India. It is recognized as the largest component of the Indian moviemaking industry, with a history dating back to 1913 (Vincent, 2013). It has been reported that the industry saw exponential growth after India achieved independence from British rule in 1947. During this period, "cinema became a vehicle for addressing social ills. Bollywood portrayed a society which was both desired and achievable" (Tewari, 2007). As time passed, Bollywood continued to produce large social dramas, romantic films, and historical epics.

Fast forward to the 1980s, when the industry started to witness a lot more potboilers, aka 'masala movies,' which typically featured action and melodrama while employing an ensemble cast. This was the time during which the stars were more of the driving forces behind the films rather than the plot. The aforementioned explains how mainstream filmmaking in the late 1970s and 1980s prioritized commercial aspects over rich storytelling (Roy, 2019). However,

simultaneously, a new wave of cinema emerged in Bollywood, which was recognized as parallel cinema that rejected the masala movie narrative and focused more closely on social issues such as caste discrimination, communal harmony, poverty, gender equality, and class struggle (Roy, 2019). This new form of cinema would largely rely on relatively smaller budgets and employ less-known actors. The traction of parallel cinema gradually died down in the early 1990s.

Entering the 21st century, the Indian film industry, of which Bollywood persisted to be the largest component, produced as many as 1,000 feature films annually in all major Indian languages and in a variety of cities (Roy, 2019). Even international audiences began to develop among South Asiana residing in the USA and UK. The standard features of Bollywood films during this time continued to be formulaic storylines, dance-and-song routines, well-choreographed fight scenes, larger-than-life heroes, and melodrama.

In recent years, especially since COVID-19, Bollywood has undergone a new evolution - this time driven by OTT platforms. The spirit of parallel cinema, which thrived in Bollywood's earlier days before fading, seems to be making a comeback through OTT. As one article notes, "democratized access to content creation and distribution in a manner that had previously remained unheard of opens up space for emerging voices. The new generation has brought along some sort of sensibility to Bollywood by emphasizing the importance of authenticity, inclusivity, and issues the filmmakers address" (Dubey and Bhopatkar, 2024). This shift in Bollywood storylines, casts, and formats holds significant implications for India, where the framing of social issues like gender inequality can deeply impact public attitudes, as analyzed above.

Comparative Analysis of Bollywood Films' Reflection of Cultural Values in OTT vs Traditional Formats

Animal - Traditional format

"Animal," directed by Sandeep Reddy Vanga, was released on December 1st, 2023. The film quickly became one of the most talked-about films of the year. It was the third wrong and controversial protagonist created by Vanga after Kabir Singh and Arjun Reddy, and it also showed toxic masculinity and violent relationships. The film cost over 100 crores and boasted high advertising, with thousands of reels flooding social media when it came out. The movie stars Ranbir Kapoor as Ranvijay, portraying a classic alpha male character, and Rashmika Mandanna as Geetanjali. The director, Vanga, once again focuses on hypermasculinity, aggression, and physical violence, depicting a concerning power dynamic where men seek to control rather than empower women. Kapoor's character consistently displays violent and controlling behavior, often undermining the agency of female characters, especially Geetanjali. The film was a huge success at the box office, with a worldwide revenue of more than 500 crores. Heavy promotions aided the masses to walk into theaters. Despite mixed reviews, the classical model of cinema releases worked out before the film ended its journey on OTT platforms.

The film revolves around the grudge that Ranvijay has against his own being, societal expectations, and aggression within him. His killer outbursts are always depicted as acts of love or protection, mainly towards his wife, Geetanjali, who steadily becomes enslaved and stripped of her independence. The story unfolds within a toxic household where extreme acts of violence form the central message. The plot moves forward with Ranvijay's external and internal struggles but lacks a convincing resolution or character development, unsettling the audience. Animal heavily reinforces toxic masculinity, showing male dominance in disturbing ways. According to Feminism India, the film reinforces sexism because all female characters can only be docile and subjugated. Perhaps most incendiary is when Ranvijay tells Geetanjali, "You have got a big pelvis, you'll provide healthy babies," reducing her to a reproductive object (Bhattacharjee, 2023). Furthermore, in one scene, Ranvijay asks Geetanjali to strip naked in the presence of a servant who works for their family. It is a degrading display of male dominance. Another outrageous scene includes Tripti Dimri's Bhabhi being forced to lick Ranvijay's shoe as a symbol of loyalty and submission. These are just a few examples of the many deep-seated sexism instances in the movie and the verbal and mental abuse that comprises it.

According to ScoopWhoop, these moments sparked online debates as people took sides over whether this was a film based on pure entertainment or responsible wrong-doing as the toxic face of an irresponsible male. Critics argued that the overall message that the movie had to present was engulfed by its excessive violence and sexism (Jain, 2023). Youth Ki Awaaz, for example, described how, even though the film was praised regarding cinematography and the design of the pace, criticism followed regarding overkill violence and emotional cheapness. The movie's second half, dragging interminably with repetitive violent scenes, was emotionally hollow and gratuitously brutal (Chatterjee, 2023). The Swaddle (2023) was even more cynical, labeling the film "feminism rage bait"—a provocation purposed to dismiss feminist critiques of cinema as irrelevancies. While its technical virtuosity is good enough, many critics went home rather in a suit, mentally and emotionally disturbed, with themes of hypermasculinity and toxic male dominance kicking away any nuanced storytelling bits.

The controversy around Animal intensified when directors Anurag Kashyap and Sandeep Reddy Vanga defended the film. Kashyap argued that cinema should depict reality, even if it includes brutal themes like toxic masculinity, without being bound by strict moral codes. This viewpoint, however, was met with backlash, with critics claiming Animal was not critiquing toxic masculinity but glorifying it (Hindustan Times, 2023). Similarly, Vanga, who had previously defended Kabir Singh, argued that the violence and aggression in Animal were essential to portray the protagonist's emotions and struggles, not to glorify them. This stance, however, further angered critics, who felt that the directors were downplaying the film's negative messages about gender and violence. By dismissing these concerns, the directors only fueled the controversy, with critics and feminists warning that films like Animal could harm audiences by normalizing such behavior, thus amplifying the debate and scandal surrounding the film (Outlook Entertainment Desk, 2024).

The film was a box office hit despite its polarizing themes. In fact, as per Garg (2023), this success may be attributed to hypermasculinity and aggression feeding directly into the alpha male trope. That being said, in the bigger scheme of things, while audiences thronged theaters and the movie did well commercially, its legacy will most probably be defined by its rather troubling portrayal of gender and violence as deepened in patriarchal ideas that don't question them.

Laapataa Ladies - OTT

Laapata Ladies, directed by Kiran Rao, was released in Indian cinema theatres in March 2023 and later went on to stream on Netflix on April 26th, 2024. During its theatrical release, the film didn't work well at the box office and only gained success and attention when released on the OTT platform. A big reason for the aforementioned could be the niche nature of the film and the cast involved. For instance, when compared to *Animal*, this film was a large contrast both in terms of format and tone where one depended on the star power of Ranbir Kapoor and repeated hyper-masculine traits, while the other had relatively unknown actors with a rural feminist narrative outlining women's struggle within the strict patriarchal systems. While *Laapataa Ladies* challenges patriarchy in themes of identity, self-assertion, and sisterhood, *Animal* reinforces aggressive masculinity and traditional gender roles. Once again, their thematic differences explain the release strategies' relative success.

The plot of the film follows two young brides, Phool and Jaya, lost in a rural, patriarchal structure, robbing them of every thread of agential and individualistic identities, and comes across as a nuanced critique of patriarchy. Both Jaya, who craves freedom from an abusive marriage, and Phool, who is ready for the demands of serving her husband, are victims of this same fabric, though their desires are poles apart. The film takes a glimpse at how these women address the perils of autonomy, but all are mild reminders that although they have different aspirations, they seem to converge in their fight against a regime that seeks to restrain their freedom (Verma, 2024).

While hyper-masculine films such as *Animal* take pride in violent masculine aggressiveness and toxicity, *Laapataa Ladies* espouses soft feminism. Where dominance, violence, and control lie at the heart of *Animal*, *Laapataa Ladies* resists the patriarchal structures put in place by letting the stories of women rediscovering their identities and charting out their course in a controlled yet impressive manner. What is even more interesting is that *Laapataa Ladies'* film sets its feminist narrative in a rural backdrop, where choices made by women are presumed to be more deeply rooted in societal expectations and patriarchy. Its film, however, focuses on the empowering aspects of strong rural women who derive their power bases from their communities and solidarity with other women. For instance, the theme of sisterly love and powerful unity among women is reflected in the film *Laapataa Ladies* - Jaya motivates others to realize their own ambitions, while Manju Mai is an independent tea stall businesswoman having left her abusive marriage. Society tends to believe that

single women are lonely, but instead of this, women in this film stand in solidarity to pursue independence and self-determination. This point of the plot again emphasizes the issue of female empowerment, especially in a country where women are required to exhibit traditionalism and submission towards men (Badri, 2024).

One of the most recurrent elements of *Laapataa Ladies* is the *ghunghat* or veil, which is at once a suppressor and sometimes a liberator. For Phool, the veil brings about mistaken identity, implying how women are obscured and dislocated by patriarchal traditions. Conversely, in Jaya's use of the anonymity provided by the *ghunghat* lies her escape from the clutches of an abusive husband, marking a reclaiming of lost agency. The duality of the representation of the veil puts forward that while it becomes a tool for control, it presents space for resistance above a certain context (Verma, 2024).

All in all, the feminism in *Laapataa Ladies* is not aggressive but deep and complex. Subtly presented feminism allows the audience to see how these women gradually reclaim their autonomy and challenge oppressive structures around them. The moment feminism meets rurality, the characterization of women's struggles in the movie deepens (Badri, 2024). Comparing such a film to *Animal* underscores how Bollywood can serve as a rich tapestry for different perspectives on gender - ranging from the poisonous, aggressive masculinity of *Animal* to the empowering, reflective feminism of *Laapataa Ladies*. They stand at polar opposites regarding their handling of gender dynamics in the same cultural context, taking forth the cultural dialogue about gender roles in Indian society that does not find a single, monolithic solution or method.

Conclusion

This research paper analyzed the intersection of gender dynamics in Indian society and the significant influence of Bollywood, encompassing both traditional cinema and OTT platforms, in shaping and reflecting these dynamics.

Gender, as examined in this paper, is understood as a social construct encompassing the psychological, social, and cultural differences between males and females. From a structural-functionalist perspective, the traditional Indian society has fostered gender norms that promote stability by assigning distinct roles to males and females, leading to a predominantly patriarchal structure where men occupy dominant roles and women are more submissive. This imbalance reinforces notions of male power, often resulting in societal issues like violence against women, which remains an unfortunate reality in India.

Media, especially films, play a powerful role in reinforcing or challenging these stereotypes, particularly in a country like India, where Bollywood's influence is vast. Bollywood themes have evolved significantly, transitioning from the "Golden Age" of romance and family drama to modern, socially inclusive themes. The rise of OTT platforms like

Netflix and Prime Video has further allowed filmmakers to experiment with challenging narratives, including those that question traditional gender roles and societal norms.

Through a comparative analysis of films like *Animal* and *Laapata Ladies*, distinct approaches to gender representation become evident. *Animal*, a film grounded in themes of toxic masculinity, received mixed feedback from audiences. While many criticized its problematic portrayal of women and the normalization of male dominance, some experts noted that its box office success could be attributed to its appeal to the male ego, reinforcing a sense of superiority that aligns with the patriarchal structures deeply embedded in Indian society. On the other hand, *Laapata Ladies*, which initially struggled in cinemas, gained widespread success on OTT platforms, perhaps indicating that these platforms foster a more receptive environment for storylines that challenge rather than conform to societal norms. This suggests that as Bollywood continues to expand within the OTT space, there is potential for a growing audience open to narratives that address complex social issues, including gender dynamics.

Ultimately, filmmakers bear a responsibility to consider the societal impact of their work, as their narratives can either challenge or perpetuate social beliefs. The expansion of Bollywood through OTT platforms broadens its reach from domestic to international audiences, heightening the potential for socially conscious storytelling that reflects universal human values.

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