

Empowerment of Women through Movies in the Indian Society Shakti: From Infringement to Empowerment- Expanding Horizons

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Women's rights and issues have always been a subject of serious concern of academicians, intelligentsia and policy makers. From pastoral society to contemporary information and global society, the role of women has changed drastically. The role of a typical "Grihani" (house wife) who catered to all the requirements of the house holds including the rearing and upbringing of children in various sub roles of daughter, daughter-in-law, wife, mother, aunt etc. has been played quite efficiently. The continuity of changes in socio-economic and psycho-cultural aspects of human living has influenced the role of women. With the process of Industrialization, Modernization and Globalization showing its deep impact on the human society all over the world, the role and responsibilities of women has attained new definition and perspective. Further this has also led to addition of responsibilities and widened the role of women who also shares the financial responsibilities.

However the existing lacuna in the formulation and execution of the policies has not changed the grass root situation to a great extent. The women rights are not any exclusive rights as has been debated and put forward. In specific reference to Indian context (and which to some extent can be generalized to the South Asian countries) **Patriarchal structure** of the society over centuries has gradually led to **gender inequality**, gender discrimination and gender disabilities. Women's rights in this context have assumed exclusivity. Further when women are not considered equal to the men in the social context the question of women rights arise. The women's rights are the means by which a dignified living is ensured thereby safeguarding her privileges. Thus the basic fundamental rights of speech, freedom and decision-making are her basic rights as an individual and citizen. The right for education and employment are significant for women development and national development in the wider sense. The power and freedom to exercise these rights is women empowerment. Women rights and empowerment are not independent of each other. The women empowerment can only be facilitated only if she is able to exercise her right in the socio-economic spheres of decision-making.

Impact of Media

Media has played a substantial role in creating awareness in the society. The impact of audio-visual aspect of media on society is beyond any conjecture. Given the proliferation of the visual media in modern life, it is important to locate the space occupied by gender (women) within it, more so the realm of cinema. Films by their wider audience reach not only reflect but reaffirm, also interrogate social and gender images and stereotypes. Movies, especially movies made, in Hindi and other regional languages in India leave a deep imprint on the mind of viewers. The Indian set up with its rich cultural undertones and the wide diversity of customs and traditions practiced in our country with its emphasis on moral, social and religious values make it an apt medium for communicating this message of empowerment of women to literate as well as illiterate masses, especially women at the grass root level. Bollywood directors are 'experimenting' with low budget films. Nowadays, directors make low budget films keeping in mind the sentiments of the audience. The things that they can digest or they can accept are given to them. The storylines of today's low budget films are very gripping. Such films are centered on real facts in today's so called 'modern' world which when seen leave a deep impact on peoples minds and they start comparing their lives with the characters

depicted in the films. Thus a process of identification is set in motion by 'reel' characters which in turn triggers on the thinking of the 'real' life characters.

Women playing multiple roles in life have been at the center stage of our media. The depiction of physical beauty of women has always been profitable for the commercial movie producers in almost all languages including Tamil, Kannada, Malayalam, Hindi, or Bengali. The beauty of women, their body language, style, jewellery and costumes have always been commented upon, sometimes in positive manner and sometimes in negative manner too. Ultimately it is up to the audience to decide what they expect and remember from a movie. Mehboob Khan's 'Radha', Satyajit Ray's 'Charulata', Apama Sen's 'Parma', 'Neera' in Kunku, 'Radha' in Aurat are still talked about and discussed due to the message that they conveyed and the values that they preached through their characters. Even though a lot of water has flown over the bridge, people still cherish their memories. Do you think Bipasha and Mallika of the present generation stand any chance in comparison with these? The women in the movies are either depicted as 'abla' i.e. the powerless, helpless women pitted against a male dominated society or as 'sabra'- the empowered women bent on creating a position and status for them in this male dominated territory. That a woman could exist in between these two extremes is perhaps not acceptable to movie producers and script writers. The writers of yore usually glorified women as 'Devata' or goddesses bent on sacrificing for other members in the family or have humiliated them 'Patita'- downfallen women in the society. Thus the image of female characters was stereotyped in this male bastion. The concept of women as weeping heroines or cry babies was thus deep rooted in the Indian psyche. These women felt helpless without any male support. Remember the famous song "Na jaonsaiyanchhudakeinbaiyya, kasamtumarimeinropadungi" The 'chhotibahu' in 'Sahib, Bibi and Gulam' gradually marches forward towards self destruction. Meenakumari had earned a reputation for working in these kinds of movies.

Majority of the movies depicted women as vulnerable weaklings of the society for whom male support was an absolute must in life. Yet some movies projected the image of mentally and morally strong women who faced the challenges of life boldly and squarely and continued to imbibe Indian values in the minds of cinegoers. The first movie that comes to our mind in this context is Mehboob Khan's magnum opus called 'Mother India.' It is the story of Radha- a young struggling housewife, mother of two children and later on a deserted housewife creating a watermark in the Indian psyche. The song with its existentialistic message 'Duniyamein hum aaye to jeena hi padega, jeevanhai agar jahar to peena hi padega' reverberates in the minds of viewers even after so many decades. Radha (Nargis) now an old woman remembers her past. She remembers her married life. The family has to work extremely hard to pay off the moneylender Sukhilala (Kanhaiyalal). Her husband (Raj Kumar) loses both his arms in an accident and feeling useless abandons the family. Alone, Radha has to raise her children while fending off financial as well as sexual pressures from Sukhilala. One son dies in a flood and in later years one son Ramu (Rajendra Kumar) grows to be a dutiful son while the other Birju (Sunil Dutt) becomes a rebel committed to direct, violent action. Finally to preserve the honour of the village, Radha puts an end to Birju's rebellious activities by shooting him down. *Mother India* is the ultimate tribute to Indian Womanhood! This epic saga of the sufferings of an Indian peasant woman has an inherent and perennial appeal, being typical of the Indian situation. So tremendous was its success that the film is in fact a reference point in the long-suffering mother genre and is like an *Indian Gone with the Wind (1939)*.

The film is an opulent colour remake of Mehboob's earlier austere Black and White film Aurat (1940). Raised in a village himself, Mehboob himself was familiar with rural life, its customs and manners, its soil, seasons, sufferings and joys and creates a totally Indian experience in milieu,

detail, characters and dramatic incidents. Mehboob's Mother India is an unforgettable epic...the greatest picture produced in India during the forty and odd years of filmmaking in this country. In its epic sweep it is perhaps as great as *Gone with the Wind* produced by Hollywood but it is greater than the Hollywood picture in theme and spirit, for *Mother India* portrays the eternal story of the soil - the mother of countless millions of human beings."

(In the 1970's with the wave of parallel cinema, Hindi movies started treading on new paths and ventured in to new directions, *Ankur*, *Nishant*, *Manthan*, *Bhumika*, *Artha*, *Umbartha* are such trend breaking and trend setting movies. These movies reflected the turmoil and emotional trauma of Indian women. '*Damini*' is a significant movie to cite as an illustration. *Damini* is lightning and when this lightning strikes the family, the result is worth watching *Damini* portrays the fight of the female protagonist for the rights of another female- an underdog of the society. It is the story of an educated, morally brave woman who against the wishes of her family members and husband fought the lonely battle admirably well. In the process, she has become a crusader of human rights for millions of educated females. '*Mritudanda*' starring *Madhuri Dikshit* and stalwarts like *Shabana* reflects the struggle of morally and mentally strong women against feudalism. Set in rural Bihar, *Prakash Jha's 'Mritudanda'* is the story of *Ketaki (Madhuri Dikshit)* who emphatically reminds her husband to remain husband and not to assume attributes of god. She defies traditional womanhood imposed upon her by society and decides to follow her own mind in spirit independently. *Shabana's Chandravati* is accused of being barren by her husband and family. She too feels that it is her shortcoming. Yet when she conceives due to her relationship with *Ramsaran*, her friend, she decides to give birth to the baby. *Ketaki's* support is with her. On being asked by *Ketaki* about whose baby it is, she firmly states, "mine and mine only."

The projection of women as repositories of cultural and moral values is no where more prominent than in Indian cinema. Consequently, women as bearers of the virtues of tradition are portrayed not only as mothers and goddesses, but also as those identifiable with nationalism and the nation state (*Bharat Mata*). Many movies projecting the economic, moral, emotional and physical courage of women appeared on the screen. Some movies depicted women as the torch bearers of values in the society. These movies like '*Dilwale dulhania*', '*K3G*', '*Pardes*', '*Yadein*', '*Baghban*' etc. sang the lyrics of glory of traditional Indian culture. The women in the movies were at secondary positions and yet easily identifiable and acceptable. They were representatives of Indian values and culture.)

Women directors came forward to highlight the various nuances of female consciousness, awareness and psyche. With their individualistic style and criterion, they have carved a niche for themselves in this male dominated world. Women directors like *ArunaRaje*, *Sai Paranjape*, *Deepa Mehta*, *Kalpna Lajmi*, *Aparna Sen*, *Revathi* etc. strove to depict the hitherto hidden aspect of female lives. *Amol Palekar*, a director par excellence, has also forged ahead into the prohibited and considered taboo subject of psychosomatic happiness of women through films like '*Anahat*' and '*Paheli*.' *Mahesh Bhatt's Artha* deals with the theme of extra marital affairs. Extra marital affairs and polygamy have become the latest trend in the tinsel town. *Mahesh Bhatt's* delicate and subtle handling of *Puja's (Shabana's character)* leads it to freedom and empowerment. (The purpose of this paper is not to glorify such affairs. Yet as sociologists, one needs to accept and confront such painful things.) The other woman portrayed by *Smita Patil* surrenders to her man completely and moves gradually towards nervous breakdown. Facing all the adversities of life boldly and squarely and in the process learning to lead an independent life, *Puja* rejects her friend to live all by herself. She has, in the process, rediscovered herself and obtained a new, deeper insight into man-woman relationship.

A woman can live on her own and lead an independent, happy life is the new knowledge that empowers her. Kiran Bedi needs no introduction. Tejaswini' is the name of the movie based on her achievements and career highlights. Tejaswini, a daredevil, took up cudgels against injustice and atrocities perpetrated on behalf of the society. She stood for all those women who wanted to protect their own rights and the rights of other ignorant masses in the society. The movie proved that physical courage backed by moral strength, values and conviction can do wonders in the world.

Hindi movies have depicted all problems faced by women in reality in all walks of life. Rape, dowry deaths, abuse, domestic violence, sexual harassment, gender discrimination, casteism, problems of disabled women ('Nache Mayuri'), women exploiting women etc. constitute the usual 'masala' of our movies. The rich Indian culture with its diversity presents a wide range of themes to deal with. New streams have also merged with old currents. The concept of surrogate motherhood and problems associated with it have featured in a movie called 'Filhal'. The lesbian relationship has been depicted in movies like 'Fire' and 'Girlfriend.' This relationship has not been accepted by our society. Yet the present writers firmly believe that awareness of the problem is the first step taken to redress the problem. The trauma of the rape of a teen aged girl, based on a real train rape case in Mumbai, jolts the spectators out of complacency and makes them take notice of this cantankerous problem in 'Jago' of Raveena Tandon. The same Raveena in 'Daman' protests against the high handedness of her husband in uncompromising language and kills him like Adishakti' when he tries to destroy the life of his daughter. Sushmita played an author-backed role of S.P Malvika Chauhan in Robby Grewal's 'Samay-When Time Strikes'. Sushmita acted as a super cop and investigated a murder case along with Sushant Singh. The movie proved a good entertainer as it was appreciated. Sushmita Sen in her personal life is a role model as she is deeply into charity and has adopted an orphan girl as her daughter.

The theme of how power can corrupt even the most well-meaning of souls is explored in 'Godmother' from India. Veeram (Milind Gunaji) and his wife Rambhi (Shabana Azmi) are forced to leave their village and move to a larger city in search of work when a drought devastates the local farmland. At his new job, Veeram murders his foreman, a cruel and bigoted man who openly loathes people of Veeram's caste. It seems that the foreman had many enemies, because the police refuse to investigate the matter and Veeram finds himself rising up the ladder of local politics. But when Veeram renounces the use of violence against the people, he's assassinated, and Rambhi is elected to take his place. While she assumes leadership with good intentions, she soon displays a willingness to use her authority to brutalize others and is not above the use of violence to achieve her ends. Rambhi's increasingly corrupt rule reaches a turning point when her son demands to marry a Muslim, leading to public outcry and rioting in the streets. Godmother, which includes several musical numbers, was shown as part of the World Cinema program at the 1999 Montreal Film Festival. Andhi' of Suchitra Sen also dealt with political empowerment of women.

Two recent movies must be mentioned in this context. These movies are 'Kya Kehna' and 'Salaam Namaste'. 'Kya Kehna' deals with the pregnancy of an unwed mother. Due to her immaturity, she has fallen prey to the wiles of a cunning young man. She decides to give birth to the unwanted baby against the wishes of her parents, family and society. The ill treatment meted out to such mother in Indian society is shown along with the grit, determination and courage of the girl. 'Salaam Namaste' handles the topic of live in relationships and the problems arising out of it. Amber, a radio jockey and a trainee doctor decides to deliver her twins all by herself with out any support. The live in relationship has come to stay in our metros and as sociologists, one can not shy away from it. Many other movies like 'Bend it like Beckham', 'Agnivarsha', 'Anahat', 'Paheli' deal with different aspects of

empowerment of women. Marathi too has witnessed a recent spate of movies like 'Astitva, Umbartha', 'Not only Mrs. Raut' etc. depicting various aspects of the lives of empowered women. In regional languages too such movies have made their mark. Satyajit Ray is well known for his fine portrayal of empowered female characters. Rituparno Ghosh has also created his position in this genre. His females, can be compared with Ravindranath Tagore in this respect.

Conclusion

What role do movies play in empowering women in the Indian society? The answer is obvious. In India, the percentage of educated women is very minimal. These women are aware of their rights and status in the society where as many are ignorant of their rights. Yet many of them lack the courage to defy male dominance and question the society at large. These women, along with women at the grass root level find it easy to identify with female personas on the screen and relate to them. Any message that is conveyed through the medium of movies is more effectively accepted than a written or verbal message. It reaches a wider audience, helping thus in the dissemination of the message. Shakti is accepted as an Indian alternative to empowerment. Where as the term empowerment connotes gaining power from outside, Shakti stands for intrinsic strength or power. Empowerment can not be conferred upon or obtained from outside; it has to be developed from within. The impact of this media is profound and its after effects well known. Hence if it is used with discretion and discernment to convey subtle messages, the task is easy, pleasant and enjoyable to all concerned. To conclude, the example of the movie 'Mirch- masala' can be cited. The movie made women at the grass roots of the society aware of their rights and taught them the strength of unity.

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