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SHIFTING ROLES OF WOMEN: THROUGH THE LENS OF BOLLYWOOD

Abstract:

Men in most societies were seen as breadwinners while role of women was restricted to being a good homemaker and a good mother. This applies to women in a highly patriarchal society of India. As societies entered the world of modernization, the role of women changed dramatically. Media played an important role in the modernization of societies and greatly affected the image of women in today's modern world. A number of researches have been done on the role of women in different societies. However little has been said about the importance of movies in portraying women in shifting roles over different decades and the impact it has on societies in general. Over past decades, Indian cinema has witnessed a significant transformation in the way women are portrayed through movies. Contemporary movies portray women as more independent, confident, and career oriented. This article deals with these fast changing role of women portrayed in Indian cinema and its influence on the patriarchal Indian society with a focus on some representative Bollywood movies. The aim is to link the changing character played by women in movies with the emerging status of women in India, as movies are a reflection of changes in the social structure.

Keywords:

Bollywood, India, Movies, Roles, Women

Introduction

In the 60 years since Independence, Indian cinema has gone through a lot of changes including a shift from classic mythological blockbusters to "Bollywoodised" remakes of Hollywood's successful films. Women in the Indian film industry have played an important role in the success of individual films. Their roles however have changed overtime, from being dependent on their male counterparts to very independently carrying the storyline forward. Before referring to the changes, it is relevant to understand the importance of Indian Cinema in the world today. According to studies and surveys, Indian films are screened in over a hundred countries and watched by nearly four billion people worldwide. The Indian film industry is considered to be the largest film industry in the world with over 1000 films produced each year in more than 20 languages where Hollywood produces less than 400 films per year, according to available records. With the highest number of theatre entrances, about 3.3 billion tickets are sold annually in India¹. Another set of statistics states about 750 films are made yearly in 72 studios and shown in about 12,000 cinema houses to weekly audiences estimated at almost 70 million; some unusual records include Lata Mangeshkar in the Guinness Book as the world's most recorded artist; and Helen danced in a thousand films.

The Indian film market gets 90% of its revenue from non-English language films, mostly in Hindi followed by South Indian and other regional language films². The CRISIL Research (2010) projects that the industry is expected to grow from US\$3.2 Billion to 2010 to US\$ 5 Billion by 2014. Since this industry contributes a lot to the business and the society, it is interesting to see the changing trends in Bollywood from the past to the present time. The paper will start with a focus on the reasons Mumbai was chosen as an important city for film production. The next section provides a brief history of Bollywood and the rise of well-known Bollywood stars. The later section will analyze the changes taken place since 1940s followed by a focus on women and their changing role in the Hindi cinema with reference to some specific films. The paper concludes with some remarks and contribution of Bollywood and the important role played by the industry in shaping the society.

Mumbai and Bollywood

Bollywood, a part of the Indian film industry located in Mumbai, can be called the national film industry as it produces the most watched films in Hindi language. Mumbai has been the largest film centre in the world, although Calcutta and Madras in India compete vigorously. The Bollywood film industry has derived its name from the American film industry, Hollywood. It is one of the most popular and successful industries and amazes most people even though half of the cinemas are found in the southern part of India.

One question arises then why Mumbai chosen as a center and how did it became so popular? Well the reason lies in the fact that Mumbai was appropriate as the centre of importance for the Indian cinema industry. It had modern port; a city with European influences and pretensions minimal to Indian history and society. In addition it appeared neutral to the religious passions of South Asia, the great Hindu-Muslim clashes. All races and religions lived in Mumbai in relative harmony. It was in Mumbai

¹ *Tune in to emerging entertainment markets: spotlight on BRIC*, Ernst & Young, March 2010.

² 'Once upon a time in the east' *The Economist* 2011 The Economist Newspapers Limied: London.

that English drama and poetry flourished. A number of Western ideas that were English-stimulated, synthesized with the Indian ideas. Thus the demons, avatars, gods and spirits of three thousand years of Indian mythology mixed and came into contact with contemporary Western, Marx, ideas and icons (Akbar, 1985, 1988; Brass, 1989; Madam, 1987; Nandy, 1983; O'Flaherty, 1985, 1986; Robinson, 1989; Rudolph and Rudolph, 1987).

Brief history of Bollywood

Before 1931, the Bollywood films did not have any sound. The first Bollywood film released in 1913, named *Raja Harishchandra*, was directed by Dadasaheb Phalke. Ardesir Irani only first introduced sound in 1931 in the film *Alam Ara*, which was a huge success commercially. Bollywood was already producing an average of 200 films per year during the time in black and white. The very first colored Bollywood film was *Kisan Kanya* released in 1937, directed by Ardesir Irani but it was not as commercially successful as with the introduction of sound. In the 1940s, the Bollywood film suffered tremendously due to the World War II, the independence movement, and the violence in the India-Pakistan partition.

Only in the 1950s, colored films became commercially popular. This period also marked the beginning of a new era in Hindi films, as the films no longer had static dialogues and songs but also great romantic songs, music, some of which are everlasting. Majority of the songs of 1950s era are still sung by people, even of the new generation. This period was also experienced the rise of great Bollywood actors and actresses like Dilip Kumar, Dev Anand, Raj Kapoor Nargis, Nutan, Meena Kumari, Madhubala and others. The late 1960s saw the introduction of soft dance with singing along with shooting films on foreign locations. Stars like Rajesh Khanna and Dharmendra became immensely popular during this period.

Early days and the Changing image of female component in Bollywood

In early days, Indian cinema focused on mythological stories and great epics such as the country's first feature film, *Raja Harishchandra*, directed by Dadasaheb Phalke in 1913. During the freedom struggle, cinema was used as a medium to illustrate anger and voice the opinion of nationalist leaders and parties demanding independence from British colonial rule. However after Independence, cinema became a vehicle for addressing social problems and issues. Bollywood portrayed a society that was both desired and achievable through films.

The golden era of Bollywood films was from the 1950s to the late 1970s. This was the time when, an India, which was rural but had rich and vibrant traditions, was portrayed. Films showcased the relationships, customs, norms and ethics of Indian society. The issue of poverty was addressed during this time. The audiences could easily identify themselves with the on-screen characters whose lives reminded them of their own. Some examples of films from this era include *Kaagaz Ke Phool*, *Mother India*, *Pakeezah*, *Half Ticket*, and *Padosan*. There are a few films from this golden era of Bollywood film-industry so popular that people from the later generation still remember them. This was also the time when the women were playing a very important role in the films holding a lot of responsibility on their shoulders to sell the

films in the market. Women were given an equally dominant role in the Hindu films along with the male actors. A few examples include *Mother India* made in 1957 by Mehboob. The film was made ten years after India gained independence from the British rule. In this film the director, Mehboob, attempts to combine socialistic ideals with the traditional values.



The story revolves around Radha (played by Nargis Dutt) who marries Shamoo (played by Raj Kumar) and comes to his village where she discovers that Shamoo's mother, Sundar Chachi, has pawned their family land in order to pay for the wedding. The village usurer, Sukhilala, collects three-fourths of their produce as interest on the loan of 500 rupees. Each year most of their produce is used to pay off the interest on the loan to Sukhilala. Sukhilala was able to get this deal because Sundar Chachi is uneducated and imprinted her thumb on a contract, which she could not read. In an effort to clear a piece of land they own, Radha and Shamoo try to move some big boulders and one of the boulders rolls on to Shamoo's arms which had to be amputated. Having unable to cope with his helpless situation, Shamoo runs away leaving Radha alone. Soon after Sundar Chachi dies and later Radha's two out of four sons die in a flood. Sukhilala offers Radha food in return for sexual favors, which she resists for a long time but could not bear to see her starving children. She goes to Sukhilala's place and just when she is about to submit herself to Sukhilala, she gets a divine signal that her husband is alive and leaves immediately with a new hope. Next she is seen in the film as an old woman and her two sons Birjoo (Sunil Dutt) and Ramoo (Rajendra Kumar) as grown men. Ramoo is a responsible young man while his brother Birjoo is a good-for-nothing and resents that Sukhilala continues to take three-fourths of their produce. Birjoo's lack of ability to control his anger bothers the villagers and is finally forced to leave the village turning him into a dacoit. When Sukhilala's daughter is getting married Birjoo threatens to abduct her. Radha assures Sukhilala protection of his daughter's honor and, when Birjoo tries to abduct her, Radha shoots him dead.

The film opens with Radha as an old woman being asked to inaugurate a new canal constructed through her village. The men presiding over the function are dressed simple wearing Gandhi caps referring to Radha as the mother of the village and refuse to let anyone but her inaugurate the canal. The film begins with this opening note that Radha is a survivor, a woman who will lead in the new period of prosperity.

and development. The film shows the importance of a woman and that women identified with India is not surprising. The term *Bharat Mata* (Mother India) is a part of the Indian consciousness. There is a song accompanying the bridal procession proclaiming that the woman's fate is to leave home.

Radha is portrayed as every other woman as an ideal wife and a daughter-in-law. Her love for her husband is comparable to the divine love. She is responsible and full of common sense. Women watching this film are expected to identify with her and the men are supposed to look at her non-sexually and identify her as their own wives or mothers. This initial process of forming a bond with the audience by having clear notions of woman on the street is an important strategy. At different times the film emphasizes on this connection.

Radha has three sons while Shamoo ridicules Sukhilala for having a daughter. Her sons are shown leading her by the hand even though they are very small. But even in the beginning act when Radha is a submissive bride the counterpoint is playing along. Shamoo's only parent, Sundar Chachi, is a woman who has raised her only son alone and got him married in style. She is a strong woman who is good to her daughter-in-law and handles household matters and agriculture with equal competence. With three-fourths of the produce going to Sukhilala, Shamoo and Radha have to work hard to survive. There are many images of Radha and Shamoo harvesting the grains together. She is alongside him all the time unconstrained by her gender. There is no contradiction shown between her role as a farmer and that of a traditional wife.

When Shamoo leaves and goes away with his inability, Radha takes over the family responsibilities. She never lost hope and the hope is shown to be the source of her strength as things get bad to worse. In one of the scenes, Sukhilala has taken her bullocks away; she is shown pulling the plow herself. The close-up of Nargis Dutt as Radha with a plow on her shoulder with an expression of pain and concentration is an image that still survives in the mind of every Indian.

The song accompanying the scene nullifies the contradiction between the socialist working woman and the traditional Indian woman. The lyrics of this song³ are so intense that every word is still remembered today. It goes on to state that in this life only *laaj* is a woman's *dharma*⁴. The film intends to show that a woman can carry these accepting beliefs as part of her conditioning and can make use of them as part of the positive ethic of fighting against the odds.

The second half of the film shows Radha as a typical mother who showers her love and affection on her grown sons. Her son Birjoo turns into a dacoit but is protected by Radha who tries to plead for forgiveness from the villagers. But when Birjoo abducts a woman from her marriage, Radha takes a stand and tells him to return the girl or she will shoot him. Radha's act of unity with the girl being abducted is not because of any attachment but an act of unity with the whole of womanhood.

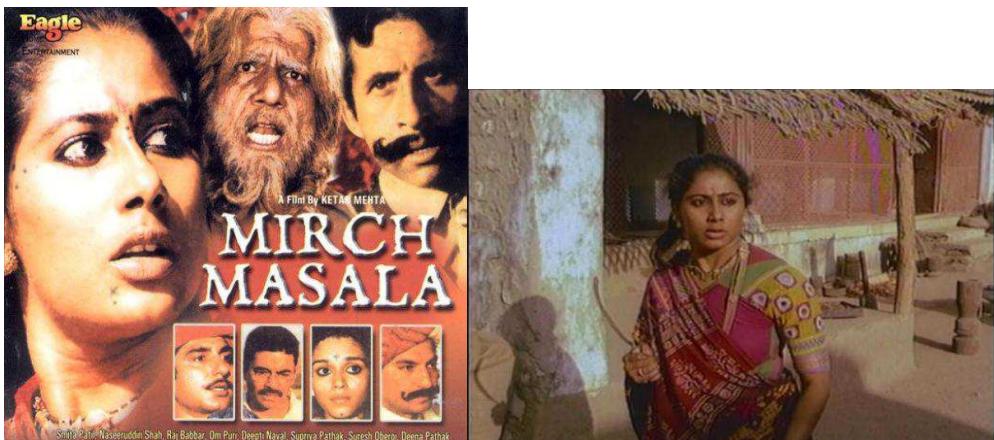
³ *Duniya mein aaye hain to jeena hi padega, jivan hai agar zeher to peena hi padege* " ie. If we have come to this world then we have to live. If life is poison then we have to drink this poison.

⁴ Both of these words have several meanings but here *laaj* means the honor and the *dharma* is the duty and the religion

Bollywood heroines in the 1980s

During the 1980s, there was the beginning of the action era, an era that brought a lot of changes. The Bollywood heroines lost their strength and space to the hero. She was reduced to being a glamorous component of the films, dancing around trees, being kidnapped, raped or killed.

One such example is of the film, *Mirch Masala* directed by Ketan Mehta in 1989, showing this changing role of women in the Indian cinema. A story of Sonbai (Smita Patil) working in a chili factory in the western part of pre-independence India. Her husband gets a job in the railways and leaves for the city. In the meantime the Subedar (or tax collector, played by Naseeruddin Shah) arrives to collect taxes and is attracted by Sonbai. He asks the village headman, the Mukhi, to bring her but the headman brings the wrong woman. The next day Sonbai passing by the Subedar's camp where she is stopped and grabbed by the Subedar. She frees herself and runs into the chilli factory where she works. An old Muslim watchman Abu Miyan (Om Puri) provides her with the protection. A parallel track is of Mukhi's wife, the Mukhiain, who is not treated well by her husband. She tries to get support for Sonbai after learning that the males of the village including her own husband have allied with the Subedar to handover Sonbai to him. Mukhiain's protest is rudely crushed by the men, and the Subedar, accompanied by all the men of the village, reaches the factory breaking the factory doors killing the watchman. In the final scene the Subedar approaches Sonbai when suddenly the other women in the factory throw bags of chili powder on his face. A number of scenes in this film show women in glamorous characters, like women dancing and the lustful Subedar looking at them. In another scene he looks at Sonbai through a telescope.

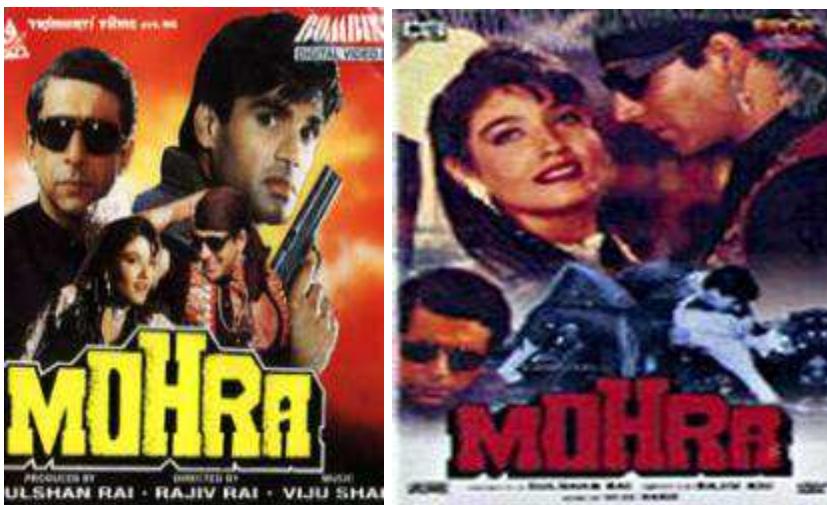


The example of *Mirch Masala* does not mean that the females in films were always left behind. Several films depict a more dominant image of women as well. In the recent history of cinema the body became an essential part of a success of an actress. Their bodies speak of time in the gym spent in working out. For example, the leading lady of the 1980s, Sri Devi, is known as 'thunder thighs'. Sri Devi, like other female stars, spends hours in the make-up room and portrays the aggressive, dominating character. In *Himmatwala*, an earlier film, she out-danced and out-fought the men. She deals with the villains herself, defeating them. In some films she needs two or three male stars to balance her role. In *Joshila* (1989) two of the top male heroes in the film would barely hold on their role on their own when casted against her. This

was specially shown by a cover story in one of the magazine saying: 'Is Sridevi a hero?' (Showtime, September, 1987). This shows that the attitude and the perception of women had totally changed by this time.



Later came the period of the 1990s bringing about more changes seen in the Hindi Cinema. By this time came several films showing the changing role of female component of Indian Cinema. One of them was *Mohra*, made in 1994 featuring Akshay Kumar (as Amar Saxena), Raveena Tandon (as Roma Singh), Sunil Shetty (as Vishal Agnihotri) and Naseeruddin Shah (as Mr. Jindal). The story starts with the plot that Vishal is imprisoned in the jail where Roma's father is the superintendent. The main female character in *Mohra* is Roma Singh. She is a journalist working for a newspaper called *Samadhan* (meaning solution). The name of the newspaper implies it as an activist publication that battles with corruption and government neglection. Roma's position as the assistant editor of this newspaper establishes her as an activist journalist. Roma goes to visit her father's jail in order to write an article. Some prisoners try to rape Roma but Vishal rescues her. Roma learns that Vishal is imprisoned for a murder of some boys who raped his wife's sister. Because of the corrupt prosecutor the boys were set free and later tried to rape Vishal's wife but she stabbed herself. In response, Vishal kills them all and was imprisoned. Roma, with the help of Mr. Jindal, the blind owner of the newspaper she works for, arranges a second trial for Vishal where his case is reviewed and he is released.



Jindal convinces Vishal that he should become a vigilante and kill the real culprits behind his wife and sister-in-law's deaths i.e. the drug dealers. Amar Saxena is a police officer that is also involved in busting the two main drug dealers of their city, Tyson and Gibran. Vishal starts killing their henchmen but Amar gets on his way, however Vishal kills them all. Jindal now tells him to kill the Commissioner of Police who he says is corrupt. But Vishal realizes that this is a setup finds out that Jindal is not blind and an evil mastermind wanting to destroy Tyson and Gibran to become the king of crime. He kidnaps Roma, who is now engaged to Amar, and is about to escape with her when Amar and Vishal, together halt his plans.

Throughout the film Roma's professional achievements are because of her powerful boss Mr. Jindal. She is able to stand up to the editor by associating herself with Jindal, the owner of the newspaper. She arranges important meetings with top police officials but only with Jindal's influence. This shows a gender-neutral sign of the power dealing that is common in any such situation. Nowhere in the film has Roma's own competency been permitted to establish. She is shown to be rather incompetent and naive. Although her intentions are noble she is unable to convince the jury of Vishal's innocence. It is Jindal's mediation that makes the difference and obtains Vishal's release. Roma's body language is supposed to depict her as a "liberated" woman. Writing in G, an Indian film magazine, Monica Motwani states 'the heroine may have metamorphosed over the years, but she still cannot break away from the shackles of certain norms set by Hindi cinema years ago.'⁵

Therefore women appear to have lost the space they had created for themselves. As films became more shiny and hi-tech, the heroes took centre stage and the heroines remain more of a glamour component. Their presence did nothing to move the story forward. The more India became global the more the Bollywood films regressed. Some of the hits films of the post-liberalization, in the 1990s, showed a desire for a traditional way of life when women kept their homes and men earned the bread. While Madhuri Dixit stole hearts in one of the biggest hits of the '90s, *Hum Apke Hai Kaun*, she also established the trend of heroines who would never put their own dreams ahead of the aspirations and desires of their family. The caring homemaker role of the women was back in trend.

⁵ Monica Motwani, *The Changing Face of the Hindi Film Heroine*, [G Magazine Online](#), 1996

The more recent films in late 1990s, like '*Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gum*', '*Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*', '*Dil Toh Pagal Hai*', '*Biwi No.1*', all had women as decorations and as homemakers. None of these films made by contemporary young filmmakers presented women as career women. However those women who had failed in their love life were shown to take up a career. In *Dil Toh Pagal Hai*, Karisma Kapoor is a dancer loses to Madhuri Dixit, whose main aim in life is to look for her life partner. Sushmita Sen was shown as a model in '*Biwi No.1*' but then she was also a home breaker, and the forgiving homemaker wife in the same movie, Karisma Kapoor, 'wins' back her man.

Even the film *Dil Chahta Hai*, known to be a Generation X movie, made by a young director, caught to the traditional role for its female leads. While the three male characters in the film had identities apart from their romantic ones, the females didn't have any identity of their own. Only one character (Dimple Kapadia) is having a career but does not have a happy ending while the man who loves her (Akshay Khanna) finds a normal girlfriend.

Among the directors of the above-mentioned films, several studied abroad and have their lifestyle influenced by the west values. They have seen Hollywood films but still returned to traditional Indian values and conservatism through the female characters in their films.

Yet another depiction of the changing role and image of women would be the way a clear distinction is shown between the heroine and the vamp, the good girl and bad girl. The vamp always smoked, bared flesh, and was punished for her bad deeds. As Saira Banu a 'foreign'-returned girl- a smoker, a spoilt-brat, was shown in Manoj Kumar's *Purab Pachim* and then was taught a lesson by the hero. The good ones are always shown as the very nice girls. The image of an ideal daughter or wife or daughter-in-law was used in different avatars with only a change of name and location. Singh (2007) shows how the popular cinema has drawn heavily upon Indian mythology for its popular appeal. It mainly shares the interests and values of male prejudice, dramatizing male fantasies of the female. Hence a woman is depicted either as an angel or as a monster.

Sometime afterwards, in the 90s especially, the line between the heroine and vamp disappeared. The heroine dressed as boldly and moved as provocatively as the bad girl of old times. Some critics opined that as an effect of globalization and consumerism where mass production demanded heroines to become more ornamental than real woman. She might be shown dancing in snow-covered Switzerland or Austria but basically sticks to the ideal woman Indian males fantasize about which is being a homemaker.

Even Bipasha Basu's (Nishigandha Dasgupta) in Madhur Bhandarkar's *Corporate* had the negative shades. She is an ambitious girl wanting to be successful at any cost to get rid of her past bad experiences. In her supreme confidence she doesn't mind indulging in industrial inquiring on a rival company. She gets caught but the audience is left sympathetic to her problematic situation.

The change of images has not been a sudden one but happened slowly. The debate whether films reflect life or life imitates films can also be examined in this context. Despite a large number of women working both in urban and rural areas, the films

more often ignore this reality. Seeing women's portrayal in popular cinema, it seems time has been still for her. Even though the characterization is more detailed the role has not changed drastically. The roles assigned to heroines still carry the stereotypes.

Some changes in the women's typical characters have been evident in the films lately. Jiah Khan, the Lolita-like figure in Ram Gopal Varma's *Nishabd* is a fresh change because instead of casting her as a bad girl the director focuses on the teenager's growing consciousness of her sexuality, which she accepts confidently by reaching out to a man more than twice her age. This has been made possible partly with the entry of small cinema, encouraged by the multiplex culture; new directors acknowledge the changing time and bring their dreams in their scripts. Fortunately, many of the directors have gained popularity showing the audience wanting a change from the typical story lines. This is something proving beneficial for heroines wanting to take a different path away from the typical stereotypes.

Bollywood and beyond

In conclusion, Indian cinema industry has changed significantly since 1947 making a name for it and is well known for its techniques. Indian films are now competing with western productions on the world stage, winning prestigious international awards. The success of Indian cinema across the world is spreading the rich cultural traditions of Indian dance and music to a global audience. Culture is the essential factor in the modern society and cinema in particular is acting as a mirror of the society. It reflects many trends, existing virtues, social struggles, and the living patterns. The Indian cinema portrays the essence of the Indian society. The ethnic and traditional values of the Indian society, its cultural diversity and the unity among the varied cultural and religious sects, is highlighted by Indian cinema. Thus it plays a very important in depicting the Indian values to the world. The Indian films are very popular all around Asia and also in other parts of the world.

With globalization, the Indian cinema is becoming increasingly influenced by Western cinema. Bollywood imports technical expertise from overseas and many films are shot on western locations. Many Bollywood films are also based on Hollywood blockbusters. However at the same time Indian media has several reports on Bollywood's increasing influence in the world film industry and how it is competing with Hollywood. Bollywood started in 1899 with the production of a short film by a portrait photographer, Harischandra Sakharam Bhatavedekar, called *The Wrestlers*. Hollywood's birth however happened 11 years later in 1910 with a Biography melodrama. Since the coming of sound in 1931, Bollywood has produced over 9,000 films (Mishra 2006: 1).

Today India is the world's largest producers of films with a total of 1,288 feature films produced only in 2009 compared to Hollywood that produces 500 films per year on an average (BBC News 2011). Hollywood has a worldwide audience of 2.6 billion while Bollywood produces more than 1000 (not consistently) films every year and has a worldwide audience of 3 Billion. In terms of vieweship, Bollywood overtook Hollywood in 2004 and has been leading ever since. The NRI also are playing an important role contributing a lot to the Indian film industry. The Bollywood films are now changing according to the need of the modern world and are also made according to the demand of the NRI's. It is estimated that around 15 million Indian expatriates living in different parts of the world account for over 65% of Bollywood's earnings. An

estimated \$800 is spent by NRI's in Indian films and music. US (2 million Indian expats), UK (1.5 million), South Africa (1 million of Africa's 2 million Indian population) are major markets for Bollywood.

However Bollywood still retains its very Indian value and sticks to the traditional customs and life of people in India. This is especially true as it is difficult to distinguish between art and life in South Asian society; they no longer imitate each other but have appeared to merge with each other. Political philosophies, social values, group behaviors, speeches and dresses in society are reflected in the cinema and also reflect back on the society. Furthermore, film stars have moved from their fantasyland into politics to emerge as powerful figures guiding the destiny of millions. This includes a number of female actresses as well who have served themselves as the caretaker of the society. This development indicates that the female component in the film industry has made its presence known not just in the films but also in the real world. The role played by women in Indian cinema serves as a role model for other women with fewer opportunities to follow. With Bollywood being a big successful industry, the female characters played in their movies allow Indian women to relate themselves easily with these female characters. It is thus possible to view the cinema as a genuine symbol for society and this perception helps to understand the society in a better way.

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