

Reflecting India

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Reflecting India: The Shifting Socio-Political Narratives in Cinema

Context:

Recently, a new biopic on **Jyotiba Phule**, a 19th-century leader from Maharashtra who fought for the rights of oppressed castes, was released. This film marks a significant transformation in the way national issues are represented in Indian cinema. Cinema, as a powerful tool, has always played a critical role in reflecting the socio-political landscape of India. The evolving portrayal of national issues in films has mirrored changes in the country's political, social, and cultural environment.

Socio-Political Themes in Early Cinema

In the early years, Indian cinema served as a reflection of the socio-political climate of the time. It depicted national issues while engaging with themes such as **nationalism**, **communal harmony**, and **socio-economic disparities**.

- **Cinema as a Mirror of National Issues:** Indian cinema in its initial years was a reflection of the socio-political context of the time. It addressed complex themes like **politics**, **social inequalities**, and **cultural identity**, often challenging existing beliefs and inspiring public discourse.
- **Nationalism and Patriotism:** The early years of Indian cinema were marked by films promoting Indian identity and resistance to colonial rule. With **British censorship**, filmmakers used **mythological** and **historical allegories** to inspire nationalist sentiment. For example, films like **Lagaan** symbolized resistance against colonial rule through the game of cricket.
- **Communal Amity:** During the period leading to **Partition**, cinema consciously promoted messages of **Hindu-Muslim unity**. The conflict between **city vs village** and **east vs west** was a recurring theme in early films. Cinema played a role in fostering harmony at a time when **communal tensions** were on the rise.
- **Socio-Economic Issues:** Early films highlighted social issues like **untouchability**, **caste oppression**, **women's rights**, and **poverty**. Filmmakers such as **V. Shantaram** advocated

for **progressive changes** and **social upliftment**, often inspired by **Gandhian ideals**.

- **Economic Struggles and Class Issues:** Early cinema also focused on the **plight of peasants, workers, and the urban poor**. The rise of **parallel cinema** reflected growing concerns about **economic struggles** and the challenges faced by marginalized communities.
- **Swadeshi and National Pride:** Early films promoted **Swadeshi** values, countering Western cultural influence. **Dadasaheb Phalke**, the "father of Indian cinema," consciously used the medium to promote **Indianness** and the rejection of colonial dominance.

Recent Changes in Cinema Reflecting Current National Issues

In recent years, Indian cinema has experienced a shift in its thematic focus, mirroring the evolving socio-political landscape of modern India. Films today reflect the country's changing identity, political climate, and socio-economic challenges.

- **Decline in Antagonizing the West:** Earlier films often portrayed the **West** as the antagonist, symbolizing colonial oppression. However, with the passing of time and the diminishing memory of **British imperialism**, the West has become less of a focus in Indian cinema. Today, Western culture is more mainstream, and the focus has shifted to domestic issues.
- **Assertive Nationalism:** In the last decade, there has been a noticeable rise in films portraying **patriotism** and **military heroism**. Movies like **Uri: The Surgical Strike**, **Shershaah**, **Kesari**, and **The Kashmir Files** emphasize **assertive nationalism** and India's stance on **terrorism** and **border security**, aligning with the current political climate.
- **Increasing Shade of Religion:** A growing trend in Indian cinema is the rise of **religious themes, communalism, and religious stereotyping**. **Hindutva** has gained prominence as a dominant strand of nationalism, influencing many recent films.
- **Rising Caste Discussion:** Films today have taken a **bolder approach** to addressing issues of **caste discrimination, police brutality, and systemic oppression**. Movies like **Article 15**, **Jai Bhim**, and **Sairat** are part of a growing public dialogue on **Dalit rights** and **intersectional justice**, reflecting a shift towards more direct discussions on caste issues.
- **Women's Empowerment and Gender Issues:** Recent films increasingly reflect themes of **feminism, gender roles, and toxic masculinity**. Films like **Thappad**, **Pink**, **Chhapaak**, and **The Great Indian Kitchen** address issues of **consent, domestic violence**, and the representation of women in public life, mirroring ongoing national conversations about gender equality.

- **Impact of Technology and Media:** Films now explore the influence of **digital culture**, **misinformation**, and **privacy concerns**. Movies like **Jamtara**, **Choked**, and **Mumbai Mafia** delve into the complex relationship between the **online and offline worlds**, reflecting the challenges posed by the digital age.
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What Lies Ahead for Indian Cinema?

Indian cinema has always mirrored the socio-political environment of its time. From the **mythical heroes** of early films to today's **complex protagonists**, cinema has evolved from symbolic resistance to **direct confrontation** with national issues. As the nation moves forward, Indian cinema is likely to continue reflecting the **complexity of modern India**, addressing issues like **globalization**, **environmental challenges**, and **youth empowerment**.

- The shift from symbolic resistance to **direct engagement** with national issues marks India's journey from a **colonial subject** to a **modern democracy**. This transformation in cinema is reflective of India's progress in navigating its identity, political ideologies, and social justice movements.

