



Portrayal of Substance Abuse in Post Independence Hindi Cinema: A Thematic Study

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Abstract

The history of substance abuse can be traced back to prehistoric ages. Figures suggest that in the contemporary times substance abuse has increased greatly to become a menace to the society. Concurrent with this increase in substance abuse is an increase in its representation in print and visual media. Post independence Hindi cinema has been quite sensitive to substance abuse and its trade. Films showing substance abuse can be classified into two broad categories: those showing drug intake or addiction and those focusing on drug trade. Films show substance abuse in romantic aura also. The portrayal of negative aspects of substance abuse is a more recent trend in post independence Hindi cinema, which is in contrast to the cinema of 50s and 60s. The paper suggests that cinema in the current age of internet can prove a highly effective tool to deal with this menace.

Keywords: Cinema, substance abuse, drug trade, media, film

Introduction

Substance Abuse alternatively called *Drug Abuse* is as old as the history of human civilization. The cult of taking drugs began before the beginning of systematized agriculture. It is believed that people of the Stone Age used to consume hallucinogenic mushrooms some 12,000 years ago (McKenna, 1992). Coca was used as a stimulant in South America even in prehistoric times (Davenport-Hines, 2002). Even the common food eaten by human beings would induce in them states of stimulation, euphoria or at least relaxation. Researchers such as Zioudrou (1979) and Brantl (1979) found opioid activity in cereals such as wheat, maize and barley (exorphins), and bovine and human milk (casomorphin), as well as stimulatory activity in these proteins, and in oats, rye and soy, thus establishing a relationship between human food and its soothing or stimulating qualities (Wadley and Angus 1993). Systematic agriculture resulted in associated food processing activities such as grinding, cooking and fermentation which led a path to alcohol production.

Drugs today have become a severe threat to mankind, so much so that at least 15.3 million persons today have drug use disorders. Next only to petroleum and arms trade, illicit drugs trade is the third largest business in the world with a turnover of around \$500 billion. In 2008, 155 to 250 million people, or 3.5% to 5.7% of the world's population aged 15-64, used psychoactive substances other than alcohol- such as cannabis, amphetamines, cocaine, opioids, and non-prescribed psychoactive prescription medication. 230 million people, or 1 in 20 adults, were estimated to have used an illicit drug at least once in year 2010.

The term *Substance Abuse* now preferred over the term *Drug Abuse* by the World Health Organization refers to a patterned use of psychoactive substances (drugs), including alcohol, in which the user consumes the substance in amounts or with methods which are harmful to themselves or others. Evidence suggests that there is an increasing use of illicit drugs and the reported number points to over 3 million drug addicts in India. The situation is explosive in the state of Punjab where, according to the State Social Security and Women and Children Development Department, 67 percent of rural households have at least one drug addict in the family. State officials estimate that more than 50 percent of its 18-35 population are using drugs illegally which is far more higher than the U.N.'s estimation of 4.8 percent for the 15-64 age range. Simultaneous to this dangerous development is an increased awareness among government and other social agencies to fight against this menace effectively. Consequently, there is taking place a far greater representation of drugs abuse in print and visual media, social media and in entertainment media.

Cinema is a potent mass media form that has been reflecting social reality since its beginning. As an effort to relate to the masses (as it has wide appeal to them), it deliberately takes up social issues, presents them in a faithful manner (although sometimes romanticizing them as well), shows their influences on the society and also suggests the ways to deal with them. A media form through its communicative role performs three key functions: (1) the surveillance of the environment; (2) the correlation of the parts of society in responding to the environment; (3) the transmission of the social heritage from one generation to the next (Lasswell, 1948). Cinema, being a mass media form has always played these functions. With its narrative function, Cinema undertakes to presents artistically 'richly layered cultural practices' (Corrigan, 2003) which result because of the interrelationship of cinema with culture (Coleman, 1994). The present paper is a thematic study of portrayal of substance abuse and substance trade in Hindi cinema.

Cinematic Representation of Substance Use

Drug abuse and drugs trade – the constant problems of the world - have been significantly portrayed in Hindi Cinema, particularly in Post Independence Hindi Cinema. The term *Hindi Cinema* here refers to the movies made in India with Hindi as the main language where as *Post Independence* refers to a time period after 1947. Terms *Film* and *Movie* have been used here alternatively and mean the same. A study of presentation of substance abuse in Hindi cinema can reveal two broad categories of such Hindi films: films showing drug intake or (and) addiction, and films showing drug trade. Films showing drug intake or addiction may depict drug intake as a usual incident or casual event, or they

may be focused on drug addiction.

Alcohol has been a favourite drug with Hindi Cinema and that is why the portrayal of alcohol consumption is a very common thing in Hindi movies. Its consumption is vilified as well as romanticized, and at times glorified. It is rejected by presenting it in negative light, thus associating it with the villainy. In Hindi cinema, it is almost impossible to find a teetotaler villain. In almost every Hindi movie, the villain is shown as a drinking guy with many other vices. But liquor is equally consumed by the protagonists, or 'Heroes' (as they are popularly called) where liquor consumption is given a positive colour by romanticizing it, so much so that it becomes the setting of many romantic and seductive hit songs. This glorification of liquor particularly happens in *Devdas* movies based on Sharat Chandra's legendary novel of the same name. In 1936 version of the movie directed by Pramathesh Barua, in 1955 version directed by Bimal Roy and in its 2002 *avatar* directed by Sanjay Leela Bhansali, the protagonists are portrayed as romantic figures, dying because of failed love and liquor consumption. In *Dev D* (2009 dir. Anurag Kashyap), another adaptation of the same novel, the protagonist begins to drink and takes drugs, after his failure to unite with his childhood love.

Drinking characters in movies are often presented in positive shades. In 1975 family drama *Julie* (dir. K. S. Sethumadhavan) the character of Morris- Julie's father- is shown as a drinking but fun loving, lively and caring man. In Prakash Mehra's *Muqaddar Ka Sikandar* (1978) the protagonist Sikandar is shown as full of positive qualities, rather at his best when he is drunk. In the same director's *Sharabi* (1984), the protagonist Vicky Kapoor is shown as large hearted and generous, implying that liquor makes people open hearted.

Cannabis (*bhang* in vernacular) is a traditional Indian drug used for intoxication. Having a mythological association with Hindu God Shiva, it is culturally accepted, ritually permitted and ceremoniously consumed. According to Hindu mythology, Cannabis grew 'at the spot where drops of divine ambrosia fell from heaven' (Escototado, 1996). For such reasons it is associated with innocence and mirth. In 1978 Indian action-thriller *Don* (dir. Chandra Barot) the consumption of *bhang* by the protagonist and its after effects of singing and dancing are shown in lighter veins. Similar situation occurs in *Aapki Kasam* (1974, dir. J. Om Prakash) where the romantic couple enjoys the intoxication of *Bhang* by singing and dancing. Traditionally in Indian literature and folklore the attitude towards *bhang* consumers and opium eaters has been of laughter and comedy, but rarely of derogation.

The portrayal of negative aspects of substance abuse and of substance trade is rather a recent trend in post independence cinema. Cinema of 50s and 60s did not bother so much with drug abuse and drug trade as the cinema of later times did. It was in 1970s when the presentation of psychotic drugs such as LSD, marijuana and heroin in Hindi Cinema began. Consequently, the characteristics of villainy as shown in Hindi movies also changed. Now the villains were portrayed as smugglers and drugs dealers, quite different from villains of 50's 60's who were mainly property seekers or rivals of the 'hero' in love triangles. Dev Anand's 1971 film *Hare Rama Hare Krishna* focused on the problem of drug addiction in addition to the social problems of breaking families and sense of alienation in the young generation. The movie dealt with the decadence of the Hippie culture and called for keeping intact cultural values to avoid drugs. Ramanad Sagar's *Jalte Badan* (1973) showed drug addiction among the youth. It told the story of a young student becoming a victim of drugs but later coming out of the vicious trap. The 1985 crime thriller *Khamosh* (dir. Vidhu Vinod Chopra) delineated the portrait of a depressed heroin addict.

A recent instance which can be quoted is of Madhur Bhandarkar's *Fashion* (2008). The movie shows how cutthroat corporate competition, frustration to achieve goals, inability to accept reality, depressing lonelines and decline in career can push one towards drugs. The movie depicts in the character of Shonali Gujral an ex-supermodel who relies heavily on drugs, being unable to deal with decline in her career. The character is based on the actual story of a designer turned model of the 90s, Gitanjali Nagpal, who experienced a 'riches to rags' fate and fell a victim to drugs. Meghna, the protagonist of the movie, too is unable to accept her decline in the showbiz and resorts to alcohol and cocaine. *Shaitan* (2011 dir. Bejoy Nambiar) shows the central character Amy, besides others, turning to drugs on being depressed and mentally disturbed. Another 2011 film *7 Khoon Maaf* (dir. Vishal Bhardwaj) depicts a drug addict in the role of Jimmy Stetson who is killed with drugs overdose.

Drug trade has been a hit theme in Hindi Cinema. Whereas substance abuse appears only as a motif in movies, drug trade appears as a theme. Illicit liquor trade and trafficking has appeared in many films. Drug mafia focused *Jaanbaz* (1986, dir. Firoz Khan) and *Charas: A Joint Operation* (2004, dir. Tigmanshu Dhulia) show the strategies adopted by the mafia to strengthen its hold on the system. The movies also deal with the problems of drugs, violence, power game and corruption. *Kaminey* (2009, dir. Vishal Bhardwaj) deals with the underworld drug mafia and drugs. Milan Lutheria's 2010 retro movie *Once Upon a Time in Mumbaai* tells the story of 70's when drug business began spreading its roots in the society, how values and principles possessed by even the villains gave way to lucrative drug business. *Dum Maaro Dum* (2011, dir. Rohan Sippy) deals with the subject of drug smuggling in Goa. It also shows how one gets enticed towards the drug trade because of the money involved in it.

The first decade of this century introduced Rave Parties in Hindi Cinema. Raj Nidimoru and Krishna D.K.'s *Goa Gone* (2013) shows three friends attending a drug mafia organized rave party. Though a zombie comedy, the movie gives a graphic representation of the euphoria of the rave parties, revealing to the general public behind the curtain scene of these parties. It also reveals how drug culture is spread by mafias and what implications this drug cult may have. The zombies symbolically represent drug addicts who are reduced to mere mechanical and devouring and destructive objects, devoid of human emotions.

Conclusions

Drugs, their use and their trade have appeared vividly in post independence Hindi Cinema. Cinema thus has been instrumental in making people known to drug abuse and drug business. It has also played an effective role in spreading awareness against such social problems. In the age of the internet, cinema has become more accessible to masses than ever. This access has been facilitated by advanced smartphones and tablets, satellite channels, online streaming videos and interactive websites, but this has also led to a greater responsibility on cinema. There are definitely reasons to believe

that in the long run cinema will prove effective in dealing with social problems more significantly than in contemporary times.

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