

# Beyond The Reel: Gender Bias In Popular Indian Entertainment

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**Abstract-** From the first Indian movie in 1913, film there has grown into a lively part of culture - shaping beliefs, reflecting life, also driving cash flow. Even though more women now work behind and in front of cameras, Bollywood still struggles with deep-rooted views about gender plus outdated character roles. The project looks at why unequal treatment sticks around in India's media world, checking out reasons and fixes by studying how films get made, who gets to create them, what viewers respond to. Using earlier findings, it pulls together different angles: how having women on screen affects money matters (Ravi, 2025), how TV keeps pushing narrow standards of beauty (Chatterjee & Rastogi, 2022), but also how meaningful movies can shift public thinking (Chandra & Bhatia, 2019). On top of that, it looks at how sexual boundary-pushing scenes tie into crime theories (Mehta, 2019), alongside how Bollywood shapes views on gender across overseas Indian communities (Kundra et al., 2025), then shifts to the struggles women in the spotlight face online today (Mitra, 2020). In closing, findings about hidden systems and tech-driven bias (Biju & Gayathri, 2024) push the conversation toward how digital tools can deepen social gaps. When combined, this research shows change has happened - just not everywhere - and old patterns still hold strong. To wrap up, the article pushes for fairer rules, balanced workplace norms, along with sharper media awareness from viewers so real gender fairness takes root in India's film world.

**Keywords:** Indian cinema, Bollywood, gender inequality, female representation, gender bias, stereotypical portrayals, beauty norms, digital culture.

## I. INTRODUCTION

In this essay, we examine a carefully selected corpus of movie subtitles from the previous 70 years with an emphasis on Bollywood, also referred to as the Mumbai film industry. Even though Bollywood is a billion-dollar entertainment industry with 1.2 billion viewers, there is little to no research that has examined the many social biases and cultural signals that can be found by

carefully examining these well-known movies over many years. Indian film industry is one of the most powerful representatives to handle a large genre of social problems through the vehicle of a script. Since its inception in 1913, films have been an essential form to convey sociopolitical observations of the time, and serving as both a valuable entertainment content to the viewers (Gupta and Gupta, 2013). It is very intriguing to understand at times if it is the movies serving as a model to the society or vice versa (Bhugra, 2006). Indian cinema has been Fallen in love with myths, romance, comedy and thrills – from the Indian. testing the waters with a number of musical genres to solidify a sustainable sound that meshes with the viewers while also stomping all over the box office.

Many major films don't pass basic tests when it comes to showing women, while top crew jobs? Mostly filled by guys - with just about 1 in 10 going to women. Even though theater groups and streaming sites suggest things are shifting, progress crawls along - and spreads unevenly at best. Bring class, age, or spoken language into play, then those divides stretch even further apart. Keep that context close, then examine how gender bias still lingers in popular Indian media - but question why it survives despite changing attitudes around society. "

Latest research highlights an obvious imbalance between genders across Indian cinema, both on-screen and off. Many major films don't even meet basic standards when it comes to including women, whereas top jobs in making them are held by men - just about one in ten goes to a woman.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Ravi, S. (2025). Bollywood, deeply woven into India's cultural fabric, churns out countless movies every year - supporting more than 500,000 jobs while pulling in big earnings. Still, although women have gained better

access to work behind the scenes, they're rarely seen front and center on screen. The research dives into how having more female roles might've shaped ticket sales between 2009 and 2019, relying on a one-of-a-kind data collection. Running a straight-line prediction method - with the balance of actresses versus actors as the key marker - it turns up little evidence that extra women leads to fatter profits. But the main actor's sex makes a real difference in how much money gets made. On top of that, what it cost to make the movie plus the type of story shapes how well it sells.

Chatterjee, S., & Rastogi, S. (2022). This essay interrogates the question of beauty bias in contemporary India with particular reference to the postmillennial popular Hindi TV serials. It begins with a consideration of the impact of television on society and illustrates how representation of women has always been a mirror image or close approximation to existing beauty standards. Drawing on five popular serials, the article finds that even while representationally forward-seeking, shows often ascribe to normative beauty standards. Sexism is subtly endorsed, when they are framing less traditionally attractive women as victims of an unfair society for example. The study concludes that far from empowering women, they frequently tend to validate beauty myths in order to build a large readership and attract sponsorship and high ratings.

Chandra, G., alongside Bhatia, S. (2019) point out that Indian movies aren't just about fun anymore - they're tackling real-life topics that shape how people see society. Although a handful of directors are shifting toward stories that spotlight injustice or change, plenty stick to old-school plots that might mislead viewers instead. The research dives into how truthful filmmaking affects audiences, checking how well issue-based films actually perform. It highlights what the industry's done to push for social progress while noting how more people are warming up to this kind of storytelling. At the same time, it pushes new creators in film and media to weave everyday struggles into popular movies.

Mehta, M. (2019). The study pushes cultural criminology further by looking at how gender shows up - alongside sexually inappropriate actions - in Bollywood movies from the 2000s onward. Nine films made between 2000 and 2016 were checked based on

things such as who's behind the camera, how fully written female characters are, scenes showing sexual boundary violations, plus whether the male viewpoint shapes what we see. Results show the industry still leans heavily toward men, giving little room for women's experiences. Women often get reduced to looks; besides that, seven of these movies clearly include moments where sex norms get crossed. Just two movies meet the Bechdel-Wallace criteria, yet women's parts tend to lack depth or blend together. Researchers wrap up by saying these depictions could fuel criminal behavior, pointing toward a gap that future studies should tackle.

Kundra, S., Kundra, N., Nabobo-Baba, U., Sarwal, A., & Bhawna. (2025) In Fiji - called 'Little India' now and then - a group named Indo-Fijians lives, blending traditions from India with island ways to create a unique blend, though many still sense a connection to India because of films and series, especially Bollywood stuff. This cultural ripple doesn't stop at one ethnicity - it draws younger ethnic Fijians in too, since daily contact with Indo-Fijians leads them to compare their habits with Indian norms. The study checks how students view gender concepts tied to India, including women and those beyond the binary, shaped by media clips, streaming scenes, or chats across backgrounds. Using casual conversation groups based on the Talanoa approach, results reveal complex views built from family teachings mixed with movie portrayals. One thing becomes clear: Indian pop content plays a role in reshaping gender understanding across communities, stretching well beyond national borders.

Mitra, S. (2020). Bollywood flicks have long revolved around movie icons who grab audience attention. Even though how we consume media keeps shifting, these celebs still hold sway - showing up not just in movies but also on TV and online spots. Nowadays, actors juggle different spotlight gigs, mixing real-life vibes with screen characters using tools like Instagram or Twitter. Still, more attention makes old views on fame and fan culture harder to keep. Famous people aren't only praised - they're questioned too, mostly on digital platforms. Women in the spotlight deal with tougher judgment, frequently attacked for their looks or bombarded with mean comments. This study looks at how online networks change Bollywood celebrity life, zeroing in on what female stars struggle with most.

Biju, P. R., along with Gayathri, O. (2024), point out that systemic injustice runs deep in India's social fabric - hitting Dalits, women, people from minority faiths, and cut-off regions hardest. Progress in tech and money matters often skews against these same folks. Past studies looked into how smart tools - like suggestion algorithms or review platforms - affect society at large; however, little is known about their direct toll on those already pushed to the edges. This study looks into ways smart software might limit individual decisions in marginalized areas, while also checking if such tech widens current societal gaps. It's meant to help leaders shape rules, plus stay ahead of how growing AI use could affect vulnerable populations down the line.

Gowtham, how movies worldwide show India changed over time - not just stuck on old ideas about magic or hardship - but started showing real depth. That change? It lines up with how cultures mix more now, thanks to tech and the internet opening doors. Directors such as Satyajit Ray made waves by sharing homegrown tales far beyond borders. Now, because of online streaming services spreading fast, Indian films find fans across continents, blending shared human experiences with unique regional flavors.

Singh, K., Pasha, M. A., & Rai, S. K. (2024). For close to 100 years, movies made in Hindi have played a big part in Indian culture, helping form shared views while mirroring social norms. Even though these widely watched films attract mixed crowds and highlight customs along with dreams, they sometimes repeat fixed images - say, the endlessly giving mom or the hot-headed male lead - which subtly shift how people see others. Over time, such repeated scenes may affect ideas around gender, social rank, and economic status by simply showing what's 'normal'. Earlier studies looked into how media strengthens bias; however, little attention has gone toward understanding how top-tier Hindi films impact adult attitudes toward stereotypes specifically within Delhi NCR - a gap this work aims to explore.

Kamble, C. (2023). In the past, movies from India usually showed Dalit women as helpless targets of both social hierarchy and sexism - told mostly by upper-caste creators. But now, thanks to storytellers such as Nagraj Manjule, Pa. Ranjith, or Mari Selvaraj - who come from marginalized communities - the storytelling's changing. Their work presents Dalit

women not as passive figures but as strong, independent, informed people capable of pushing back against injustice. This shift changes how stories are shown - moving from powerlessness to empowerment - breaking old ideas about caste and gender. These films together reshape what it means to be Dalit, showing strength through bold presence rather than silence or shame.

Deb, J. (2023). The idea of the male gaze - born from feminist thought - explains how media tends to depict women in ways shaped by straight men's fantasies. Instead of seeing them as full people, this focus turns females into eye candy for guys, stripping away who they really are. Across Indian films and elsewhere, ladies have long appeared as quiet, flashy presences whose worth comes mostly from looking good. Sometimes pictures like this one back up old-fashioned views, which messes with how girls see themselves or feel about who they are. Spotting the guy-centered way stories get told - and pushing back by letting women take charge behind the scenes while showing more kinds of people - can slowly break down these damaging myths.

Padhi, P. K., Nayak A., along with Singh B. (2023): Back in old India, females got serious respect - treated just like males, which sacred books such as the Vedas clearly show. They learned deeply, mastered creative crafts, while standing for kindness and strong morals. Still, later on, male-dominated views took hold, bringing unfair treatment plus control over women - as myths reveal through moments when Draupadi was shamed or Sita endured pain. Over time, old habits pushed women into home-centered lives while backing up men's control. As new forms of media grew popular, images of women changed - less respect, more exaggeration and lustful angles - twisting how people see femininity, erasing real voices and weakening fair treatment.

### III. OBJECTIVE

Problem faced by females in Indian cinema

#### 1. Violence Against Women in Bollywood Cinema.

Both overt physical abuse depictions and the perpetuation of gender stereotypes that normalize aggression and discrimination against women are

examples of violence against women in Bollywood films.

In the movie Animal in which there is extreme violence which was directed by Sandeep Reddy vanga, in the movie he shows both hate and love.

The main critique is that the movie is a senseless sequence of gore, misogyny and abusiveness, one after the other. The film has reignited the debate on the eternal struggle between directive creativity, and moral and social responsibility.

## 2.Objectification of male gaze

The concept known as the 'male gaze' - originally from film critique - points out how cinema often lines up its images and scenes with what a heterosexual guy would find appealing. Yet in Bollywood, this comes across differently: think lingering shots tracing women's bodies, storytelling that frames females as passive, dutiful, or stuck to male characters. Even when ladies get moments of strength or attention, the plot rarely follows their viewpoint; rather, it bends sharply around how men live and soak in the tale

## 3.Pay inequality

Years passed before Bollywood's pay gap became hard to ignore - every now and then, things heated up. Female stars, talented and consistent, still end up earning way less than men they work alongside. Some performers opened up about salaries, revealing gaps come more from how studios see their popularity or draw - not because of gender alone

In certain films, a single guy appears alongside several women - this often means ladies earn less.

Deepika Padukone wanted to be paid fairly for her work and refuses to be underpaid. Kirti Sanon noticed that some producers don't provide high budget to the films led by women because of the fear

## 4.Differentiation of age and appearance in Bollywood

we've noticed how frequently females get sized up by looks or years lived. one of the Bollywood actor Shefali Shah talks bluntly about how women over 40 get overlooked in showbiz - yet she's always been upfront when calling it out

A well-known case of age bias actually begins right within Bollywood.

Several guys from Bollywood who're around fifty end up acting alongside women in their twenties or thirties - that highlights a strong sense of bias based on age

Neena Gupta doesn't shy away from speaking her mind - honestly, that's exactly what makes her stand out. When replying to a fan online, she called out how few parts exist for women at her life stage, no filter. We're here for that kind of real talk - it hits hard cause it's true.

## 5.limited and stereotyped roles

- Bollywood's been boxing women into tight, predictable parts - roles shaped by rigid ideas about how they should look, act, or fit in. Instead of showing who women truly are or what they want, these images mirror old-school rules, propping them up with every scene.
- Common Stereotypes
- Sanskari Bahu (Traditional Daughter-in-law): Ladies appear constantly putting others first, tied to home life without much focus on their struggles - or personal sides - check films such as "Vivah" along with "Hum Saath Saath Hain".
- The Bad Girl: Folks who hit the bottle, light up cigarettes, or wear bold outfits usually get painted as shady - this leans into narrow thinking instead of showing depth, take Veronica from "Cocktail" for example.
- Older females sometimes get painted as mean villains - take films such as "Beta," where tension between generations flares up because of how these characters act.

## 6. Other issues

In many industries, including Bollywood, nepotism—the practice of giving preference to friends or family—is a widespread problem. Nepotism is another issue that Bollywood's female actors face; in cases where it occurred, women suffered greatly. Many auditions are necessary to get into dramas or Bollywood. They undergo a body check during some auditions, where their size, shape, and colour are evaluated. However, a girl of a well-known actor or actress wishes to pursue a

career in the film industry where they won't be constrained by their body type, size, or colour

In one of the interview Taapsee Pannu expressed her view on nepotism and her struggle regarding entering Bollywood

she is renowned for being vocal and, she stated that she lost many films or films are gone from her hand due to not being a daughter sister or girlfriend of so and so in Bollywood industry or she don't have any past connection with Bollywood.

#### IV. IMPACTS

What Impact does Indian Cinema have on Individual

1. Dull skin, thin frames, or flawless faces keep popping up in Indian films and

TV shows as if they're the only version of attractive. Because these images flash everywhere, lots of fans - especially girls still growing up - start measuring their worth against them, which chips away at how they see themselves while feeding quiet insecurities. Take Vidya Balan, a popular Bollywood star she once admitted that endless remarks about her not being slim shook her self-belief, until she slowly learned to value who she real self esteem Such widespread habits lead many everyday people in India to face alike feelings of stress. While these patterns spread easily, they often bring matching inner struggles across countless lives.

2. Unrealistic Standards

The predominance of size-zero bodies, sharp facial features, and fair-skinned actors in Bollywood fosters the belief that these attributes are not just preferred but necessary for beauty and success. This has led to a rise in body dissatisfaction, unhealthy dieting practices, and increased demand for cosmetic alterations among Indian youth aspiring to media- fueled "perfection". Male actors are often portrayed as muscular and handsome, establishing a tough, narrowly defined standard for men as well. Such continuous portrayal enforces the idea that only such looks are worthy of admiration, undermining the self-image of millions who do not fit these, Molds.

3. Mental Health

Women in Bollywood face tough mental health struggles because of constant public attention, demands to look perfect, unstable jobs, also an ultra-competitive

scene that sometimes takes advantage. Deep-rooted male-dominated views combined with how the film world pushes narrow ideas about women often deepen these challenges. Still, mainstream Indian movies - especially those from Bollywood - are filled with repetitive storylines that stick women into old-fashioned parts. More often than not, female roles come across as decorative, always giving up for others, or quietly obeying, just there to support the man's journey.

What Impact does Indian Cinema have on society

1. Stereotype Persistence In Indian movies, females usually play helpers, love targets, or people who suffer - males tend to come off as bold, strong, or shut down emotionally. Take "Kabir Singh" - his aggression gets framed like passion, yet in "Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge," Kajol acts gentle, always seeking a man's approval. These repeated patterns narrow how folks see masculinity and femininity - not only that, they nudge audiences into treating clichéd actions like every day norms.

2. Movie roles often repeat unfair beliefs, shaping how people see others outside the theater. When females are shown as less capable or passive, it backs up pay gaps or job barriers they face at work. Old-school Hindi films usually act like men should run things or handle tech jobs while ladies belong cooking dinner. Because of these messages, girls find it tougher to break into fields such as engineering, startups, or government roles.

3. Women often don't go after certain strong or different careers because they hardly ever see others like them doing it. Take mainstream Indian cinema - how many times do you spot a woman shown as a scientist, lawmaker, or top-level entrepreneur? Almost never. That's why flicks such as "Chhapaak" and "Mary Kom" grab attention - they show females pushing through tough paths most wouldn't expect. Since these images are few and far between, girls growing up may struggle to picture themselves in those shoes. Without seeing it on screen or around them, dreaming big feels harder.

4. Little children pick up stuff from movies and shows just by watching. Because they're so young, messages about what boys versus girls should do stick deep - shaping choices in play, dreams, or careers down the road. A boy may hide his feelings; afraid mates will

tease him for being weak or unmanly. At the same time, girls can get quiet hints that leading or taking charge doesn't quite fit.

The Historical trends in Bollywood for gender bias

The evolution of gender in Bollywood reflects a messy mix of shifts tied to India's social, political, and cultural swings. Though things have moved ahead here and there, outdated ideas about male and female roles haven't fully faded - lately though, fresh resistance has cracked open space for bolder, truer storytelling. Back in the '50s through the '60s, female characters were often painted as flawless heroes - defined by self-sacrifice, calm strength, deep resilience. Films like *Mother India* (1957) pushed this model of the suffering mother figure - silent endurance propping up strict family systems while celebrating narrow but honoured versions of womanhood. Yet films like "*Bandini*" (1963) began digging into real struggles women faced - suggesting shifts ahead for how they'd appear on screen. Through the 70s and into the next decade, something new emerged - a bolder type of woman, tired of waiting, pushing back hard rather than fading away. In "*Mirch Masala*" (1987), females hold their ground when pushed by unjust power, signalling rising courage and rebellion. Even then, plenty of plots stuck to worn-out views - showing them mostly as caregivers or moral anchors helping men face personal storms, hardly ever leading tales of their own. Once the 90s hit, freer market policies in India started rattling long-held patterns in portraying women through cinema. Girls in Indian cinema slowly started seeming more independent, chasing jobs - though outdated tags stuck around. Films showed women picking paths of their own - but often still boxed in by tradition or beauty standards. Since the 2000s, though, stuff shifted hard; roles got sharper, wilder, less predictable. Movies like "*Queen*" (2014), "*Pink*" (2016), and "*Chhapaak*" (2020) dig into actual hardships women face, spotlighting heroes who grab control instead of waiting. On top of that, more ladies are now behind the camera, shaping tales that challenge set notions about men and women, riding along with social change and rising voices calling for equality.

Females in Bollywood in modern era (2000)

Singh's 2007 study shows Indian myth shapes hit movies. Through exaggerated views of women, these tales often back men's biased dreams. So, females

appear as demons or pure saints. But by the '90s, the line between seductress and main female character faded. The heroine acted and wore clothes just like the rebellious girls from earlier times. Because of worldwide trends and focus on possessions, some experts thought female leads started looking prettier than real ladies, thanks to factory-style movie making. Even if shown twirling in snowy Swiss fields or across sunny Aussie plains, she still stands for the perfect homemaker many Indian guys dream about. Changes in how she's shown happened slowly, not all at once. Movies began tweaking old-fashioned female roles bit by bit. Jiah Khan's role in "*Nishabd*" shows a fresh change - her character starts exploring early desires. Instead of waiting, she goes after someone way older, owning her choice straight up. Small cinemas popping up helped make this kind of story possible. With multiplexes spreading, young filmmakers now see their chance to push bold ideas into movies.

## V. CONCLUSION

Though movies aren't the whole picture, they still shape how people view men and women across India. Even if there're now bolder female leads, more women behind the scenes, or streaming shows breaking molds, old imbalances don't fade fast. Mainstream TV and films usually stick to narrow ideals - favouring fair skin, submissive roles, or hero-driven plots centered on guys. These patterns don't just limit who gets seen - they quietly teach audiences what's 'normal,' keeping outdated views alive.

To go further than just surface-level inclusion, real changes in systems are needed. Behind-the-scenes fairness, stories shaped with attention to gender issues, along with teaching people how to think critically about media - these help push progress forward. Rules that support varied voices in directing roles and balanced portrayals on screen can create long-term impact. In the end, breaking down sexism in India's film and TV world takes effort from everyone - not only directors and lawmakers but viewers too - if media is going to lift people up instead of reinforcing old stereotypes.

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