Juvenile Criminality and Social Labeling: Prototypes in Sibi Malayil's Mudra and Mira Nair's Salaam Bombay!

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Abstract—**Juvenile delinquency has long troubled researchers in various fields through repeated research, because it highlights not just individual wrongdoing by youth but also society's failure to provide them with meaningful alternatives. Indian cinema frequently explores this problem by portraying young characters caught between desperate personal circumstances and indifferent social institutions. This paper analyses how juvenile criminality is portrayed in Sibi Malayil's Mudra (1989) and Mira Nair's Salaam Bombay! (1988) through the lens of Howard Becker's labelling theory. Both films demonstrate that vulnerable youth can become "prototypes" of crime, as their identities are shaped by institutional labels, social stigma, and neglect. Mudra focuses on the struggles within a juvenile home in Kerala, exposing the conflict between sincere efforts to rehabilitate the inmates and institutional forces that inadvertently reinforce criminal behaviour. In contrast, Salaam Bombay! depicts the harsh lives of street children in Bombay and illustrates how labels like "criminal," "thief," or "prostitute's child" can trap these children in cycles of deviance. By comparing these two films, the study highlights how labelling practices transform marginalised children into symbolic figures of criminality. Ultimately, it advocates for a juvenile justice approach centred on rehabilitation rather than punishment.**

Index Terms—**Juvenile Criminality; Labelling Theory; Indian Cinema; Prototypes; Deviance; Juvenile Justice**

I. INTRODUCTION

Juvenile delinquency, which is criminal behaviour by individuals under the age of eighteen, has been widely recognised as a pressing social issue across cultures. The question of why adolescents become involved in crime has spurred extensive research in various streams of study. Beyond official statistics and legal studies, cultural narratives such as films often mirror and shape public perceptions of youth crime. In India, cinema serves as a powerful medium for narrating the stories of marginalised youth, including those trapped in cycles of poverty, neglect, and institutional failure.

This paper examines how juvenile criminality is depicted in two notable Indian films: Sibi Malayil's Mudra (1989), a Malayalam-language drama set in Kerala, and Mira Nair's Salaam Bombay! (1988), a Hindi-English film set on the streets of Bombay. Each film offers a poignant portrayal of children drawn into criminal activities from distinct sociocultural contexts. Mudra dramatizes the complexities of life inside a juvenile reformatory in Kerala, capturing the challenges faced by both the inmates and the reformers within. By contrast, Salaam Bombay! paints a gritty picture of street children fending for themselves in the urban chaos of Bombay. Viewed side by side, these films reveal how Indian cinema crafts "prototypes" of the juvenile criminal archetypal delinquent figures that mirror society's anxieties about youth, morality, and justice.

This analysis uses Becker's labeling theory as its central framework. Becker's approach suggests that deviance is not inherent in any act; rather, an act becomes "deviant" only when society labels it as such in reaction. Applying this perspective, the paper examines how the young characters in Mudra and Salaam Bombay! are stigmatised, categorised, and ultimately transformed into "criminals" through social and institutional processes. The comparative approach highlights that labelling operates in distinct ways in an institutional setting versus a street context, but in both cases, it profoundly shapes the identities of the youth involved.

Through this comparative lens, the paper contributes to a deeper understanding of how Indian cinema addresses issues of youth and crime. It finds that both films underscore the power of social labels to confine children to predetermined criminal roles, even as they depict moments of compassion and resistance that humanise these youth. Ultimately, the study's findings

call for juvenile justice systems to shift away from punitive measures toward rehabilitative and reformative approaches.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on juvenile delinquency in cultural texts spans several disciplines, including criminology, sociology, and film studies. Criminologists have proposed numerous explanations for youth crime, ranging from biological predispositions to socio-economic factors. Popular films both reflect these societal concerns and influence public opinion, acting as mirrors of social realities while also serving as agents that can reinforce or challenge prevailing attitudes.

Indian cinema has a longstanding preoccupation with youth in crisis. From the "angry young man" films of the 1970s to the socially conscious cinema of the 1980s, filmmakers have dramatized the struggles of disenfranchised youth. In the article "Bollywood Movies: A Contributing Factor towards Juvenile Delinquency," Shahbaz Aslam compiles research showing how media, particularly Bollywood films, shape the behaviour and psychological development of young viewers. Mudra belongs to this socially critical tradition, focusing on the conditions inside a juvenile detention home and exposing the failures of state institutions to rehabilitate young offenders.

Mira Nair's Salaam Bombay! Likewise, it aligns with a wave of Indian films that bring attention to the plight of street children in urban centres. The film's quasi-documentary realism and international acclaim have given the issue of homeless youth a worldwide audience. Considered in tandem with Mudra, Nair's film shifts the discussion from critiques of particular institutions to a broader indictment of societal neglect. Scholars have also explored how labelling contributes to cycles of juvenile crime. Howard Becker's labelling theory, first presented in his seminal work Outsiders (1963), posits that deviance is not an intrinsic quality of an act but rather the result of society's labelling of that act. Once a young person is labelled a "delinquent" or "criminal," they may internalise that identity, which in turn shapes their future behaviour (Becker 21). The present study builds on this body of scholarship by situating Mudra and Salaam Bombay! within the context of labelling theory and examining

whether these films reinforce societal labels of criminality or critique them.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK LABELING THEORY

Howard Becker developed labelling theory in the 1960s as a challenge to traditional notions of deviance. Rather than viewing deviant behaviour as inherent to certain acts or individuals, Becker argued that deviance is defined by society's response. In his view, social groups establish rules and then label individuals who break those rules as outsiders (Becker 9). This approach highlights the power of societal reactions in shaping an individual's identity and underscores the influential role of institutions such as schools, law enforcement, courts, and the media in assigning labels that can significantly alter life trajectories.

A key concept in labelling theory is the distinction between primary and secondary deviance. Primary deviance refers to an initial violation of social norms, often minor or situational, that does not define a person's self-concept. Secondary deviance occurs when an individual internalises the deviant label and incorporates it into their identity, often leading to continued deviant behaviour (Lilly et al. 102). For juveniles, this progression is especially consequential, as their identities are still developing and can be heavily swayed by external labels.

In the context of film analysis, labelling theory provides a valuable lens for examining how movies construct criminal identities. Films often dramatize the social process of labelling showing how certain individuals come to be marked as "criminals" through the intersection of personal circumstances and institutional responses. In both Mudra and Salaam Bombay! the young characters' fates are shaped not merely by their actions but by the labels that society and its institutions place upon them. This theoretical framework thus illuminates how cultural texts, such as films, do more than just reflect social realities: they also participate in the process of labelling and can perpetuate (or potentially challenge) the stigmatisation of youth.

IV. ANALYSIS OF MUDRA

Set largely within a juvenile home in Kerala, Mudra (1989) examines the relationships between the young

inmates and a well-intentioned warden who aims to rehabilitate them. The film features an array of juvenile characters who collectively represent different "types" of young offenders. Among them are the rebellious troublemaker, the innocent youth pushed into crime by circumstance, the easily manipulated accomplice, and even a figure of reform within the system. All of these characters are situated within the strict confines of the state-run institution, which serves as a microcosm of the broader juvenile justice system. Using a labelling theory perspective, Mudra exposes how the juvenile home itself ends up perpetuating criminal identities. The youths are ostensibly there to be rehabilitated, but in practice, they are treated first and foremost as offenders. Being branded a "criminal" becomes their defining identity in the eyes of the staff and eventually in their own eyes as well. The film makes this labelling process visible through the boys' interactions with authority figures: at times they react with defiance and rebellion, and at other times with resignation and internalised shame.

Nevertheless, Mudra also presents a reform-minded warden who actively challenges these labels. By treating the boys as individuals rather than as predestined delinquents, he attempts to break the cycle of secondary deviance. His efforts, however, meet resistance, both from entrenched institutional authorities who doubt that the youths can change, and from the boys themselves, who struggle to trust a system that has labelled them from the outset. In highlighting this conflict, Mudra captures a central paradox of juvenile correctional facilities: even though they are designed for rehabilitation, they often end up reinforcing the very criminal identities they were intended to erase.

V. ANALYSIS OF SALAAM BOMBAY!

Mira Nair's Salaam Bombay! (1988) offers a contrasting portrait of juvenile delinquency by shifting the focus to the streets of Bombay. The film follows Krishna, nicknamed Chaipau, who is abandoned by his family and left to survive on his own; he soon becomes immersed in a world of drug peddling, prostitution, and petty crime. In contrast to Mudra's enclosed institutional setting, Salaam Bombay! depicts a diffuse, street-level environment where labelling is informal yet pervasive.

In this unregulated social world, children are swiftly categorised by the roles they assume— "thief," "drug addict," "prostitute's child" labels that dictate how they are treated and what opportunities (if any) remain open to them. The film's stark realism highlights the brutality of such labelling: these designations stick to the children and make it nearly impossible for them to re-enter mainstream society. For Krishna and his peers, even being known simply as "street kids" becomes a stigma that marks them as outsiders regardless of their individual virtues or hopes.

From a labelling theory perspective, the street children in Salaam Bombay! are caught in a vicious cycle of deviance. Many of their initial misdeeds stealing for food or running drugs to earn money, can be viewed as primary deviance, driven by immediate necessity rather than a deviant self-image. Yet once society tags them as "criminals," these children are pushed toward secondary deviance: they begin to internalise the criminal label and continue in crime because no other identity seems available to them. The very institutions that should protect or guide them family, school, law enforcement are either absent or complicit in their marginalisation. Salaam Bombay! Thus, it lays bare the structural forces behind the labelling of these youths: extreme poverty and neglect, combined with social stigma, work together to turn abandoned children into the very "juvenile criminals" that society fears.

VI. COMPARATIVE DISCUSSION

Taken together, Mudra and Salaam Bombay! provide a nuanced comparative perspective on how labelling shapes juvenile delinquency. Neither film suggests that these youths are inherently criminal; instead, both stories show how society's reactions and labels can trap children in cycles of deviance. Mudra highlights the way a state institution can inadvertently manufacture "criminals" by treating children as offenders first and individuals second. Salaam Bombay! on the other hand, shows that in the absence of any protective institutions, social neglect and day-to-day survival on the streets label children as outcasts just as powerfully.

Despite their different contexts, both films reinforce a key tenet of labelling theory: juvenile deviance is socially constructed, not innate. The archetypes that emerge in these films the "rebellious" inmate, the

street hustler, the victim of circumstance are not born criminals but rather products of social labelling processes. By dramatizing these labelled prototypes, Mudra and Salaam Bombay! invite viewers to question the justice and efficacy of society's current approaches to juvenile crime.

Additionally, comparing the two films reveals their differing cinematic approaches to this issue. Mudra employs elements of melodrama and centres on a reformist hero figure to suggest the possibility of change from within the system, whereas Salaam Bombay! uses unflinching realism and lacks any singular "savior" figure, thereby exposing the bleakness of a life where help is absent. Together, the two films broaden the discourse on youth criminality in Indian cinema, offering a multifaceted critique of both societal attitudes and institutional practices in dealing with vulnerable children.

VII. CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the portrayal of juvenile criminality in Sibi Malayil's Mudra and Mira Nair's Salaam Bombay! through the lens of Howard Becker's labelling theory. By focusing on how each film depicts the labelling of children as criminals, the analysis showed that both movies construct vivid prototypes of juvenile offenders and reveal the harm caused by societal and institutional stigmatisation. Mudra exposes the irony that a juvenile justice institution despite its reformative intent may end up cementing criminal identities. Salaam Bombay! illustrates that when society utterly neglects its children, those children become labelled and marginalised in ways that trap them in ongoing deviance. Together, these films suggest that juvenile criminality arises less from youths' inherent tendencies and more from the labels and conditions imposed upon them by society.

In light of these findings, this study advocates shifting our approach to juvenile justice away from punishment and toward rehabilitation. By recognising the powerful role labelling plays in perpetuating youth crime, policymakers, educators, and filmmakers can work toward systems that emphasise reintegration and second chances over retribution. Films like Mudra and Salaam Bombay! play a vital role in this process: not only do they document the lived realities of marginalised children, but they also challenge audiences to rethink their assumptions about youth, crime, and deviance.

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