Laughter Through the Ages:
Role of Comedy Films in Shaping Bollywood

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Abstract

This paper shows that comedy films in popular Hindi cinema are flourishing into a distinct genre' in the post-liberalisation 'Bollywood' format of Indian cinemas. Comedy films have been an integral part of Indian cinema from the beginning of its 100 years history. These films evolved through different forms like slapstick, situational comedy, farce, satire, dark comedies and in recent times successfully entered the billion-dollar box-office club in its 'Bollywoodized' avatar. This change signifies a shift in terms of the production, distribution and consumption of the comedy films. This study aims to find out how these changes are understood and interpreted by cine-goers across select cities in India and US. The study conducted using qualitative methods - the focus group discussion (FGD) to discuss and analyse select comedy films and examine the central element of the genre's - story, plot, characters, and setting. The study found that most cine-goers identified with the content of these films as these referenced to either stories and plots from memories of Yester-yearsyester-years, or their present-day aspirations and dreams. As the preference for seeking pleasure and identification with the 'feel-good' experience of watching comedy films has created comedy consumers, the genre of comedy has emerged as a preferred entertainment format not only in Bollywood but in other media as well like television, advertisements, digital and recently in the Over the Top (OTT) platforms.

Keywords: Bollywoodization, Hindi films, comedy consumers, film franchise, comedy genre.'

Introduction

The term 'Bollywood,' connotes Indian Popular Hindi films primarily produced in the film industry based in Mumbai (Bombay). These films have gained massive popularity in the post-liberalisation era when due to globalisation, Hindi films found millions of global viewers and popularity beyond the geography of India. For decades, popular films in Hindi or regional

cinemas of India, have been characterised by mix-genre elements, music, dance routines, and melodrama. By mid-2000, bollywoodisation added lavish production values with growing digital technology, designer-branded apparel with India's new design industry and an emphasis on 'stars and spectacle, leading to enormous box-office success and 'enthusiastic audiences from India to West Africa to Russia, and throughout the English-speaking world'. (Tejaswini Ganti, 2013).

Evolution of Comedy in Hindi Films

Humour, as understood in Greek philosophy, has travelled far from its then interpreted as a 'malevolent behaviour, from which a civilised person should pull back.' It evolved with time to be associated with performance intended to cause laughter and is now synonymous with satire or humour in general. In the history of World Cinema, comedy featured prominently in the silent era itself. In India, it has been a consistent and essential element of film making and viewership. Nevertheless, film scholars and academicians have throughout played down its role and importance in the different Indian cinemas, especially the popular cinema. (Gooptu, 2011) The first full-fledged satirical comedy film on Indian screen, *Bilet Pherat* (London Returned), was produced in 1921 by Dhirendra Nath Ganguly in Bengal. The film was a satire on the life of a London returned youth – dealing with the issues of cultural mismatch of those times in a joking manner. Historically, films in the early days became very popular among the people in no time, especially after the *talkies* (sound) films came. However, comedy took a while to emerge – initially, comedy merely provided the theatrically driven, comic relief.

In the post-independence era, Hindi films introduced the comedians as a staple, appearing in the main plot at regular intervals. Most of their role was of slapstick variety and artists like Tuntun, Mukri, Asit Sen, Keshto Mukherji, becoming symbols of laughter and humour. Slapstick is a primitive and universal comedy packed with the style of aggressive and physical acts including violent scenes, rough play, and joke with a shared vision, for example, throwing a cake to face, crumbling house, falling into the sea, missing pants, slapping each other (Braindana, 2018).

It was films like Guddi (1971)and *Bawarchi* (1972), that brought situational comedy into the Hindi film narrative while telling compelling stories about the emerging middle-class families. The comedies led the era by Hrishikesh Mukherjee and Basu Chatterjee. These based on the gentle, middle-class lives in the cities. It reminded the people of the humour and comedy that are ever-present in our everyday lives, only that we miss it because we always concern ourselves with the seriousness of life. (Ganjoo, 2008)

It was in 1983, when Kundan Lal Shah came with *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaron,* the genre of comedy finally matured in Hindi films. This film produced by Film Finance Corporation (FFC), and classified under the label of Parallel Cinema or alternate cinema. It was not a box office success initially, but slowly it gained the cult status as the audience's taste for comedy began to change. In 1987, another masterpiece *Pushpak* hit the scene that got the audiences excited about the comedy genre.

In the 90s, as the society began to open up into liberalisation and economic changes, a new brand of slapstick comedy entered into the scene. Coming from the David-Govinda camp, these films popularised the use of Verbal comedy. Films like *Aankhen* (1993), *Raja Babu* (1994), *Dulaara* (1994), *Coolie No. 1* (1995), and *Judwaa* (1997) were super hits nonetheless.

Verbal comedy refers to a form of comedy that uses literary devices like the pun, or double meaning sexual innuendoes triggering humour. According to Phelps (2011), jokes conducted with the language used in everyday conversation. The film dialogues in these films used common words of daily life. The closeness to everyday life makes the film easily acceptable and understood by the audience. It is also in line with a purpose why people watch the comedy films, i.e. entertaining their self, without any involvement in complicated thinking process (Bishop, 2013).

The post-liberalisation of economic changes in the 90s gave impetus to the global production and distribution of Hindi films. Coupled with the entry of satellite television, "Indian filmmakers began operating in a new media landscape, where a vast range of options, including easy access to Bollywood and Hollywood films, through TV satellites and website downloads, was available to viewers at home" (Rao, 2007). This is called the '*Bollywoodization of the Indian cinema"* and seen as a shift, in which the Bollywood culture industry was born and became separate and distinct from the actual film production. (Rajadhyaksha 2003)

In the decade of 2000s, a stream of comedy films from director Priyadarshan, a Malayali filmmaker, entered the Bollywood clan, with re-makes of these regional films in the glossy Bollywood format that made a mark at the box-office with *Hera Pheri (2000),* that became a cult movie and grew into a film series with an equally spawned sequel, *Phir Hera Pheri* (2006). The comic genre grew to come full circle with the super-hit Munna Bhai MBBS,(2003) and an equally successful sequel Lage Raho Munnabhai(2006) which is now a franchise with a couple of more films made. Thus, began the grand entry of comedy films into the box office hit phenomenon.

Review of Literature

To develop a perspective on the given topic, this study examines some significant writings on Indian and Hindi film studies. It is essential to understand how there is an incongruency in the way films developed as a form and an industry and how they wrote about, especially in the academic context. Most of the literature on films in India, especially the popular films was first written in popular magazines and with a journalistic viewpoint. The academic focus on Indian films, that was led by the western scholarship primarily focused on the parallel or meaningful cinema that developed alongside. At the same time, the colossal popular genre largely ignored for over forty years of its prevalence.

M. Madhava Prasad, in his book, '*Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction'*, provides a comprehensive understanding of how Indian film studies were looked at from varying perspectives both in India and the west. The different perspectives have interpreted the history of Indian cinemas from various ideologies and aesthetics. The western film critics started writings on Indian cinema in 1956, when Satyajit's Ray's film *Pather Panchali* (The Song of the Road), caught international attention. The film won accolades in terms of the personal vision of the director, and 'these writers did not feel the need to situate this cinema in the historical context, a tendency that was encouraged by the perception that that context served, if at all, only as a backdrop of mediocrity against which the auteurs shone even brighter.' (Prasad, 98). Ray and other masters began the Parallel cinema movement, a term employed by film critics to denote the realistic tradition of filmmaking. (Prasad, 1998)

In India, the writings on popular cinema led by anthropologists, Indologists, and psychologists who located these films within the folk tradition and a form of popular culture.

Ashis Nandy, in his essay "*An Intelligent Critic's Guide to Indian Cinema*", says that popular films depend on the middle-classes for legitimacy and critical acclaim. These films tend to reflect and be protective of the cultural values of society. Its criticism towards any tradition is usually indirect, latent, or unintended. It reaffirms the values that are being increasingly marginalised in public life by the language of the modernising middle-classes such as consensual non-contractual human relations, community ties, the primacy of maternity over conjugality, relevance of the mythic over the historical. (Nandy 2012).

Ashish Rajadhyaksha's paper, '*'The 'Bollywoodization' of the Indian cinema: cultural nationalism in a global arena"* discusses the Bollywoodization of the Indian cinema, in which the Bollywood culture industry as separate and distinct from the actual film production. "Bollywood is not the Indian film industry or not the film industry alone," he writes. "It might be best seen as a more diffuse cultural conglomeration involving a range of distribution and

consumption activities from websites to music cassettes, from cable to radio, from New Delhi to New York." (2003)

Jyotika Virdi's book, The Cinematic Imagination, is based on understanding the central preoccupation in Hindi films with the notion of the nation. She analyses how this "nation" plays out as a prominent trope along the terrain of gender, sexuality, family, and community to show that there remains the fundamental untenability of Indianness or any national identity in Hindi films. This study refutes the earlier argument from Sumita Chakravarty, 'National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema 1947–87' (who identifies the national identity in Indian cinema by drawing on principles of Hinduism while investigating cinema as an impersonation or as a masquerade.

Rachel Dwyer's '*Bollywood's India: Hindi cinema as a Guide to Contemporary India'*, offers an interesting thesis that Bollywood cinema is a better guide to understand the realities of modern India than any other scholarly works. She bases this on the premise that films guide thoughts, aspirations, and attitudes of the emerging middle class in the country, who view their history through cinema rather than on books written by historians and form their political attitudes on films and not the speeches of their politicians. (Dawyer, 2019)

Shakuntala Rao, paper, *The Globalization of Bollywood: an Ethnography of Non-Elite Audiences in India,* examines how the new globalising Bollywood is shaping Indian identity and how non-elite audiences from the lower middle class and rural India understand these images. The paper contest that Bollywood films these days are representing the images that makes it attractive to the upper middle class diasporic and urban communities whose tastes, values, desires, and consumptions are reflected and re-energised by these films. The masses of the rural, weak, and lower-middle-class audiences find themselves distanced from the images and dreamworlds of Bollywood, and are less and less likely to consume them in the future. (Rao, 2007)

The "Bollywoodization" of Popular Indian Visual Culture: A Critical Perspective by Keval J. Kumar, traces the roots of the popular films today through its history from the silent era of film making, recalling the influences of different languages, genres, styles that encompass the making of Bollywood as we know it today. He points out the hegemony of the entire film industry into other new technological forms including the press, radio, television, music, advertising, the worldwide web, the social media, and telecommunications media while emphasising the rootedness of the form in the visual arts and practices of folk and classical traditions of earlier times.

In a recent paper, *'Bollywood's Religious comedy: An inaugural Humor-neurotics,'* Sheila J Nayyar's explores the nascent sub-genre of 'religious' comedy in Bollywood Hindi films. In hit films like *OMG!* (2012) and *PK* (2014), the author investigates the conventions or unspoken rules that license laughter "at" religion as well as how such films navigate India's cultural landscape, which is alive sensorily, with multiple religions. She looks at some of the typically Indian (which is to say, *not* merely Hindu) properties of the genre, which includes the notion of secularism in the subcontinent. Interestingly she examines the parallel texts produced by the actors' religions; and the saliency, ironically enough, of television to the films—of a portrayed tele-belonging. In this way, the review offers pedagogical guidance for academically using a divine comedy from the Bollywood corpus, while teaching film studies.

The objective of the study

a) To explore the reasons behind the popularity of comedy film genre among the Bollywood cine-goers in India and abroad, especially in the post-liberalisation era.

b) To examine how these comedy films reinforce and re-define some of the social values and norms in the globalised world.

c) To briefly map the growth trajectory of Hindi comedy films.

Research Design

The study conducted using secondary and primary data. The secondary data for the study collected from the web-based Hindi films database site, Movie Data Base (IMDB), which is an online database of films, television, video films, etc. owned by Amazon.com.

The first data collection was purely qualitative. The first data collection was purely qualitative. Using the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) method, data were collected using Zoom and Microsoft Teams platform to research four groups of cine-goers residing in the cities of Delhi-NCR, Bangalore (Karnataka) and Patna (Bihar) in India and one group from Palo Alto, in the United States of America. Each group had eight members, and a total of 32 respondents participated in the researchResearch.

The sample was selected using convenience sampling, and the criterion for selection based on their interest in watching films and agreeing to watch the selected films for discussion. For a close-reading of the film texts, three films from comedy genres were selected. These films have been commercial blockbusters in the past three consecutive years and high on popularity chart as per the internet. The films examined using Multimodal discourse analysis, where the analysis is not constrained to the linguistic analysis of texts but includes viewing

aesthetics and stylistics, which means to include the audio-visual discourse of the narration itself. (Janney, 2012).

The following three films selected for the study:

	Top Hindi Comedy Films - Box Office Grossers					
Year of Release	**Film Name**	**Budget (In Rs. Crores)**	**Collection Abroad (In Rs. Crores)**	**Domestic Collection (In Rs. Crores)**	**IMDb Rating**	**IMDb Verdict**
2019	**Housefull 4**	125	297	205	3.4	Above Average
2018	**Badhaai Ho**	30	225	135	8.0	Triple Blockbuster
2017	**Hindi Medium**	25	304	64	7.8	Blockbuster

The FGD sessions held after all the viewers had watched the films.

The film discussion guide prepared to discuss the following broad questions/areas:

1. Opening questions: Understanding the respondents' relationship with films: identify film-watching habits, how they choose, how they watch, how often, with whom, favourite genre' etc.
2. Probe questions: To understand the familiarity and likeness of the comedy genre. Discussions around the evolution of comedy films over time. How has comedy matured as a genre? Which is their favourite comedy, Hindi film, and why? Any favourite film directors etc.
3. Essential Questions: Questions about the film under discussion: Opinion, perceptions around the story, plot, characterisation, setting and editing of the film. Probe perceptions around social messaging, cultural layers, questions around characterisation etc.
4. Follow up questions: Comparing films, choosing and ranking, specific likes, dislikes etc.
5. Exiting questions: Personal opinion and critics opinion.

Brief Description of the Films under Study

The following are the three comedy films under study, with a brief description of the film plot: *Housefull 4,* produced by Nadiadwalla Grandson Entertainment private limited and Fox Star Studios, was a 2019 release which stood at number 8, in the global gross earnings for the year.

Based on the domestic net earnings, the film ranked was at number 5 in the overall Indian Cinemas ranking. Directed by Farhad Samji, this is the fourth instalment of the Housefull franchise, starring superstar Akshay Kumar in the lead. (Indian Express, 2019) It claimed to be the highest-budgeted Indian comedy film. The story is based on the theme of reincarnation, spanning a period of 600 years from 1419 to 2019. The plot begins in London where a set of three brothers are marrying a set of three daughters of a billionaire, in order to pay off a considerable amount of money to a gangster that they have lost accidentally. Things go as planned, and they plan to get married at Sitamgarh, a quaint small place in the heart of India. On reaching Sitamgarh, one of the brothers realises that all of them are reincarnations from 600 years ago and the wrong couples are about to get married. The rest of the story revolves around the truth of previous birth, palace intrigue of 600 years ago, their relationships with each other, and with the characters of this life, including the gangsters from London. The rest of the film is about how all the characters, one by one, realise their collective past and resolve the past palace intrigue in the present scenario. The couples come together, as per the previous birth.

Badhai- Ho, (Congratulations) produced by Junglee Pictures and released in 2018, stood at eight ranks, in terms of highest-grossing Bollywood films among the Hindi popular films of the year. Directed by Amit Sharma this blockbuster comedy film is a story of a middle-aged couple who have a freak pregnancy much to the disappointment of their grown-up sons – the eldest son, who is the protagonist, is himself planning to get married, while the second son is finishing high school. The middle-aged couple who initially rattled and a bit unsure of this sudden development, decide to have the baby. The rest of the story revolves around how this middle-class household tries to cope with their angry sons, other relatives including the son's fiancee's family, etc. and learn to embrace their embarrassment. The film reaches an exciting climax, as misunderstandings caused and relationships get threatened. However, it ends on a happy note as everyone is delighted with the birth of a baby girl in the family.

Hindi Medium, stood at number 4 in the ranking of Hindi films produced in 2017. The film produced by Maddock films and T Series and directed by Saket Chaudhary. The story set in Delhi, where a wealthy couple, who are unable to admit their daughter to a prestigious English medium school, manipulate the situation by pretending to belong to the working class, in order to get the admission through the individual 'quota' for needy children. The rest of the plot revolves around their struggles to adjust to the life of impoverished slum dwellers, their interactions with the genuine poor working-class people, and the efforts at not being caught as risky turns and twists to the plan occur. In the end, there is a twist in the tale when the couple realises the futility of chasing prestigious (private) school and admit their daughter to a

reasonably good government school that they refurbish by making a handsome donation that they can afford.

Discussion and Analysis

Demographic Profile

Out of the 32 respondents, 56% are females, and 44% are male.

65% of the respondents are in the age group of 18 to 25 years, while 35% are over 40 years of age.

All the respondents are ethnically Indian and belong to different parts of the country. In the NRI group, two members are second-generation NRIs, being born and brought up in the US; the other six were migrated from India more than twenty years ago.

All the respondents are educated and understood and spoke English, Hindi fluently. The NRI respondents regularly visit India and have families and relatives who live here.

The group of young people are either students or work in the Information Technology industry or the private sector. The older group comprises homemakers, professionals in government as well as in the private sector, and a couple of entrepreneurs.

The average annual income of the families in India is around 18 lakh rupees and around 200,000 dollars in the US.

Media Habits

All the respondents were avid cinema lovers – apart from watching Hindi films regularly, some of them watched world cinema including Hollywood, Iranian, Korean, Italian, and French films, as well Indian regional cinemas in Tamil, Telegu, Malayali, Bengali, and Bhojpuri languages. The older generation respondents, in India and the US, recalled watching and appreciated the films from Hindi parallel cinema of the 70s and 80s. However, they described themselves, primarily as lovers of Bollywood 'masala' or popular Hindi film. All of them enjoyed the comedy films and confessed to watching, reading and promoting the genre'. Some of them had watched most of the Hindi comedy films of Yester-yearsyester-years. During the discussion, they recalled earlier comedy films such as '*Padosan*', '*Amar, Akbar, Anthony'*, '*Shaukeen*', "*Khata Meetha'* etc. and made references to the dialogues, songs and scenes, from these classics. They acknowledged watching these films repeatedly on other media platforms such as television, OTT, and the internet. They also watch film-related programs and film music shows. While they watch the new films in the theatres, many said they also catch it on the television premiers at home.

The NRI respondents watched the latest Bollywood movies in the local theatres, as they released simultaneously, almost every week. The respondents informed that there are three theatres in their close vicinity that screen Bollywood films. " I read the review of the film and keep myself updated on the Bollywood news and gossip." This resounded several times during the conversation around how the NRI respondents decide which film to watch. The young NRI students studied Hindi films as a part of their curriculum for the Film Studies subject in college. " Many of my fellow students are non-Indians and enjoy the Bollywood films." Youngsters also watched Hindi films online, read and wrote film reviews, and engaged with the social media sites on Bollywood films. The standup comedy show was top-rated among the youngsters who watched these mostly online. The respondents also watched comedy shows on television. Almost all the respondents, including those from the US, had seen comedy show hosted by Kapil Sharma on Sony Television. They watched it with varying degrees of likeability. The program had this broad appeal due to the comic presentation and the film-based content. Laughter and jokes define the mood, and it is "an hour of non-serious and relaxed entertainment", as described by one respondent. Some of the respondents from Bangalore, who was familiar with regional films, watched Malayalam comedy films too.

Overall, the respondents watch a lot of Indian (Hindi) shows and films, using multiple media, and preferred comedy as an overall genre of entertainment. Interest in Hindi films among the respondents in the US is due to entertainment as well as academics.

Comedy films as Brands

In all the groups, the respondents discussed at length the different comedy film franchise started in India and could easily differentiate between the different franchise brands. These franchises have emerged in the post bollywoodized Hindi film industry and enjoy phenomenal success at the box office, with loyal fan clubs and growing viewership.

Among the respondents of this study, most of them turned out to be the fans of the Golmaal series. The Golmaal series (*director Rohit Shetty*), competed with other brands like the Welcome series (*Nadiadwala and grandsons*), Hera Pheri series (*director Priyadarshani*), Masti series, Dhamaal (Indra Kumar), Fukrey series, and Housefull series(*Nadiadwala and grandsons*). These franchises powered by the big stars of the Bollywood industry who are the face of the brand. The Houseful series belongs to the leading star, Akshay Kumar, while Ajay Devgan leads the Golmaal series. These production houses source content and directors from all over the country – often deriving the content from regional cinema. Priyadarshan, a successful Malayalam film director, who has made successful comedy films in the regional

language, now has entered the Bollywood space with the Heri-Pheri series and other re-makes or new films but produced in the new format with glitz and glamour that is popular in the international market.

The Golmaal brand holds the record of the biggest comedy brand in the Indian box office. As a comedy brand leader, Golmaal is the first-ever Bollywood comedy film to achieve the 200-crore mark feat at the box office. In comparison, the Housefull brand faced a lot of ups and downs. Houseful 4 was not only the brand's but overall, the costliest comedy film produced in Hindi, at a budget of rupees 75 crores.

In the discussion on the 2019 comedy hit, Housefull 4, there was a unanimous agreement that the film was "not the best product in the Housefull series". Earlier films of this banner were acknowledged to be more entertaining, " very hilarious and a non-stop entertainment, as Sajjid Khan directed these". In Housefull 4, the director had to be replaced by Farhad Samji, (Sajjid Khan got involved in a controversial me-too movement), which according to my respondents, was the main reason for the film's weak editing and 'falling flat' in some parts.

The plot of the film, however, was well appreciated. According to the respondents the story had all the successful elements of a typical 'masala' film, "It had the reincarnation story, the fantasy of medieval palaces and court intrigue, the London NRI connect that has been created with exaggeration and grandeur, using computer graphics and digital post-production technology." The reincarnation story has been an n immensely strong theme in Hindi popular cinema, since the 40s. Almost all the films made on this theme across the decades have been super hits of their time. Houseful 4 is the first in Bollywood comedy film on this theme – it also managed to include some contemporary social issues around gender identity, NRI's dilemma of returning home, the grand Indian wedding, creating a comic mish-mash of multi-starrer verbal comedy.

Majority of the respondents in the study came down firmly against the film. The criticism based in terms of craft, like 'being too lengthy', as well as the content, 'it is an over-ripe comedy, prankish escapades', and immature characterisation. The respondents pointed out that the character of the effeminate dancer or the transgender manager was shown in poor taste and were pure nonsensical, bringing elements of homosexuality only for comedy. Ultimately their narratives add up to the already existing ridicule towards the idea of it (Silveria, 2015). Even while comically representing them, the characters in question happen to be the 'gay' men. "The audience comically perceive them as a man lacking masculine attributes and becoming feminine and funny." (Borathakur, 2019)

There emerged another viewpoint, often taken by the brand loyalist, claiming it to be a perfect 'masala' comedy film – it has comedy, entertainment, emotion, excellent production value, great sets, visual delight, and a great story. The fans dismiss the argument on lack of sense and meaning by forwarding the argument that "comedy is for entertainment and not to look for deeper meaning." That it provides an escape from the stressful jobs or life, especially for the young cine-goers who enjoy it in the multiplexes on weekends, with their friends, one respondent provided me with use of metaphor to describe the feelings evoked by these Bollywood comedy films: "There is, after all, a need for comedy as a stress-buster – in a stressful life, comedy films that are 'no-brainers,' fill that space. These films provide a backdrop to socialise and 'have a good time' filled with fun and laughter. It argued that the franchise comedy films from new globalising Bollywood, recognise its audiences as the upper-middle class, urban (diasporic) communities whose tastes, values, desires, and consumptions are reflected and re-energised by these films. (Rao, 2012)

Variety in the content of comedy films

One of the significant insights on the comedy genre' came from the respondents from Bangalore who discussed that in recent decades, a wide variety of comedy films produced in Bollywood.

Comparing the three films under discussion, one can make this distinction. On the one hand, there was are the franchise films, whether the Housefull or Golmaal, that follow the typical Bollywood 'masala' format, with a big star cast, larger than life presentation and significant budget marketing support.

On the other hand, there are films like 'Badai Ho' which tell the story of the changing middle-class values and lifestyles that affect modern families. Another film that discussed in this context is 'Tumhari Sullu'(2018), a story around the housewife whose achievements are typically not noteworthy, although that does not stop her from dreaming big. Moreover, when the significant opportunities come, she does not lose her identity despite getting a glamourous media job. Resonating with the urban 'middle-class' cinema of yester-yearsyester-years (led by Basu Chatterjee and Hrishikesh Mukherji), that promised to create a world, which the spectators could recognise as their own (Prasad, 1998). In these films provincial North, India has re-emerged in popular Hindi cinema as a nostalgic site for conflicts around modernity, progress, and development. (Rao, 2019)

A yet another variety of comedy films, those who have leapt, are the ones that have integrated contemporary social issues, mostly about social hardships, the identity of women,

plight of dispossessed that have hitherto been in the domain of parallel cinema. ‘Hindi Medium’, the third film under review is a comedy-drama that raises a contemporary issue, educated in a prestigious (and teaches in the English medium) school is an essential determinant of status in the society; it underlines the prevalent conviction in today’s consumerist society, that money can buy status. The film was equally liked by the respondents from India as well as the NRIs, primarily due to its universal appeal. "In the US, we have the concept of the neighbourhood-schools, that leads to having good schools situated in the costly neighbourhood.”

“These stories of social issues, when told in the parallel cinema, carry a political edge to the textualised experience, within the dictates of realism” (Gokulsing and Dissanayake, 2012). The respondents from Delhi argued how the parallel cinema of yesteryears limited the viewership of realistic films to intellectual and serious film viewers. Nevertheless, the new-age comedy films which too follow the dictates of realism, but have evolved their unique style and techniques by embracing humour and laughter. This has expanded the viewership base, especially among the young multi-plex cine-goers, who too are vocal about social issues, mostly without intellectualising it. Among the NRI respondents, the film resonates very much within their host culture, as the concept of neighbourhood schools in expensive localities and private school versus public school issues are very much a part of their lives. "The film shows the commodification of education system that is prevalent in the west, and it is shown so convincingly by the actors. The comic treatment does not trivialise the issue but deep drives the message into the viewer's consciences."

Stories of the Middle-class families

The film ‘Badhai-Ho’ was liked by all the respondents, across age and residence. The story of the film has a fresh approach, which accepted as the most attractive element in the film. The film has received positive reviews and won two national film awards and the popular Filmfare awards of the year. As one of the middle age respondents said, “the surprising element of the story is that despite the young stars in the lead role, it was the middle-aged parents who turned out to be the ‘hero - heroine’ of the film.”

The film is a situational comedy dealing with this unusual phenomenon – the inability to come to terms with the fact that your parents have sex. (Guha, 2018)). The young respondent from Patna found the characterisation 'cute' but not unreal. Referring to the families known to him, he said, he knew of middle-aged pregnancy, especially if the couple does not have a son".

The respondents from the US also referred to the Hollywood film (Father of the Bride-II) where a middle-aged pregnancy occurs, but the focus is not on feeling embarrassed, but that of surprise. The discussion among the respondents shifted to the cultural issue in India, where sexual intimacy is linked to reproduction and thus age and family size. Sex for pleasure (that led to the freak pregnancy) frowned upon in public discourse. This view is shared in the film too by the upper-class, wine sipping and hard-to-please, mother of Nakul's girlfriend. “The story brings forth the double standards of the middle class in the Indian urban society, towards intimacy and romance among older couples.” As a middle-aged couple, Priyamvada and Jitendra make a lovely couple. Their bewilderment at the unplanned pregnancy is evident in their effort to juggle with the situation while managing the family.

“ The film subtly hints at the changing social values and brings to forth the matters of couple's intimacy and portrays a realistic image of a middle-class couple." said one respondent who was discussing the powerful messaging and characterisation of the film. Jitender a poet at heart and a regular middle-class family man comes across as a loving and caring husband. At the same time, Priyamvada is a typical middle-class woman with grit within her gentle demeanour. Their tender love story becomes a matter of social ridicule since society looks at the unplanned pregnancy as a deviation from the accepted social norms.

The discussants agreed that the film's treatment as a comedy film takes the lead. Despite engaging with 'pregnancy issue' in a comical way, it brings to the fore the deep-rooted gendered politics and the hypocrisy of the middle class. In the matters related to sex, men seen as 'macho' Jitender is looked up as a stud and love guru by his friends and contemporaries at a family wedding. On the other hand, Priyamvada has seen struggling to hide her baby bump, all the while being slut-shamed by her own family, especially the sisters in law at the same wedding. Similarly, while the male doctor who diagnoses the pregnancy, seems amused at the situation, the nurse is horrified at the news of the middle age pregnancy!

While discussing the layers of the film, the respondents pointed out how it is interesting to see how modernity and development in middle-class India have also concerned itself with the issues of family planning – often the messages on promoting the use of family planning products equate having smaller families with a modern outlook and economic prosperity. Subliminally, the film does raise the issue of having unprotected sex. This is best brought out by the grandmother who takes a dig on her son and how he forgot the lesson of ‘hum do humare do’ (government’s family planning message on having two children) and says, “*Apne aap ko sarkari naukar batate ho, Jab sarkar ki baat hi na samajh aai to intne saal se Naukri kaisi.”(*What is the use of working in government service if you do not follow their family

planning messages). The witty dialogues are the backbone of this well-crafted film. The news about the middle-aged Priyamvada's pregnancy does not receive the obvious congratulatory response either in the family – as the grown-up sons are shocked with disapproval. The mother in law cracks up to ask '*time kab mil gaya tujhe'* (when did you find the time to have sex ?) or among the neighbours and relatives who smirk at the news. The bafflement of their son, Nakul is well captured in his comical words " *ye koi maa-baap ke karne ki cheez hai'* (How can anyone accept this from their parents?)

Conclusion

In this study, the discussion around the growth of comedy films within the popular Hindi cinema, over the years, emphasises how the cine-goers in post liberalisation have changed. People take pride in the films they are watching and listening. They expect variety and seek entertainment through multi-media. Moreover, in the new Bollywoodized format, these comedy films have grown into a mature genre' having a distinct personality and fulfilling the didactic demands of Bollywood industry. This seen in the increasing numbers of comedy films that are consistently enriching the box office collections globally. The popularity of comedy films has had a cascading effect on other media as well, leading to the emergence of comedy as the preferred entertainment platform in India. Other media like broadcast, advertising, social media (stand up comedy)and now the OTT have adapted the comedy as an essential format to tell their stories. As a result, the content of the comedy has gone much beyond its slapstick, stress buster, no-brainer requirement, to embracing much more. Comedy films have successfully diversified their content to take severe social issues as well as concerns of the small town and middle class, within its fold.

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