

# Interrogating Gender Based Violence in Recent Bollywood Films: A Critical Analysis

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**Abstract** -- UN Joint Programme (UNJP) on Gender-Based Violence (GBV) Prevention in Southeast Asia, 2024-29 Data claims that it globally affects almost one in three women in her lifetime, against women and girls it is reported to be occurring at home, in public spaces, in workplaces and on online platforms too. It is a fundamental violation of human rights and a global health problem with considerable social and economic costs to individuals, communities, and countries. It is seen resulting in intimate partner violence, "honour" killings and feticides, childhood and adolescent sexual violence, sexual harassment, dowry-related violence, feticides, early and forced marriages.

Women's issues are central to every society, primarily because they go on to define all human relationships and social constructs and Cinema as a medium, more than Literature or Political Debate cuts across all social, religious, economic, class and caste boundaries to appeal to human minds. While intimate partner violence was long back addressed by Mira Nair in *Monsoon Weddings* in 2001, honour killing was featured in *Dhadak* (2018); similarly, a Gang rape victim's trauma was wonderfully dealt with, way back in 1978 in *Ghar*. In 2003, a film named *Mathrubhumi* undertakes female feticide and female infanticide to deal with gender imbalance and economics resulting in fraternal polyandry and bride buying in some parts of India. Likewise, while *Damini* (1993) an extremely powerful film where a woman fights for justice against brutal rape and murder of maid servant by her family inmates, *Mehndi* (1998) on the other hand, undertakes atrocities of dowry system and another film *Raja ki Aayegi Baraat* in 1997 deals with an old social evil practice of a raped woman forcibly marrying the rapist. Besides these many films have sought to break stereotypes like Marital rape and LGBTQ rights of Gay and Lesbian.

**Keywords**--adolescent sexual violence, dowry-related, feticides, forced marriages, gender imbalance, global, "honour killings", intimate partner violence, political debate, sexual harassment, southeast Asia, stereotypes, UN Joint Programme.

## I. GENDER BASED HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLENCE

According to UN Joint Programme On Gender Based Violence Prevention in Southeast Asia (2024-2029)<sup>i</sup>, violence against women is claimed to occur with girls at home, in public spaces, in workplaces and on online platforms too. It is a fundamental violation of human rights and a global health problem affecting socially and economically individuals, communities, and countries.

Women and girls who face multiple forms of oppression due to bias, discrimination and inequitable power structures related to their identity (e.g., gender expressions, diverse sexual orientations, ethnicity, caste, disability, migration status, etc.) are often marginalized and have unique experiences with violence. For example, women and girls with physical and cognitive disabilities may be more at risk of gender-based violence and can experience additional barriers in accessing support services. Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) on the other hand, remains the most common form of GBV, affecting up to 60 per cent of women in Asia and the Pacific region. National prevalence data demonstrates that across the region, the proportion of women who have experienced physical and/or sexual violence at the hands of an intimate partner over their lifetime ranges from 6 per cent in Singapore, 15 per cent in Laos and the Philippines, and 59 per cent in Timor Leste.

## II. UN WOMEN (2023). ASIA PACIFIC REGION EVAW PORTFOLIO UPDATE.

National studies have found similarly high rates of emotional and economic abuse perpetrated against women by an intimate partner. Women and girls are also at risk of non-partner sexual violence, with available lifetime prevalence data showing rates ranging from 5 per cent of women in Laos to 19 percent in Indonesia.

## III. TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED GENDER BASED VIOLENCE.

(TFGBV) is an increasing concern. A study by the Economist Intelligence Unit reveals that the prevalence of TFGBV is as high as 88 per cent in Asia and the Pacific.

While population-based data on the experiences of specific groups is limited, evidence suggests that adolescent girls, women with disabilities, lower caste women, ethnic and religious minorities, LGBTQIA+ women and migrant women are especially at risk of violence.

## IV. WAYS TO ADDRESS DRIVERS OF VIOLENCE (*OUR WATCH*)<sup>ii</sup> –

No single person or organization can bring about an end to violence.

A collective, national effort is needed, by addressing the drivers of violence against women across all areas of society. Individuals, families, communities, Organisations and systems (like the legal system) all play a role.

1. Condoning of violence against women must be questioned: There have been instances of MLAs, blaming the accused on the ground of what they were wearing or because the women went out in the night. Or if she was drunk or she shouldn't have fought back have been some lame excuses.

*Solution:* It is extremely imperative that fresh legislation and judicial laws are passed to ensure that appropriate steps are taken to give justice to accused and the perpetrators are aptly punished.

2. Factors that can weaken prosocial behaviour such as stress, environmental/neighbourhood factors, male-dominated settings, heavy alcohol consumption) and therefore reduce empathy, respect and concern for women.

*Solution:* Oppressed Women undergoing assaults from drunk husbands is a major apathy, or lacking freedom of movement, seeking education/employment need to be fought and opposed.

3. Backlash and resistance to prevention and gender equality (actions that seek to block change, uphold the status quo of gender relations, or reestablish male privilege and power): Women are warned by family elders to keep a low profile, and in cases of girls/women, facing molestation / rape, (majority of cases by intimate family members/known people) they are to keep their mouth shut and ignore.

*Solution:* Often such incidents are detrimental to mental and psychological health, hence both elder male as well as female members must be counselled/ motivated to allow girls/women to confide in them. They must be advised to treat the daughter with love and care.

Nevertheless, such issues are pretty common in poor families where in such low economic conditions the patriarchy cannot outdo orthodox beliefs and practices, moreover, they lack the agency to question/challenge in the court of law. Second category constitutes families where in the name of Honour, inter-caste marriages, mainly concerning upper class and lower caste marriages, often parents of such girls cannot summon courage to approve such ties fearing their community will not approve.

Such ties are unfortunately meeting dreadful end even today, leading to killing of the girl/boy; the glaring fact is the families where rape/honour killings happen, they might be partially educated or fairly educated: the social structure becomes the major reason of such crimes.

Literature and Cinema in India have had a strong influence on the minds of audience and Cinema especially as a visual and verbal medium has been one of the strongest medium in bringing change in the outlook.

My paper is a discussion on select Bollywood Films in India which because of the storyline and treatment have the propensity to undertake moving, sensitive issues concerning Gender Violence (among other subjects) and bringing considerable change in their outlook.

#### V. GENDER VIOLENCE IN RECENT BOLLYWOOD FILMS: A CRITICAL EXAMINATION AND ANALYSIS

Women's issues are central to every society, primarily because they go on to define all human relationships and social constructs and Cinema as a medium, more than literature or political debate cuts across all social, religious, economic, class and caste boundaries to appeal to human minds.

"I used to feel bad about being body-shamed: Yami Indian actor, Yami Gautam in a newspaper article says, "I want to tell aspiring actors that they should never fall for such (Body-shaming) comments. Keep honing your skills until you reach your goal." <sup>iii</sup>

Yami, who hails from Chandigarh had to face her share of criticism for her looks when she was new to the industry, but that didn't shake her morale. She says that they commented on her nose or dimple and that she is pretty but looks ordinary. 'She talks about how she managed to speak about her skin condition, known as Keratosis Pilaris, that she's been struggling with since her teenage years. The actor speaks on how she's struggling with since her teenage years.' She gives a revealing fact as especially in the glamour industry, retaining one's composure is quite difficult. Her message is that it is essential to support each other and accept people as they are.

**Body Shaming** is inherently tied to gender violence because of the power dynamics at play. It is frequently used to demean women who step outside traditional feminine ideals or to weaponize their perceived physical "flaws". Activists and Gender researchers highlight that body shaming is normalized in society as a way to silence, shame and subjugate women. Besides, body shaming overlaps with medical and state violence.

Recent Hindi film directors' role has been vital as they are seen quite vociferous in breaking the stereotype, the traits of femininity invariably believed to be submissive, adjusting for women. They are making films which are aiming at not just depicting strong, empowered women but they are creating men also who should take the lead to break the conventions; proving that the role of men is crucial in seeing empowered women.

In the ordinary life women face far more anxiety and stress owing to looks; while the girls to be married are put on display facing humiliation of being "judged", the matrimonial advertisements remain unchanged with the demand for not just fair but "milky white complexion".

Interestingly, Media plays an active role in promoting body shaming through a number of advertisements for promoting fairness for both genders, its 'Fair and Lovely' for women and 'Fair and Handsome' for men. While Bollywood heroes with their five or six packs make men insecure and ashamed of their bodies, the masochistic men/actors displayed in the advertisements of men vests tend to enhance youths' level of stress in their efforts to be like them. There are unfortunate instances of youths' male or female consuming fatal medicines or supplements or taking recourse to artificial methods to look attractive. Body Shaming attributes to Gender Violence as it not only puts disproportionate pressure to unattainable beauty standards, it amounts to psychological abuse ironically by intimate partners. This subject is very successfully treated in the film *Dum Laga ke Haisha* (2015).

**So, Prem is forced to marry 'fat and ugly' Sandhya (Bhumi Pednekar) because her B.Ed degree promises a fixed government salary for the in-laws - something they desperately need. And thus starts a tussle between the couple: Sandhya's struggle to seduce her husband and Prem's struggle to come to terms with the fact that he is married to an ugly, fat woman who thinks too much of herself. .... That is what sets *Dum Laga Ke Haisha* apart .... It is a love story. ... turned husband-wife. It shows that it gets messy when two strangers share everything, from the room to their bed, that romance can bloom on the banks of Ganga, ... *Dum Laga Ke Haisha* portrays all of that beautifully.<sup>iv</sup>**

It furthermore brings the subject of women becoming the victim of rape, molestation and acid attacks that bruise their heart, mind and soul, worst of all, it makes them suffer from a permanent injury on heart and soul: the fear of feeling unsafe on road and elsewhere in society.

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While intimate partner violence was long back addressed by Mira Nair in *Monsoon Weddings* in 2001, honour killing was featured in *Dhadak* (2018), a Gangrape victim's trauma was very sensitively dealt with, way back in 1978 in *Ghar*. In 2003, a film named *Mathrubhumi* undertakes female feticide and female infanticide to deal with gender imbalance and economics resulting in fraternal polyandry and bride buying in some parts of India. Likewise, while *Damini* (1993) emerges as an extremely powerful film where a woman fights for justice against brutal rape and murder of maid servant by her family inmates, *Mehndi* (1998), undertakes atrocities of dowry system and another film *Raja ki Aayegi Baraat* in 1997 deals with an old social evil practice of a raped woman forcibly marrying the rapist.

*2015 onwards, one sees films treating critiquing the everyday patriarchal notions like Thappad, Pink and Piku and more path breaking films*

*Thappad* very incisively portrays the trauma and despair of a woman slapped by her husband. Directed by Anubhav Sinha, produced in 2020, is not just about domestic violence, it brings to light the years of conditioning that a woman is subjected to by her own family and the society she lives in. It is about a fairly good, modern educated family residing in Metro, where Amrita, played by Tapsi Pannu, is seen as a happy wife, who chooses to drop her desire to pursue dancing career and happily takes care of all chores. Her life gets a jolt when her husband Vikram, played by Pavail Gulati, in the heat of moment slaps her in front of his several office guests they had invited over.

Vikram's only response is, "You know how things have been. I was too stressed last night."

But what is required of him, just a "sorry", he does not speak throughout the film. Sinha is not depicting domestic violence and its crudity, he is depicting Vikram, representing the patriarchal man who see nothing wrong in pouring out his frustration on his wife. It is a society conditioning that men can always justify their wrongs, whatever it may be. Its really commendable that Sinha undertakes this discourse of 'slapping', not as a mere everyday phenomenon. As reported by NCRB<sup>v</sup>, National Crime Records Bureau consistently, this holds as the largest chunk of all registered crimes against women, accounting to 27% to 31.8% of total reported gender-based offenses.



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Sneha Thomas, senior Research Analyst claims Delhi and Telangana recorded crime rates around double the national average of 64.6 cases per lakh women.

Sinha undertakes the most important issue that gendering that is stereotyping of gender roles happen early on, in households where boys are not encouraged to help in household work but girls are subtly, yet surely, trained to hone their gender specific skills and fortify their femininity. Amu's mother and brother are shown following stereotypical notions regarding femininity, hence they are unable to see rationale in her refusal to return to that home; but they get to understand eventually. Interesting angle is when Amu's female advocate is stunned to learn that she wants to file case for divorce just because he slapped her once; and confirms several times if she was sure; Amu tells her decisively, "Nahi maar sakta wo, ek baar bhi nahi" (he cannot slap even once). Sinha advocates clearly that a daughter needs support of the male members to seek justice and dignity and that any kind of violence is not trivial that gets validated when Amu says emphatically, "no, he cannot, not even once".

*Thappad* film also gives a lesson to the mothers to stand for their daughters and daughters-in-law and not reinforce age-old norms of keeping their marriages alive at any cost.

The film *Pink* (2016) even earlier than *Thappad*, came up with the subject of blatant prejudices of previous times, biased attitude towards the 'second sex', subtle and polished echoes of deeply-ingrained masculinity and patriarchy that have been the hallmarks of the so called postmodern era too, says writer Subhashree Mukherjee in the chapter "The Positivity of NO and Varied Shades of Pink".<sup>vi</sup>

The film takes up woman's condition in a metropolitan city and critiques the hypocrisy and indifference of society towards them buried under crippling patriarchy and misogyny. What sets the film apart is the emphasis laid on woman's consent in every action, it evinces assertion on right to bodily integrity, the basic fundamental right of a woman that women since a long time has been ignored. While the film *Pink* can be greatly recognized for making this breakthrough for women's integrity and respect, the achievement of the former film discussed, It becomes imperative to mention the film *Piku* (2015) which too deals with patriarchal interventions of an over-indulgent father who drives his adult daughter, intelligent and working, crazy with his endless demands, who judges her personal life, who believes women cannot drive, and an outsider makes Piku realize what she intended to change in her life.

Besides these few films have undertaken topics connected with marginalized prostitutes' and eunuchs as well as LGBTQ rights of Gay and Lesbian.

In this context, *Gangubai of Kathiawada* deserves greater attention and reverence as the director, Bhansali has certainly picked up a subject that blurs the line between respected and marginalized; as Gangubai insisted that prostitution should also be treated like a job that gives the employees right to take leave or say NO to a client when one is not inclined to give services. The film made in 2022 is a real saga of a prostitute whose life is presented in the film to showcase an unusual woman's power and strength. It comes close on heels to *Pink* (2016) the film that created an edge by emphasizing on women's right to consent, the issue is taken up with women in a city trying to equate their position with men. In the latter 2022 film, interestingly, prostitutes' right to consent is undertaken. The most crucial moment comes when she says in her speech in the climax scene of the film that because of them many of the wives of "respectable homes" need to be grateful to them as those husbands are ultimately returning to their respective homes, or else, she warns, the society will become a "jungle"; lawlessness will prevail. Besides, the film quite effectively undertakes the situation of 'hijra' (transgender-umbrella term) the film tends to critique Gender Binary and the social prejudice it has evinced from the very beginning, and makes us think of their status today.

The film, also undertakes the case of Razia, a transgender or a eunuch, quite conspicuously, He contests presidential elections of the region, against Gangubai, and Gangubai wins; Razia's defeat poses obvious question regarding marginality of the transgenders. He gets defeated by Gangubai, owing to a third gender; in this regard, Sonia Jayant in her paper,

'Eunuchs establish identity through Indian narratives', writes,<sup>vii</sup>

**Eunuchs are a unique social group who face multiple obstacles in societies across the globe primarily due to their sexual orientation and gender identity. Transgender has been pushed to the margin over the years. Its rather a grey area of the society as this group is misinterpreted.....**

The film beyond doubt depicts subalterns as Gangubais and Razias and calls to attention their marginal existence.

Another film, *Badhai Do*, (also released in 2022) is a film that intersects gender and sexuality as it takes love of same sex who according to stereotypical notion feel guilty and hence conceal their sexuality from everyone. Three film directors, at length undertake the subject of both sexes and enable the protagonists to counter societal and family pressure, and attempt to break the stereotype and accept the truth themselves, while making the society internalize it as "normal".



The film ran in theatres just after the recent lifting of Covid pandemic and audience appreciated it. Its reception at the international level has been really overwhelming which confirms the fact that other sections of Gender are receiving acceptance, LGBT communities are legalized officially but the real acceptance has to come from people. The film's initiative is commendable and on the social platform such films are certainly going to awaken people and sensitize them towards different Genders.

This film was screened at the 13th Kashish Mumbai International Queer Film Festival, which concluded on June 12, 2022, where central protagonist of the film, Rajkumar Rao who plays the role of Shardul said (TOI, Delhi Times):<sup>viii</sup>

**Sometimes, people have preconceived notions that why is a straight guy playing a gay character. I am glad that people from the community who saw the film, loved it. I have met so many people who saw the film and told me that nobody could have played it better than Bhumi (Pednekar) and me.**

Hindi cinema for a long time has depicted gay characters as laughing stock, such as in the film *Kal Ho Na Ho*, the maid servant, Kanta Bai suspecting the two actors, Shahrukh and Saif Ali as gay, shudders at the thought of their being partners. This is a glaring fact that gay characters have rarely been portrayed in Hindi films realistically and with sensitivity but Shardul in this film, *Badhai Ho* looks very real and believable, and so does the female protagonist, portrayed by Bhumi Pednekar. The film comically presents the two trying to work out a relationship together through marriage, pretending to their families that they were straight. But acting out does not go a long way as the middle class concern for fruit of a marriage (a prospective pregnancy) complicates the plot until the two are face to face with the reality of accepting the reality themselves, and internalize; finally announce to the families, the society that they are different and "not abnormal".

Both the films, *Gangubai of Kathiawada* (2022) and *Badhai Do* (2022) undertake Gender and sexuality which point to women and transgenders from the margins, who assert their sense of identity and garner respect which is a basic Human Right. Gangubai's story and her demands asking for customary living rights for sex workers perhaps stand significant in 2022 and later verdict of the Supreme Court that has issued a guideline where the police or the central force has got no right to harass or arrest a brothel in case it is raided for running unlawfully, there is a demand of sex workers getting protection and dignity; in fact the film getting National Award this year speaks volumes about people acknowledging dignity for them, across sections of society.

Similarly, in recent times, certain Hindi films have dealt with same- sex men and women such as *Raincoat*, *Fire*, *Aligarh*. *Lakshmi Bomb*, made in recent times is another such film that deserves attention for its bold subject, Lakshmi Bomb Review: <sup>ix</sup>

Story: Lakshmi is a tough and honest sessions court judge, and gets murdered by goons because of her crackdown on a notorious human trafficking cartel. How Lakshmi's death is avenged forms the crux of the story.

Review: The movie is a two-hour celebration of women's empowerment. The narrative in the movie tackles issues like dependency (on man), gender bias, sex trafficking and violence against women. And despite the endearing vision, the message is rather muddled as the film goes on. Lakshmi (Lakshmi Manchur) fights her way against deep-rooted connections between crime and bureaucracy, and finally indicts a dangerous criminal Vaikuntam (Prabhakar) after he was caught trafficking women. Her strong-willed actions cause a back clash to ensue and she is murdered by other members of Vaikuntam's gang. But for some weird reason Lakshmi continues to live with her parents (Posani Krishna Murali and Hema) and becomes a ghost whenever she pleases, killing members of the gang one by one.

Close to the heels of *Lakshmi Bomb* which admirably highlights the transgenders, Razia's pathetic marginality, in *Gangubai of Kathiawada* week back film, the story goes back several years, to one made in contemporary times, inevitably, forces us to examine, question and address the Gender binary today.

One film I saw last week entitled *Kathal* (2026) an ingenious storyline that actually deals with Missing girl incident which in the hands of brilliant director Guneet Monga comes as a light satire, apparently making powerful people a laughing stock as for their ego satisfaction they can make entire Police Team devote totally to search a culprit for stealing 2 pcs of 'kathal', popularly known as Jackfruit. Nevertheless, she critiques the socio-political system that compels the entire Police force to ignore other cases. The film is about young men and women of today, bent upon transcending the old order. The female Inspector who hails from a low caste poor family is courageous and stands by truth; she finds the route to Kathal mystery through tracing the missing daughter of the gardener who was being pushed into flesh trade. The film ends positively by the Court Judge (a female) appreciating the inspector's initiative to give preference to Girl's disappearance rather than making futile attempts at solving the egoist MLA's lost fruit.

The film very well points at Gender biases, like people in her neighbourhood (both men and women) judging the said girl's character by her torn Jeans, the Gardener is conveniently held as a thief because he is poor, the good looking Female Inspector who is asked why she had to become Inspector and the answer she gives is bound to put audience into a fit of laughter when she answers sharply, "Because I enjoy hitting people"

Guneet Monga, the popular producer of films like *Lunchbox*, *Gangs of Wasseypur*, *Period*, *End of Sentence* (2017) has once again directed a film that would force audience to think differently about social, political, caste and gender binaries. The Female Inspector is senior in position to her beau who also works with her and worst of all he is an upper caste Brahmin who conditioned by caste hierarchy, is hesitant to imagine of a wedlock with her. But with passage of time, he understands her values, the respect she has for poor and the destitute that emboldens him to resist his father's orthodox beliefs and realizes that not higher and equal hierarchy but respect for the partner has more value.

## NOTES

<sup>i</sup> UN Joint Programme (UNJP) on Gender-Based Violence Prevention in Southeast Asia: UN Women Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, pp1

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.ourwatch.org.au>, The Link between gender inequality and violence against women

<sup>iii</sup> Kumar, Vineeta, India.com, Home Entertainment, **Yami Gautam on being skin-shamed for having Keratosis Pilaris: Am used to people saying it, Lets conceal it, Let's Airbrush it** Exclusive, Feb 11, 2017, 8.06 a.m.

<sup>iv</sup> Sweta Kaushal, **"Dum Laga Ke Haisha review: The warmth and reality will win your heart"**, updated on Mar 1, 2015, 16: 53:55 IST, *Hindustan Times*

## VI. CONCLUSION

Gender discrimination, agency to girls to study to work and to get honour has to be the mission. While almost all kinds of gender violence have been showcased appropriately in various films, several others reinforcing gender and sexuality issues are being made to sensitize people at large, irrespective of Gender. Both the films, *Gangubai of Kathiawada* and *Badhai Ho* undertake Gender and Sexuality which point to those from margins demanding Human Right that every human being deserves to get. Similarly, recent Bollywood films have dealt with same sex men and women such as *Raincoat Aligarh* and many more. Directors producers eyeing subjects connected with Gender violence and Gender Equality need to act proactively to make many more insightful films. Film *Kathal* by Monga is an example for the film directors to emulate and use their powerful medium to bring about changes in their outlook regarding Human Rights. Gender Violence has to be countered, only then society can become healthy. More importantly, Gender prejudices have to be set aside and while changes in outlook have improved but marginalized sectors have to achieve many milestones.

<sup>v</sup> <https://ceda.ashoka.edu.in>, what India's 2024 crime statistics reveal 9and miss) about violence, 22 June2026 National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB)

<sup>vi</sup> "Shades of Pink", *Literature & Films: Adaptations and Beyond*, edited by Shubha R. Mishra and Urmila Dabu, Creative Books, new Delhi, pp112-24

<sup>vii</sup> Sarkar, Aninnya and Dr. Indrani Singh Rai, **Suppression and Subjugation yet Daring and Dynamic Representation of Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Gangubai of Kathiawad* as a Gendered Subalterm** (*Research Journal of English (RJOW)*) Vol-7, Issue-2, 2022, 14/6/2022.

<sup>viii</sup> Sen. S. Debrati, **"Badhai Do, People Told me that Badhai Do gave them the strength to come out of their Families"** Rajkumar, Delhi Times, Sunday, June 12, 2022.

<sup>ix</sup> Joseph, Deepu, *Times of India*, **"There are just too many illogical twists and turns in the movie for the audience to make sense of anything"** 11 March 2017