

# Migration and Hindi Cinema: A Study

Anagha Kamble

Assistant Professor, Department of History, University of Mumbai

## Abstract:

Migration has been an integral part of human history, several push and pull factors play a significant role for people to move from their place of settlement to a new area. Economic factors have played an important role in pushing people from the rural areas to migrate to the urban or semi urban areas in search of work. This migration has a profound impact on the individual, community and the nation at large. This article attempts to discuss the portrayal of migration from rural areas in Hindi cinema by highlighting the major discourse and pattern of societal reflection as depicted on screen. Through the content analysis of a few select hindi films, this study aims to explore the complexities of urban life and migration as portrayed in films.

## INTRODUCTION

Indian cinema with its history of over a hundred years has shaped the cultural landscape of the nation. The city of Mumbai has played an important role in the development of cinema in India. The screening of the first motion picture of Lumiere brothers took place in the Watson Hotel in Mumbai.<sup>1</sup> This event revolutionized the process of filmmaking in India, with several indigenous filmmakers embarking upon the task of filmmaking. The lives of workers and their struggle for existence had inspired many film makers. The farmers, laborers and the poor became the center of cinematic representation as India achieved its independence and moved towards a socialist model of economy under the leadership of the first Prime Minister of independent India Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. Workers were the fulcrum of the nation building project and this was reflected in their portrayal in Indian cinema which proved an important tool to carry forward the ideology of the modern nation state. Films like *Naya Daur*, *Paigham*, *Mazdoor*, *Coolie*, *Kaala Pathhar* addressed the changing dynamics of the labour struggles and played a role in bringing it before the public.

Movement of people from their place of original residence to another can be broadly understood as the phenomenon of migration.<sup>2</sup> Migration can be classified as international migration and internal migration. International migration refers to people migrating out of their country to another country. Internal migration can be further classified as interstate migration that is from one state to another state or intra state migration that is movement from one place to another in the same state. People have been on the move since the very early times. In the case of India, one of the largest known migrations in history was witnessed in the aftermath of partition in 1947. The character and volume of this migration coupled with the bloodshed and violence remains unparalleled. The factors which led to this movement of people were largely political. India has also seen the international migration of people which is now formed a huge diaspora.

Internal migration has been a distinct feature of India, largely caused due to the unequal development. The migration of people from the rural areas to the urban areas in search of better opportunities for survival has been voluminous.<sup>3</sup> India being an agrarian economy often has phases of drought and famine, lack of

infrastructural facilities and credit finance leading to impoverishment. The rural poor who rarely find other opportunities of livelihood, either succumb to poverty or migrate to the urban areas as labourers and workers. According to Sandeep Chachra “(Rural) males migrate primarily for economic causes, whether from one rural area to another or to urban areas to seek jobs. The job seekers to the urban markets are generally low income unskilled labour force moving in the hope of finding employment at these urban centres of labour demand”.<sup>4</sup>

Metro cities like Mumbai, Delhi, Kolkata and Chennai have seen a large influx of migrant labour from the rural areas. The city of Mumbai, is often referred to as the city of migrants due to the nature of its demographics which has people from across the country who have settled here, some permanently and some only to earn a living and return to their villages. The contribution of the migration to the city was recorded as high of 400 per cent during 1921-31.<sup>5</sup> As mentioned by D.P. Singh “The volume of net migration during 1951-61 was 600 thousand persons...migration contributed about 39 per cent of total population growth of Greater Mumbai during last decade of 1991-2001”.<sup>6</sup> Some migratory patterns have been circulatory, some linear, some voluntary and some involuntary all of which has changed the social fabric of the receiving cities. For nation builders and leaders of modern India like Mahatma Gandhi, the village remained a sacrosanct entity where they believed lived the ‘real India’ and the city with its elements of modernity and westernization was often a realm of dismay. Nehru on the other hand, had faith in the industrialisation and urbanisation projects while respecting the rural spirit.<sup>7</sup> Rural poor migrated to the urban centers in the hope of better livelihood. Cities for many, were a centre of hope, a place that can elevate all their financial problems. Many drew the distinction between *karmabhoomi* and *janmabhoomi* where the migrants worked in the city but lived a life, had their loved ones in their hometown.

## CINEMA AND MIGRATION

Indian cinema representing the ideals of the new nation, resonated with the philosophy of the modern nation state. Numerous stories have been recreated on screen depicting the poverty in the villages, the migration to the cities and the dreadful and traumatic life of the city. This discourse seems to have captured the cinematic imagination in almost all the films produced after independence. A return from the city to the village being the hope that lived within each of the stories. The name of film maker *Khwaja Ahmad Abbas* stands tall amongst all the stalwarts who depicted the migrant labourers' plight on screen. K.A. Abbas born in Panipat in 1914 was a journalist, screenwriter, director, producer and novelist. He was closely observant and remotely associated with the national movement from his very young days. In his years at the University, he was impressed with the writings of Bertrand Russell as well as the ideas of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. He strongly believed that Indian cinema had the potential of making artistic films which could reflect the social realities, but he was aware that there was a constant clash between making ‘meaningless films and making purposeful films’, which he said “was the eternal clash between the forces of progress and the forces of stagnation”.<sup>8</sup> One of his most famous movie was *Dharti Ke Laal* (1946) which resonated with the Bengal famine and the subsequent migration of people to Kolkatta. Another phenomenal film was *Rahi* (1953) revolving around the story of tea plantation workers. Raj Kapoor was very much similar to Abbas in his dedication to depict the lives of the downtrodden.<sup>9</sup> He desired to make films that could represent the reality in which one lived.<sup>10</sup> In Raj Kapoor’s *Shree 420*, an educated man migrates from Allahabad in search of a job. He finds his journey of survival in Mumbai filled with challenges. The film constructs a discourse of vices inherent to the city, to which the protagonist falls prey to. The movie narrates the unfortunate conditions in which a helpless migrant is attracted to the

world of crime. The title of the film presents a contradiction with '420' which applies to theft in the Indian Penal Code is prefixed with 'Shree' which is a title used with respect. In many ways Raj Kapoor attempts to expose the dark world of the white collared rich of the city and narrates the plight of the poor. The story and screenplay for Raj Kapoor's *Jaagte Raho* (1956) was written by *K A Abbas* and it was directed by *Amit Maitra, Shombh Mitra*. A very simplistic narration of a migrant worker who has come to the city in search of work. Failing to find any work by night, he struggles to get some water to quench his thirst. Humour is employed to showcase the dark reality of the city's rich and settled people contrasted with the simplicity of the rural.

Bimal Roy's *Do Bigha Zameen* (1953) is known for its socialist theme. The movie depicts the challenges faced by the poor farmer and his family who migrates to the city of Kolkatta. *Shambhu* the farmer, role played by Balraj Sahani, is unwilling to sell his land to the village landlord who aspires to build a mill nearby, the consequence of which he is forced to repay his former debt or he would lose his land. Not having the resources to repay the debt and the desire to save his land, he migrates to the city of Kolkata, becomes a rickshaw puller. The character of the city depicted has been one of exploitation and trauma, in which the migrant families are trapped. One of the very popular scenes showcases *Shambhu* racing with the rickshaw as the passenger lures him with an increasing fare, creates an emotional turmoil within the viewer whose life resonates with that of *Shambhu* who too are racing each day in the city to earn a better living and provide for their families. It portrays the lack of humanism among the rich city dwellers, for whom the life of a poor worker can be easily traded with money. It becomes a vicious circle for survival from which there is no escape. Despite all their sacrifices, they are unable to save money in the face of their daily needs and medicinal emergencies. The family after much struggles returns to the village empty handed. The last shot of the film, where *Shambhu* picks up a handful of soil from his lost piece of land, his action meets with immediate prohibition from the security. Farmers derive their sense of belonging from their farmland and it is the fulcrum of their existence. The farmers land is often revered like that of one's mother, *Shambhu* is now alienated from his 'mother' his land. he family turns back and walks away. The movie closes here without explicitly outlining where the family heads to. Probably they head back to the city where they continue to earn and live despite all its struggles and challenges.

Muzaffar Ali directed *Gaman* (1978), discusses the challenges faced by villagers living on the edge of poverty. Unable to find livelihood for their survival, and lured by the opportunities of the city, Farook Shaikh playing the lead role as *Ghulam Hasan* migrates to the city of Mumbai. As the popular saying goes, that no one sleeps hungry in Mumbai and can surely find some work. This being the driving ideology many filmmakers worked around this theme in their films. The film *Gaman* captures several shots of the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Terminus like many other films symbolically signaling the entry of the migrant into the city. The story unfolds with *Ghulams* desire to acquire a taxi driving license so as to earn enough money to return home. The nostalgia of home and the feeling of alienation in the city are captured through the various frames in the film. Through the other interconnected stories of struggle and failure a scary reality of Mumbai is unfolded on screen. The divide between the rich and the poor is captured through the varied shots of the film. In one of the shots the passengers in the taxi express their disgust at the migrants who keep flogging Mumbai. *Ghulam* driving the taxi is a passive listener to this conversation. Through this shot the director highlights the conflict between the "locals" and the "migrants" which has remained an integral debate in the politics of the city as well. The conditions in which the migrant poor stays in the city are contrasted with the high rise buildings as the *Ghulam* drives his taxi around the city picking passengers on the way. In one such shot, in the scorching heat *Ghulam* awaits in his taxi for his

taxi fare helplessly looking around at the rich partying on their terrace. His myth about the city is soon broken as he sees his friend lose his life in the struggle to survive. The *kaali peeli* padmini fiats running through the city criss-crossed by people pulling hand carts and buses and people racing to reach their workplaces as the song *Seene mai jalan ankhon mai toofan sa kyun hai, iss sheher mai har shaksh pareshan sa kyun hai*. The lyrics and the picturisation of this song captures the essence of the city of Mumbai. The climax of the movie is even hard hitting, when a defeated *Ghulam* finally decides to return to his village, reaches the railway station but realising the limited money in his pocket is unable to board the train. The shot taken by the director from inside the railway station through which *Ghulam* appears to be imprisoned in the city, caged in his situation and there is no escape from it. He helplessly watches the train leave the station and he only returns to live a life of sorrow and challenges in the city.

Hansal Mehta's *CityLights* (2014) is a story of a poor farmer from Rajasthan who migrates to Mumbai in search of livelihood. The events that unfold find Deepak Singh the protagonist and his family caught in the dark crime nexus in the city. Struggling to meet ends and find work to survive in the city, they are dragged deeper into the web from where they find no return. Deepak, determined to send his wife and daughter back to Rajasthan, agrees to participate in a criminal activity, finally leading to his death. Eventually his wife and daughter return to the village having lost everything in the city they had hoped would free them from their sufferings. *Citylights* exposes the dreadful fate of a man sucked into the world of crime which *Shree 420* produced several decades earlier does not. *Shree 420* rather provides a comforting end with the protagonist able to return to his life of normalcy, which obviously is not an option available to many as seen in *Citylights*. Lives of many are completely shattered and destroyed in the city amidst the struggle for survival and the romanticised dream of return to the village is never fully achieved.

## CONCLUSION

In the three films, *Do Bigha Zameen*, *Gaman*, *CityLights* separated by decades, one observes the common thread of migration to the city for a better life. The poverty and lack of opportunities coupled with the natural calamities continue to challenge the rural poor who are thus forced to migrate to the cities. The three films are not a just fictionalised imagery but narrate a tale of reality and tragedy. All the three films revolve around the central theme of return to the village after earning a livelihood. In *Do Bigha Zameen*, the family returns to the village only to realise it has lost everything it ever cared for in the village. The land which once belonged to them was now alien and they had become the outsiders of sorts in their own land, they walk away feeling rejected and sad. In *Gaman*, the protagonist, traumatised with the experience of the city, hopes to escape and return but that escape becomes impossible. While throughout the film, the shots expose the deep desire of return and his longing to meet his family, he is unable to board the train in the final scene. This signals the deep rooted challenges of rural poor who are trapped in a vicious web of the city and the village. In *CityLights* the struggles take a malicious turn as Deepak is sucked into the life of crime. The inability to make ends meet pushes the vulnerable poor towards the world of crime from where there is no return as is evident in the film where Deepak is killed, however he is able to secure the freedom of his wife and child from the dark horrors of the city. Though the return to the village is achieved, it is incomplete as they have lost their family member to the city. These films expose how migration to the cities from the villages is an inevitable aspect due to the lack of development in the rural areas. Anubhav Sinha's *Bheed* depicting the return migration to the rural villages in the backdrop of the pandemic further establishes how the migrant poor are left helpless in the city in the wake of an emergency without basic resources to survive and are compelled to rush back to their villages. Anuj Kumar observes, "The

film(*Bheed*) states that the market has systematically turned migrant workers into cheap labour and that they would return at the first opportunity”.<sup>11</sup> All these films evoke empathy and raise a social critique on the rural urban dynamics by highlighting the tensions within the real on reel. Cities despite their challenges and trauma continue to be the *karmabhoomi* for many migrants. In the recent years, popular hindi cinema has adopted a more nuanced depiction of the rural- urban spaces with films like *Swades* and *Peepli live* showing the complex realities of the village life.

## END NOTES

1. Madhavi Kale, “Screening Empire from Itself: Imperial Preference, Represented Communities, and the Decent Burial of the Indian Cinematograph Committee Report (1927–28)”, in Grant, K., Levine, P., Trentmann, F. (eds.) *Beyond sovereignty*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2007, p.191
2. International Organisation for Migration, <https://www.iom.int/about-migration>, accessed on 7 January, 2024.
3. Neeraj Kumar, “Inter-state Migration in India”, *Indian Economic Service Government of India*, [://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.ies.gov.in/pdfs/Seminar-neerajkumar.pdf](https://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.ies.gov.in/pdfs/Seminar-neerajkumar.pdf), accessed on 8 January, 2024.
4. Sandeep Chachra, “Government Policies and Rural Urban Migration”, *Indian Anthropologist*, Vol 23, No. 1, 1993, p.74
5. D.P.Singh, Migration in Mumbai: Trends in Fifty Years, *Demography India*, Vol. 36, No. 2 ,2007, p. 315, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/346438710\\_Migration\\_in\\_Mumbai\\_Trends\\_in\\_Fifty\\_Year\\_s](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/346438710_Migration_in_Mumbai_Trends_in_Fifty_Year_s), accessed on 8 January, 2024
6. D.P.Singh, Migration in Mumbai: Trends in Fifty Years, *Demography India*, Vol. 36, No. 2 ,2007, p. 317, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/346438710\\_Migration\\_in\\_Mumbai\\_Trends\\_in\\_Fifty\\_Year\\_s](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/346438710_Migration_in_Mumbai_Trends_in_Fifty_Year_s), accessed on 8 January, 2024.
7. Surinder Jodka, Nation and Village: Images of Rural India in Gandhi, Nehru and Ambedkar, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 10-16 August, 2002, Vol. 37, No. 32, pp. 3343-3353, accessed on 4 January, 2024
8. ‘Interview K.A. Abbas, Part 1-5’. Transcript of the Audio Archive of Khwaja Ahmad Abbas at Centre for South Asian Studies, University of Cambridge, *Khwaja Ahmad Abbas Memorial Trust*, <https://www.kaabbas.com/about-ka-abbas.php>, accessed on 6 January 2024.
9. Amborish Roychoudhury, ‘Once Upon a Cinema: The Making of Raj Kapoor’s Jaagte Raho’, *Firstpost*, <https://www.firstpost.com/entertainment/once-upon-a-cinema-the-making-of-raj-kapoors-jaagte-raho-11151031.html>, accessed on 11 January 2024.
10. Priya Joshi, *Bollywood’s India: Public Fantasy*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2015, p.20
11. Anuj Kumar, “Bheed’ Movie Review: Anubhav Sinha’s Cry for Social Justice Needs To Be Heard”, *The Hindu*, 24 March, 2023, <https://www.thehindu.com/entertainment/movies/bheed-movie-review-anubhav-sinhas-cry-for-social-justice-needs-to-be-heard/article66656164.ece>, accessed on 5 January, 2024.