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Analysing a Paradigm Shift in the Agency of Women in the Movies Dangal and Panga

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Abstract:
Cinema has become an essential and indispensable part of almost everybody's life in today's world. Cinema, also known as films and movies, is a potent medium that has enormous power to influence people's thoughts, beliefs, and behaviour. Along with influencing many other aspects of life, cinema in India has immensely contributed in shaping society's perception with respect to women. This change has occurred mainly due to a general awakening about the rights of women and their empowerment and there is no denying the fact that cinema has played a major role in its own respective way in creating this awakening. Overall, the scenario has drastically changed for good and one can come across lots of stories of successful women, both in reel as well as in real life. The present paper examines a paradigm shift in the portrayal of women characters in Indian cinema, and how this shift reflects the evolving social and cultural norms of gender roles in society. The study employs a qualitative approach, analyzing the themes, characters, and dialogues in two recent Hindi movies to assess the depiction of women's agency and empowerment in the Indian patriarchal structure. The findings indicate that both movies depict women as strong, independent, and capable of achieving their dreams, challenging traditional gender roles and societal expectations. The study also highlights the impact of such movies on the audience and their perception of gender roles and women empowerment. The research concludes that the portrayal of new images of capable and powerful women in cinema can play a crucial role in promoting gender equality and empowerment, shaping societal attitudes and beliefs. The paper suggests further research on the impact of such movies on society and the need for more inclusive and diverse representation of women in Indian cinema.
Keywords

Agency, Gender stereotypes, Male domination, Women Empowerment

1. Introduction

Ever since its inception, Cinema has fascinated and mesmerized cine-goers with varied aspects of its making as per the respective taste of its viewers. Be it direction, script, acting, story, songs, music, dialogues or various technical features, the viewer has always felt enthralled by watching movies. People primarily go to cinema halls for having fun, entertainment and respite from the routine humdrum of life but cinema's scope cannot be circumscribed to simply calling it a source of amusement, enjoyment and a means of diversion from the travails of life. Cinema is much more than only a way to have fun as it carries within it the vital potential of questioning and challenging the unwholesome patterns of thoughts, behaviour, customs and traditions both at individual and social level. In fact, in its endeavour of encompassing a variety of themes from the social and cultural life of a

country, it becomes a cultural phenomenon that mirrors a country's customs, mores and traditions. The Indian film industry, alternatively popular as Bollywood, has carved a niche for itself in global arena for addressing a variety of issues related to human life and showing the regional, cultural and lingual diversity of India. It has catered to the diverse interests of public by producing movies extending its wings across all genres and themes. Ever since its coming into vogue, Indian cinema has continuously evolved and has tried to keep pace with all changing trends in the social, political and cultural life of Indian society.

From the beginning of Indian cinema and its early phases in the 1930s and 1940s to the present day, there have been numerous shifts in content and technology. The earlier cinematic art of acting and dialogue-delivery which took place at a very slow pace has changed to fast action and speedy dialogues. The thematic content of the movies also underwent a significant change, shifting from early family dramas to many pertinent social issues related to class, caste and gender. In addition to technological advancement, a significant shift occurred in the way characters were portrayed in Indian cinema. Accordingly, the portrayal of women characters in Indian cinema has also become more complex, nuanced, and empowered over time (Chakraborty 263). Indian cinema has become more experimental and diverse in recent years owing to multiple factors including wide-spread awareness and change in general perception towards the hitherto marginalized sections of society. It has regularly been thought of as one of the most powerful instruments of social change by focusing on gender and other social issues and by engaging the audience in a participative discourse on these issues which require focus, attention and change for the restructuring of society making it more equitable. This research is significant as it contributes to the existing literature on the portrayal of women in Indian cinema and its impact on society. The paper highlights the need for more inclusive and diverse representation of women in Indian cinema and emphasizes the role of cinema in shaping societal attitudes and beliefs towards gender roles.

It is a known fact that in the pre-independence times, the women in India stood relegated to fringes and were seen only as a supporting character, both in real life and in reel life. It was considered that the prime responsibility of women was to bear and rear children, and manage household. Men were everywhere in the primary position with society treating women in a subservient manner and her position was only secondary and all avenues of her personal growth as a human being endowed with some unique and appreciable qualities and capabilities were withheld from her. Even equipping her with education was not considered essential as staying within the boundaries of parental or marital house was supposed to be her sole identity, destiny and aim of life. However, gradually, with emergence of changing socio-economic trends and in the wake of liberal attitudes taking place in every realm of life, the societal attitudes with respect to women too underwent a change. Along with a radical shift in perceptions about her role in personal and social sphere, women got the much needed and much awaited opportunity to educate herself and were able to showcase their acumen and mettle, both physical and mental. In the present times, women have taken the reins of their lives in their own hands and are no longer dependent on their male counterparts. Education also has played a major role in providing new horizons and avenues to women for forging their own identity.

If one makes a critical survey of the movies of the first eight decades of the twentieth century, one can easily track a general trend of movies where the leading lady of the movie was presented mainly as the romantic counterpart of the male protagonist of the movie with no concrete identity of her own. The movies were also mainly male-centric with the pivotal

focus of the movie revolving around the life, career and choices of the male characters of the movie. With the passage of time, as the conventions of the society changed, this change got reflected in the movies also, with movies beginning to embrace the change in society and casting women in many new and multi-dimensional images. The 1982 movie *Arth* is considered to be a ground-breaking movie as it dealt with the story of a woman whose unsuccessful married life does not lead her into self-pity and she takes a stand and decision to start her life afresh. After *Arth* and its vast popularity and acclaim, the world of Hindi cinema was never the same again as far as movies related to gender issues was concerned.

The movies of the earlier times, largely speaking perpetuated gender stereotypes but this cinematic scenario has changed for better. Slowly, one finds female characters being given roles which project them as empowered women, having the agency of making their own decisions about their lives. They are the women, who in their much required and changed roles, not only stand against injustice of all kinds but are also successful women and their lives are a saga of perseverance and achievements. The movies with new positive images of successful and independent women exemplify the paradigm shift in societal perception vis-a-vis women and are a reflection of the gradual change in the patriarchal and hegemonic norms of the society in real life and its subsequent manifestation in the roles written for women in reel life. One can notice that though the movies of previous century portrayed women as meek and submissive characters, the movies of 2010's and later period portrayed women as educated, strong, capable characters free to live life on their own terms and conditions.

2. Literature Review

Several studies have been conducted to examine the portrayal of women in Indian cinema and the impact it has on society. According to Jyotsna Kapur, the portrayal of women in Indian cinema has evolved from their being submissive and passive to being more empowered and assertive over the years. However, this evolution has been slow and not consistent across all genres and regions of Indian cinema (1-10). Recent Bollywood movies, such as *Dangal* (2016) and *Panga* (2020) have received critical acclaim for their portrayal of women as having evolved as independent characters who are able to unfetter themselves from patriarchal bonds. The most encouraging, heartening and laudable aspect of these movies is that it is the figures of patriarchy, father, husband and son, that are presented in new roles where they instead of creating hurdles in the evolvement of their daughters, wives or mothers are shown as supporting and encouraging them to forge their new identities as successful women out of the domain of domestic life. According to Joshi and Sharma, *Dangal* showcases the story of a father who trains his daughters to become world-class wrestlers, challenging traditional gender roles in Indian society. Similarly, *Panga* tells the story of a mother who decides to make a comeback to professional sports, challenging the societal expectation that women should prioritize their family over their careers (1-7).

Several other studies have also highlighted the impact of these movies on the audience's perception of women and their agency. According to Patwardhan and Chandran, movies like *Dangal* and *Panga* have encouraged women to chase their dreams and challenge the societal norms that limit their potential. These movies have also sparked conversations about gender equality and women's empowerment in India (129-136). Both movies exemplify that be it their dreams, or be it the society's patriarchal attitude towards women, today's women will not take it sitting down helplessly. They will not only stand against gender prejudices but will also motivate other women to do so.

However, some researchers have criticized the limited scope of such movies and the perpetuation of patriarchal norms in Indian cinema. For instance, Banerjee argues that even though movies like *Dangal* and *Panga* are commendable, they are still focused on the concept of an exceptional woman who is successful in a male-dominated world. Banerjee suggests that Indian cinema needs to explore a wider range of narratives that challenge patriarchal norms and allow for more diverse representations of women (59-71).

The literature suggests that while Indian cinema has made some progress in portraying women as empowered and capable individuals, it still has a long way to go in terms of challenging patriarchal norms and promoting gender equality. The movies *Dangal* and *Panga* serve as encouraging examples of the shift in patriarchal perceptions, but also highlight the need for more diverse and nuanced representations of women in Indian cinema.

The power of cinema in shaping human behaviour is evidenced by the fact that it is one of the most popular forms of entertainment in India, with millions of people watching movies regularly and getting inadvertently influenced by its varied social messages. Studies have shown that movies can influence people's attitudes, beliefs, and behaviour, both positively and negatively. For example, a study by Gupta and Sinha found that making of movies with themes of violence and sexual exploitation of women was associated with increased aggression and antisocial behavior among adolescents in India (291-294). Another study by Jadhav and Halkare found that movies can influence people's perceptions of gender roles, with movies often reinforcing traditional gender stereotypes and patriarchal values (434-448). However, a study by Srivastava and Kumar found that watching movies with positive messages about social issues such as gender equality and women empowerment can increase people's awareness and support for these issues (171-176).

Indian cinema must be credited with the making of so many movies that strongly impacted the views and mindsets of the viewers for the betterment of society. . For example, the movie, *Prem Rog* (1982) centered on the theme of widow remarriage with the story of a girl of an affluent but conservative family losing her husband a day after her marriage. The death of her husband causing her to be labeled as a widow at a very young age steers the course of her life in to observing all customs and rituals prescribed for widows in Hindu society starting from the conservative voices insisting on the tonsuring of her beautiful long hair to her confinement in a solitary room with provisions of cooking very basic food for herself. It takes time for the simple innocent girl to come to terms with her grief and the sudden and unfortunate upheaval in her life but she is gradually shown as getting accustomed to the stereotypical standards of society for widows. Her life gets a new lease of life after her remarriage for which her society permits her after a lot of contradiction and bloodshed in the movie. Another movie on the theme of widow remarriage was *Baabul* made in 2006. Similarly, many movies were made to address the position of women in society as prostitutes. The movie *Gangubai Kathiawadi* (2022), a recent movie has also addressed the same issue in a highly sensitive manner. The movie, *Pink* (2016) addressed the issue of sexual harassment of women in Indian society where women still have the onus on them to prove themselves as simple and chaste girls if they stepping out of the boundaries of their parental homes live independently having established their identity as career oriented working girls with their marital status still as single. The movie dealt with the theme of gender equality and was a powerful statement that women in difficult and tabooed situations of sexual assault can stand up for themselves and seek justice. *Pad Man* (2018) was another movie that took the tabooed theme of   menstruation, a fact of female biology but surrounded with mysterious

proscriptions of any talk about it in public, and promoted the importance of menstrual hygiene. The movie encouraged women to break free from societal stigmas and promoted the need for education and awareness on these tabooed issues. It goes without saying that movies dealing with societal stereotypes and misconceptions have a direct bearing on the viewers and go a long way in having a powerful influence on mass behaviour, shaping or shifting their attitudes, beliefs, and actions in various ways. Therefore, it is imperative for the film-makers to be sensitive about the influence of movies on viewers mind and to be extra careful in using this power in the most responsible manner, as movies enjoy the undisputed reputation of creating a positive change in society.

Patriarchy as a persistent force: The Depiction of male dominance in Hindi Cinema

Male domination as one signifier of patriarchy has been a recurring theme in Hindi cinema formany years. Men holding indisputable power and control over women is often portrayed as a norm in society and women's silent acquiescence to male hegemony is as normally taken for granted. Male domination on silver screen can manifest itself in various forms, such as male characters dominating the screen time in the form of more dialogues and action given to them, while whatever limited screen time is given to female characters is in accordance with their relation in the movie to some male character in the form of husband, father, son ,lover or boss in the office, thereby relegating them either to supporting roles or to passive, docile and submissive roles.

Hindi movies are replete with instances of male hegemony; however, one example of male domination in Indian cinema is the 1975 movie *Sholay*. In the movie, the two main male protagonists, Veeru and Jai, are portrayed as macho figures who are capable of confronting and defeating an entire gang of hardcore dacoits and dominate the main plot of the story while the female characters, Basanti and Radha, are there in the movie to serve the purpose of mere love interests of these two male protagonists.
Another example is the 1994 movie *Mohra* in which the female protagonist is portrayed as an educated woman but is projected as a woman facing situations which require the help, support and intervention of male characters. The recent movie *Kabir Singh* is another example of male domination in Indian cinema. The movie portrays the male protagonist as an aggressive and dominant figure who controls and abuses his female partner. The movie was criticized for glorifying toxic masculinity and promoting misogyny (Banerjee 48-52). Male domination as persistent feature in Hindi cinema, often portraying men as dominant figures and women as passive and submissive entities reinforces gender stereotypes and perpetuates societal norms that uphold male superiority. While there have been efforts to challenge this portrayal in recent years, it remains an issue that needs to be addressed in Indian cinema.

Role of feminist movements in changing the perspective about women:
Feminist movements have had a significant impact on changing the perception about women in India. They have challenged traditional gender norms, advocated for women's rights and representation in various fields, and raised awareness about issues such as gender-based violence and discrimination. For example, the "Women's suffrage movement" in India began in the early 20th century and sought to secure the right to vote for women. The movement helped to challenge the notion that women were not capable of participating in the political process and helped to pave the way for greater political representation for women in India. Similarly, "Me Too movement" which began in the US in 2017, also had a significant impact in India. Women came forward with their experiences of sexual harassment and assault,

leading to a wider conversation about the pervasive nature of gender-based violence in India. The movement helped to challenge the culture of silence around sexual harassment and highlighted the need for better laws and policies to protect women from harassment and violence. These are just a few examples of how feminist movements have changed the overall perception of women in India. While there is still a long way to go in achieving gender equality in India, these movements have helped to raise awareness and create positive change.

Evolution of the role of Women in Indian cinema in the last 75 years:
Evolution and change has always remained an inevitable part of any society and civilization and is all the more crucial for modern societies. Over the past 75 years, the role of women in Indian cinema has also undergone significant change. Ever since the emphasis on women empowerment and equality by feminists and other progressive segments of society, the portrayal of women in Indian cinema has also come under scrutiny and has become a topic of discussion and concern because of cinema's significant role in affecting the view-points of its audience. In its long history of nearly more than hundred years, Indian cinema, over the years, has woven the stories of educated and empowered women in its main story line and has given more screen space to women to such an heartening extent that sometimes, woman is the central figure of the story and her emotions, dreams, aspirations and ambitions become the core theme of the movie. The presentation of women on silver screen has evolved significantly as, compared to the early years of Indian cinema when women were portrayed in subordinate and submissive roles having little agency of their own, the movies of the twenty first century have presented women as emancipated from the age old shackles of gender stereotypes and conservatism and women are portrayed emerging as strong, self-reliant and empowered to make their own choices about the way they want their lives to be. The tolerance and acceptability of the viewers has also evolved with respect to women with an increasing sense of women in such novel roles as something normal and not an aberration in real life too.

Several studies have been conducted on the evolution of the role of women in Indian cinema. In their study, Desai and Mazumdar examined the portrayal of women in Indian cinema from the 1940s to the 2000s. They found that the role of women in Indian cinema has undergone a significant transformation. In the early years of Indian cinema, movies such as *Mughal-e-Azam* and *Shree 420* portrayed women as docile and subservient, reinforcing traditional gender roles and patriarchal values. In recent years, movies such as *Piku, Queen,* and *Pad Man* have challenged traditional gender roles and have portrayed women in a more nuanced and progressive manner. These movies have depicted women as strong, capable, and independent individuals who are capable of making their own choices and charting their own paths in life (122-136).

Another study conducted by Joshi analyzed the portrayal of women in Indian cinema from the 1950s to the 2010s. Joshi found that the role of women in Indian cinema has undergone a significant shift. In the early years of Indian cinema, women were often portrayed as damsels in distress or as mere objects of desire. However, over time, the portrayal of women in Indian cinema has become more complex, with women being shown as strong, independent, and capable of making their own decisions (1-12).

In their study, Rathore and Mathur analyzed the portrayal of women in Indian cinema from the 1970s to the 2010s. They found that the portrayal of women in Indian cinema has become more progressive over time. Women are now portrayed as more than just love interests or objects of desire. They are shown as having their own dreams, aspirations, and ambitions (1-9).

Overall, these studies suggest that the portrayal of women in Indian cinema has undergone a significant transformation over the years in accordance with the changes affecting the lives of women in actuality. Women are no longer depicted in conventional images of subdued, submissive and subservient but are shown as educated and career-oriented women who are financially independent and more empowered than ever before to question and challenge the rationale of giving her a secondary status in society. With education playing a tremendously significant role in giving women a new and respectable identity, the society also has become more progressive and resilient as far as gender equality is concerned.

Discussion:
Movies have a powerful influence on human behaviour, as they shape our thoughts, emotions, and actions. Indian movies are no exception to this, as they have a significant impact on the thought processes of people in India. They serve as a medium for conveying cultural values, beliefs, and attitudes and can shape societal norms and behaviour.

The portrayal of women in Indian cinema has been a topic of debate for a long time, with many scholars and feminists discussing how it impacts the perception of women in society. However, with the emergence of new-age cinema, there has been a shift in the agency of women characters. This research aims to analyze the paradigm shift in the agency of women in the movies *Dangal* and *Panga* and how it impacts the idea of women empowerment.

Dangal (2016) is a movie that tells the story of the Phogat sisters, Geeta and Babita, and their journey of becoming successful wrestlers in India. The movie shows how they overcame various obstacles and societal gender proscriptions to achieve their goals. The movie begins with Mahavir Singh Phogat, a former wrestler who was unable to fulfill his own dream of winning a gold medal for India, deciding to train his daughters in wrestling. He faces resistance from his family and community, who believe that wrestling is not a suitable sport for girls. Despite this, he is determined to see his daughters succeed and puts them through rigorous training. Geeta and Babita initially struggle with the training and the sport, but they eventually start to excel. They compete in various tournaments and win medals, with Geeta becoming the first Indian female wrestler to win a gold medal at the Commonwealth Games.

Throughout the movie, the Phogat sisters face various challenges and obstacles, including discrimination, gender stereotypes, and societal pressure. However, they never give up and continue to work hard towards their goal. Their journey shows the importance of perseverance, hard work, and determination in achieving success. The movie promotes the idea of gender equality and challenges traditional gender roles, showing that women can achieve great things if given the opportunity and support.

In addition to the challenges faced by the Phogat sisters in their journey towards becoming successful wrestlers, *Dangal* also sheds light on the broader societal issues that women in India face. The movie highlights the prevalent gender bias and discrimination that women face in various spheres of life, including sports.

The movie also shows the Phogat sisters getting full support from their father, a patriarchal figure, who takes lead in breaking down gender stereotypes and challenging traditional gender roles for materializing his dreams and aspirations for the success of his daughters. The Phogat sisters, encouraged by their father, get the strength to refuse to be defined by their gender and instead focus on their passion and talent for wrestling. Their journey becomes an inspiration for other young girls to pursue their dreams, despite the societal expectations and norms that may hold them back. Mahavir's unwavering support and encouragement for his daughters played a critical role in their success. The movie highlights the importance of supportive families and communities in empowering women. The movie also shows how

women can overcome societal barriers and stereotypes. Mahavir's daughters faced criticism and opposition from their community and family members, but they were determined to succeed and proved their detractors wrong. *Dangal* is a powerful movie that highlights the struggles and triumphs of women in sports in India. The movie promotes gender equality and challenges traditional gender roles, inspiring a new generation of girls to pursue their dreams and break down societal barriers.

The movie *Panga* (2020) also paints a similar picture. *Panga* is a movie that highlights the challenges faced by women who balance their professional careers with their personal responsibilities. The movie revolves around the life of Jaya Nigam, a former national-level Kabaddi player who gave up her career to focus on her family. However, she gets a chance to make a comeback and pursue her dreams again. The movie portrays Jaya as a strong and perseverant woman who strives to balance her professional aspirations with her personal responsibilities. She faces numerous challenges along the way, including the societal expectations and stereotypes that limit the opportunities available to women. Despite these obstacles, Jaya remains determined and committed to her goals, inspiring those around her to push their limits and reach for their dreams. The movie also highlights the importance of support and encouragement from loved ones in crossing all hurdles and achieving one's goals. Jaya's family and friends, particularly her husband and son, play a crucial role in supporting her as she embarks on her journey to make a comeback in Kabaddi. The movie shows how a strong support system can help women overcome the challenges they face and achieve their goals.

Panga highlights the struggles and triumphs of women who balance their professional and personal responsibilities, and the importance of pursuing one's dreams and aspirations. The movie portrays women as strong, capable individuals who can achieve greatness with determination, hard work, and support from their loved ones. It also challenges societal stereotypes and expectations about women's roles and capabilities, promoting the idea of gender equality and empowerment.

The vast majority of these films, in which women played the roles of empowered characters, received widespread acclaim and praise that was a marker of the paradigm shift from the portrayal of female characters from weaker and less powerful ones in earlier movies. The transformation of women from being submissive, timid, innocent, damsels to strong, responsible, and independent women is a journey worth celebrating in itself.

Conclusion:

Movies have played a significant role in changing the characterization of women over the years. From the traditional portrayal of women as submissive and dependent on men to the modern portrayal of women as strong, self-reliant and self-sufficient, movies such as *Dangal* and *Panga* have reflected and influenced the changing attitudes towards women in society. The evolution of women's roles in movies has brought about a paradigm shift in the way women are perceived in society. Women are no longer relegated to the background but are given roles that are equal in importance and significance to those of men. The characters portrayed by women in movies are now seen as role models for young girls and women, inspiring them to break free from traditional gender roles and pursue their dreams.The changing characterization of women in movies has also had a positive impact on society, challenging age-old beliefs about gender roles and paving the way for a more egalitarian society. Women are now seen as equal partners in all aspects of life, and their contribution to society is recognized and appreciated. In conclusion, the changing characterization of women in movies is a reflection of the changing attitudes toward women in society. It is a reminder

that women are not just supporting characters but equal contributors to the success of society. It is a call to break free from the shackles of gender stereotypes and embrace a more inclusive and empowered society.

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