The Irresistible & Oppressive Gaze

INDIAN CINEMA AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN & GIRLS

Oxfam India

This study was commissioned by Oxfam India and implemented independently by Subplot in the five project states in India (Bihar, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Odisha) under the supervision of Oxfam India.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Oxfam India initiated a research to understand the impact that mainstream Indian cinema has created on the issue of Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG) in India. The purpose of this study was to examine how films reinforce gender stereotyping and objectification of women which in turn render sexual violence as acceptable and normative. Films were analysed for their representation of women while emerging trends and messages were correlated with perceptions and attitudes of youth in Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Odisha and Uttar Pradesh.

Specific objectives included:
- Analysis of gender portrayal in mainstream Indian cinema;
- Critical reading of how films reinforce gender based stereotypes;
- Study role of films in depiction of VAWG as an acceptable social norm; and
- Investigation of how communities consume films and to what extent their behaviours are influenced by it.

Mainstream Indian films between the period 2012 – 2016 were analysed for their representation of gender roles and how that representation in turn works to perpetuate sexist notions about women. We focused on Hindi or Bollywood films which commands maximum viewership and influence, and a smaller sample of Bhojpuri and Odia films which have a viewership in the research community of this project. Qualitative discussions were held with men and women from the selected states to understand how viewing films contribute to or affirm their attitudes towards VAWG.

Findings reveal that despite a decisive turn for women centric and socially themed films, mainstream films continue to objectify women, depict them as sexual stereotypes. A female character is almost universally depicted as frail and violable. She is still the quintessential heroine of romance, performing mostly romantic functions in films. The male gaze has remained unrelenting with most films objectifying women. Superhero-led top grossers were found to be the worst offenders, apart from the new genre of sex comedies which violated all possible indicators of human rights and gender justice. Such films were found to simulate pornographic depiction and are widely watched by the young men and adolescents in the community.

A larger number of women-led and women-centric films, often directed by women have been released in recent years. Many of these films break gender stereotypes and have created space for a new narrative that depicts women in a realistic and un-objectified manner.

Interviews with the community revealed that notions of sexuality are often constructed through viewing of films. In many cases, young adults reported gender roles depicted in films are realistic and informative. Most young respondents, particularly males, associated female lead actors with glamour, music and romance. Films were also associated with early sexual awakening and in many cases, linked to 'excess freedom' in girls. Film music was reported to be a ubiquitous tool for sexual harassment.

A major differentiator has been the deep penetration of internet as an agent of social change. Cultural memory and consumption is now made to order. Since all films are online, the horizon is limitless. Many of the young male respondents reported watching Hollywood action films even if they did not understand the narration. They also reported being able to view sexual content more frequently.

Based on the key findings some recommendations include:

1. Repository of women led narratives developed and shared with film makers.
2. Awareness and sensitisation programmes with the youth and entertainment industry on 'clean and non-sexist humour'.
3. Link between regional literature and cinema strengthened for realistic portrayal of women.
4. A campaign to Convert the Heroine.
5. A feminist Censor Board which certifies a film based on its representation of women.
6. Women directors incentivised with larger awards and funding opportunities.
7. Adolescent and young adults encouraged and armed to view films critically.

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1. A culturally entrenched global pandemic

1.1 Global Context

Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG) is the gravest and most persistent form of gender inequality and discrimination. It is a manifestation of a historically unequal power relationship between man and woman and constitutes ubiquitous violation of rights and freedom of women. [1] One in every two women in South Asia face violence in her daily life.[2] VAWG is a global pandemic that has or will affect 1 in 3 women in their lifetime.[3]

Despite women's rights movements across the world which have made substantial gains, gender based violence remains an all pervasive crime that modernity, advent of technology, ideas of democracy and equality have failed to reduce. It has taken feminists and activists decades to even enshrine these violations as crime or offences – as a breach of the social contract or as injustice. The term VAW was coined and first started as a movement[4] as recently as in the early 1970s. Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics*[5] published in 1969 was perhaps the first ever argument that a man woman relationship is inherently one of oppressor and oppressed. Gradually world over legislations, such as the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), protecting women's rights and providing a safeguard against rape and other assaults began to take shape. It is a well-established fact that many of these legislations and global commitments fall short of providing the transformational approach required to address violence against women which is normative, socially acceptable and naturalised – therefore a challenge like no other. Popular culture has largely failed to rise to the opportunity of bringing about a paradigm shift in the way women are represented. Symbols of femininity as frail, violable and therefore corruptible permeate through mainstream films. Post-modern narratives in films have broken ground in depicting the human condition but have largely fallen short of subverting the hegemony of patriarchy. Given the vast reach and influence of films, particularly in a country like India, it is critical to examine how women are represented.

1.2 Situation Analysis of VAWG in India

According to the National Crime Records Bureau Statistics (2014) 38,678 rapes were registered across India (only about 90 per cent of rapes are reported) and other 4,57,174 Crime Against Women (CAW) under Indian Penal Code (IPC) were reported. There is also an alarming rise in hate rhetoric, public assaults, city crimes, revenge crimes, acid attacks and a backlash against women reporting on domestic violence. Despite stronger laws, global policies, decades of activism and awareness, VAWG continues to erode all fundamental rights of women and girls. Apart from the threat of violence and domination in every sphere of life, they miss out on gains in health, well-being, education and economic opportunity. It is now a widely accepted paradigm that only laws cannot address this. Beliefs, attitudes and prejudices in the individual and collective spaces have to be addressed. This personal or individual space in turn is heavily mediated by popular culture, of which films are perhaps

the biggest and most homogenous influence. It is therefore, worthwhile to consider how a thriving film industry may influence social norms and attitudes.

The Indian film industry is expected to gross $ 3.7 billion by 2020, according to the Deloitte Indywood Indian Film Industry Report (Deloitte 2016)[6]. This does not take into consideration the revenue losses due to piracy, low ticket prices, heavy taxes and less penetration of cinema halls, all of which undermine the actual revenue potential of the industry. In terms of number of films produced – 1500 – 2000 a year, it far exceeds Hollywood or any other country. The Hindi film industry or Bollywood, a widely accepted sobriquet for Hindi films produced from the Mumbai film industry, dominates with 43% of revenue, while regional films make up the remaining 57%. Indian films, particularly Bollywood are well known for its sexism. The discourse around violations in its depiction of women are mainly confined to certain sections of the media, feminist magazines and public platforms upholding gender equality. Civil society has so far played a limited role in talking about the impact of cinema on gender violence. There have been populist campaigns now and then but none of these outrages have resulted in any systematic protest. The Central Board for Film Certification (CBFC) is the statutory body in India that performs the dual function of certification and censorship of films. CBFC guidelines and their interpretations are inadequate in a social context where rape is commonly considered to be a loss of honour for the woman. Since it is a government body (Ministry of Information and Broadcasting), decisions are often weighed down by political sensitivities and affiliations.

1.3 Opportunity to engage

Recent political and ideological turns across the world and in India have pushed back gains on gender based violence and inequality. Rise of right wing populism has resulted in the increased use of male rhetoric in media and public spaces. Misogyny is on the rise – both within the oppressive regimes of ISIS[7] and in countries such as India seeking to reimagine themselves as nation states – linked as it is with traditionalism. It is likely to impact sexual and reproductive rights, choices and opportunities to engage in the public sphere. A leash on liberalism will automatically impact how popular culture represents women and the extent to which women and girls continue to find platforms for artistic expression. Therefore, art and cultural products about, for and by women and girls will bear an impact of the global return to traditionalism, patriarchy being one of its main pillars. It is also critically important to evaluate whether new technology, mobile, social media and internet in particular, will work to perpetuate violence or work with women and girls to spread resistance and help enforcement of justice. Even if feminist movements may not occupy centre-stage in this polarised world, there are enough tools and mechanisms to continually subvert cultural spaces and products. Advocacy and awareness campaigns across the world are working tirelessly to address the complex and deeply entrenched VAWG, specifically domestic and Intimate Partner Violence (IPV). Developing tools for an oppositional and critical reading of mainstream cinema in India is one such attempt.

1.4 Overview of Indian cinema

Indian cinema is dominated by Bollywood which contributes 43% of the revenue while regional films contribute 50%. Tamil and Telegu are the largest segment in regional films, comprising 36%, followed

by Bengali, Kannada and Malayalam (Deloitte 2016, *op.cit.*). While it does not command a considerable revenue share, Bhojpuri cinema has significant popularity in Bihar and parts of Chhattisgarh, where the study took place. Inspired by the vision of the first president of India Dr. Rajendra Prasad, Bhojpuri cinema began in 1963. It is only recently however that Bhojpuri films have earned considerable revenue and viewership. Currently, it is said to be a Rs. 2000 crore industry, with series of super hits in recent years and blockbusters expected to cross Rs. 10 crore collection in 2017. These films are known for their vulgar content and are usually certified for adult viewing by the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC).[8]

Odia cinema while catering to a limited market has significant viewership and cultural influence in Odisha, one of the states selected for this research. Having originated as early as 1936, the golden age of Odia films is said to have been during the 70s and 80s with a revival in the 1990s. Odia film industry produces a few films every year, usually timed for a festive release. Most films are based on family dramas. However, the people of Odisha, particularly the community interviewed for this research, are more influenced by Bollywood films. It is noteworthy that Odisha has a thriving music album industry – usually racy songs or romantic songs elaborately picturised. It is common for the girls who feature in these albums as dance chorus to be recruited from conditions of abject poverty. A large majority of them come from tribal areas such as Kandhamal and Ganjam. Limited career options in the film and music industry leave these girls vulnerable to trafficking. In recent years, independent music making has tapered off making way for Bollywood songs.[9]

1.5 Research objectives

This research has been initiated by Oxfam India to understand the impact that mainstream films have on VAWG in India with a special focus on Oxfam intervention states of Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha, Chhattisgarh and Uttar Pradesh.

Specific objectives include:
- Analysis of gender portrayal in mainstream Indian cinema
- Critical reading of how films reinforce gender based stereotypes
- Scrutinise the role of films in depiction of VAWG as an acceptable social norm
- Investigation of how communities consume films and to what extent their behaviours are influenced by it

A selection of Hindi or Bollywood and regional films (Odia and Bhojpuri) films have been analysed on the basis of relevant indicators and these findings correlated with how the community is influenced by portrayal of gender based roles.

The research specifically looked at sexual objectification of women – through overt tropes such as sexually denigrating portrayals and through the sub-text or nuances of the plot. Films have been studied for their portrayal of violence against women and the ways in which they are naturalised through machismo, humour, slapstick etc. Primary research was conducted in select villages of Oxfam India's intervention sites, through focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews with young

adults and adolescents. These discussions helped in the understanding of audience reaction to and acceptance of violence in intimate and personal spaces, sexual assault and treating of women as sexual objects.

1.6 Strengths and limitations of the research

This study provided an opportunity to unpack gender inequality and sexist depictions of women in mainstream films and correlate those findings with a community of youth who are most likely to be influenced by such depictions. Hence, the findings from film analysis have been corroborated and tested for the extent to which they frame patriarchal attitudes. The study has been further strengthened by the decision to develop a set of comprehensive indicators for gender reading of mainstream cinema. These indicators decode gender inequality in various ways that are specific to the Indian reality. A major concern for any research on social issues is whether its findings would lead to practice and policy change. The sample of respondents of this study belong to Oxfam priority areas. Hence this study has an immediate uptake for the design of intervention projects.

The main limitation of this research is a result of the very nature of query that was attempted. Study of sexist attitudes would benefit from an ethnographic research approach which allows more time and proximity with the sample population. Participant observation and in-depth interviews with significantly more people in each location would have been ideal. Young adults interviewed for this purpose were congenial and open during the interviews. But evidently they were often modifying or controlling their responses to ensure that it conformed to the 'right' attitude. The men and boys in particular, were careful about their responses to questions about sexual violence and aggression. The girls too, were extremely mindful of how they reported on their film viewing habits. Although as the discussion unfolded they were able to talk more freely.

The research was also constrained by limited resources and time that did not allow for a larger sample of films to be studied. Due to the inclusion of women directed and women centric films in the same analysis as super hits, top grossers and sex comedies, the quantitative overview appears slightly skewed towards a more favourable attitude towards gender equality.

2. The feminine myth – representation of women in films

This chapter briefly explores how culture or more specifically popular culture works as an aide of patriarchy.

2.1 Films as agents of sexual domination

Films, which are the most powerful and basic product of popular culture, have played a critical role in framing the representation of women within the larger ambit of popular culture, much of which has been problematic. Power relations in gender roles or 'herrschaft' – a term used by Max Weber and later cited by Kate Millet (Sexual Politics, 1969) – denotes the assumption that subordination of females by males is a birthright priority. Popular culture acts in collusion with social agencies and economic forces such as the market to strengthen this belief system. Sexual dominion, however muted or camouflaged, is the most pervasive ideology of our culture and provides its most fundamental concept of power. As in any form of domination 'control over economic goods' i.e., economic power is a consequence as well as an important instrument. Films, capital goods of the lucrative entertainment industry, work as agencies of that control.

2.2 The oppressive gaze of cinema

The power of the gaze was first studied by John Berger[10] way back in 1973. The idea here was that the very act of 'looking' was a political act. Following this, in her essay "Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema" (1975)[11] British film theorist Laura Mulvey used Freud and Lacan's principles of phallocentricism to decipher the oppressive structure of cinematic pleasure. The woman character in a film is merely a symbol of phallic control and power. She is the bearer of meaning and never the maker. The camera is a voyeur, acting at the behest of the director, fixing the woman with a gaze she cannot escape. In response to Mulvey's position, American feminist Bell Hooks offered the oppositional gaze[12] (1978), a spectator strategy with which the power of gaze may be subverted. According to her, even within the most oppressive structures of domination, the ability to look back with defiance opens up the possibility of an agency. It is from these perspectives that the analysis of Indian films is done below.

2.3 Power of Indian films

Inspite of being an important ingredient of the country's nation building project, popular films of India, more specifically hindi films, have not found much favour with scholars of films and culture. They have often been dismissed as crude imitations of Hollywood films produced at considerable cost for infantile viewers with undeveloped taste (Ray 1976).[13] Bollywood films have been linked to 'daydream' and its success attributed to the Indian masses' ability to regress easily into the childlike mode.[14]

Popular Indian cinema of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, had broad categories for their female characters – mother, lover, victim, city girl, gangsters' moll, vamp, etc. In most big entertainers such as *Mera*

Naam Joker (1970), *Purab aur Pashchim* (1970) *Bobby* (1973), *Sholay* (1975), *Amar Akbar Anthony* (1977), women were loved, wooed with music, protected, worshipped, objectified and judged. The 1990s decade was possibly the worst in its representation of women. Rape or attempt to rape were regularly used as a plot mover and picturised as a spectacle (*Bhrashtachar*, 1989, *Prem Granth*, 1996). Rape threats by a prospective lover were signs of machismo and usually dissolved the woman's reserve (*Dil*, 1990).

It is interesting to note how these big budget blockbusters co-existed with an equally popular oeuvre of art house and quotidian films – *Ankur* (1974), *Arth* (1982), *Bazaar* (1982), *Paar* (1984), *Masoom* (1983), *Mirch Masala* (1987) by directors such as Shyam Benegal, Mahesh Bhatt, Sagar Sarhadi, Gautam Ghosh, Shekhar Kapoor, Ketan Mehta. Many of these films were women centric films and went on to win awards. Noteworthy among them were *Dushman* (1998) and *Daman* (2001), both films directed by women Tanuja Chandra and Kalpana Lajmi. In all these films, the women characters were realistic, had agency and the narrative was driven by them. Many of these films were socialist in empathy and influence – depicting hard realities of class struggle and the double burden of a woman caught in it. Since the early 2000s, a new stereotype evolved –a woman who has it all, loves to shop, has no problem with vanity, is a mother, wife and career woman in equal measure, takes decisions which were until then considered a man's prerogative and hence, doubling the market for typically male oriented products. Financial independence meant having purchasing power. None of those trends in popular culture reflected the yawning gap in the workforce, political participation and educational access.

More recently film scholars have upheld the need for a new aesthetic to do full justice to the great Indian spectacle on screen. The Routledge Handbook (2013)[15] describes popular cinema as one that is "invigorated by a poetic of excess often inviting a willing suspension of disbelief." Cinema becomes an escape into a thrilling and good looking world, complete with action, spectacle, song, and melodrama. There is a readiness in popular discourse as well as cultural studies to create a space for this barely credible reality. A ready audience eagerly receives its narrative and visual splash and the market props it up.

The unrealism of popular cinema has legitimised an equally unreal depiction of women – as the hyper-sexualised object of fantasy. Enormous violations take place through innuendoes, symbols and the safe and aesthetic spaces created by a complicit cinematography. Opinion in the media, indifferent for decades, have recently started highlighting blatant sexism. A rich body of feminist film readings which examine the male agency of Indian cinema have found space. These include mainstream publications such as *The Hindu*, *Hindustan Times*, *Indian Express*, *Huffington Post* and online papers like *Scroll*. Online feminist magazines like *Ladies Finger* regularly publishes feminist readings of new releases. It may be safe to surmise that outrage against sexism in films is now more popular and mainstream than it was before.

3. Methodology

3.1 Overview

There have been rich reflections on the appropriate methodology to be used for feminist research or studies that analyse how gender intersects with culture and hegemonies. It is strongly argued that feminist research must be guided by a feminist methodology that is distinct from any mainstream social science research and be framed by feminist theories and politics to be grounded in a woman's experience. In studies such as this one, truth is no longer normative. In fact, what is perceived as the truth or the norm itself is problematic.

A combination of film analysis and community interactions were used for this research. Indicators were developed specific to Indian films and the social context it represents. Films were read for their representation of women, norms and attitudes upheld. These findings were in turn correlated with how the target community of Oxfam India viewed and read films. It is important to state that popular Indian cinema is vast, diverse and constantly evolving. It was not the purpose of this study to attempt an overview or full analysis. Only those films were chosen which had a relevance to the target community.

3.2 Sampling strategy for Community

The research was to take place in Oxfam intervention districts. The FGDs took place in 12 villages across 5 states.

	Village	District
1	Usri	Siwan district, Bihar
2	Bisarpur	Siwan district, Bihar
3	Kanadi	Khunti district, Jharkhand
4	Huttar	Khunti district, Jharkhand
5	Buchha Busti	Muzaffarnagar district, Uttar Pradesh
6	Purqazi	Muzaffarnagar district, Uttar Pradesh
7	Jagannath Busti	Bhubaneswar, Odisha

8	Rasulgarh	Bhubaneswar, Odisha
9	Dari	Janjgir-Champa district, Chattisgarh
10	Shankarpali	Janjgir-Champa district, Chattisgarh
11	Odekhera	Janjgir-Champa district, Chattisgarh
12	Komo	Janjgir-Champa district, Chattisgarh

Age and gender wise break up of respondents:

Age group	Female	Male	Total
13 – 18	37	27	64
18 – 30	52	56	108
Total	**89**	**83**	**172**

In case of this research, due to limited time, 'a priori determination of sample structure' was used. The social groups and respondents were defined in advance by Oxfam's implementing partners using the criteria of age, social situation and gender. In-depth interviews were conducted with the NGO leader and workers in each location for an overview of the social context.

3.3 Research tools

A combination of focus group discussions aided by a questionnaire and in-depth conversations were used for this research. A questionnaire could merely be a topic guide for a fast recollection of all the important themes. Some carefully crafted questions proved to be crucial as it helped channelise the respondents' thought process in a direction that they may not have taken without some guidance. It was important to remain prepared for the unexpected as it was precisely that kind of data which could give deep insights. Hence, the actual discussion was kept as unstructured as possible and often altered in keeping with the mood and energy of the community. In all locations, except Odisha, conversations took place in Hindi.

3.4 Selection of films

Films were selected primarily from the time period of 2012-2016. A sample was drawn from the following categories:

1. Blockbusters and super hits from each year
2. "Most talked about" in the community
3. Women centric films
4. Films directed by women
5. Films on social issues
6. Films by genre – romance and comedy

Blockbusters and super hits from each year were selected to ensure that films with maximum reach were being included in the sample. India does not have an official or single point database for cinema revenues. Often earning figures are conflated to project a greater success for films. Reliable and popular databases - www.bollywoodhungama.com, www.koimoi.com and www.imdb.com were referenced to arrive at the figures of box office earnings.

The list of top running films was further refined as per the "most talked about" films criteria, that is, films that were most popular amongst the respondents. During the focus group discussions, a media habits dipstick was conducted, which threw up a sample of films. After the field research, the initial sample of films was further revised to include films mentioned repeatedly by the community. This resulted in the inclusion of a larger number of films by certain actors and films of a specific genre.

Women centric and women directed films were included to examine whether films with female protagonists were actually breaking stereotypes and whether films made by women directors were altering the narrative significantly. Romance and social issues were considered as a relevant genre given the interest of this study on gender based roles.

A total of 45 Hindi films were analysed. Six regional films - three Bhojpuri and three Odia films were analysed qualitatively but not included in the statistical sample.

3.5 Tools for film analysis

To analyse films for their gender fairness, following tools were used:

1. Visual and textual analysis using critical approaches, particularly feminist film theory

Based on the thesis that images convey meaning and the construction of a woman's image is problematic and unequal, a textual and visual analysis of the films were conducted.

2. Indicators of film analysis

The qualitative analysis was further enhanced by a list of indicators which represent the various ways in which gender inequality or sexual domination manifests itself. Each of these indicators are categorised under key ways in which female characters in films perform stereotypes roles that reinforce the inequality that exists in real life.

Unequal representation in popular culture and cinema

1. Percentage of male and female characters in the cast
2. Percentage of female characters in lead roles
3. Percentage of male characters in lead roles
4. Percentage of female character as romantic co-leads
5. Percentage of female character as plot movers
6. Powerful opening for male characters
7. Powerful opening for female characters

Participation of women in workforce

8. Percentage of female characters shown as having an income
9. Professions of female characters
10. Professions of male characters

Stereotypes

11. Roles performed by female characters
12. Woman behind a man
13. Man behind a woman
14. Man raising children

Sexual objectification and stereotypes

15. Sexist portrayal – clothes, make up, body language
16. Naiveté and fragility
17. Inability to choose, take the right decision, the perpetual and easily seduced sinner
18. Taming of the Shrew – taking down of the strong woman
19. Triumph of the conventional or 'good' woman
20. Punishment of women as power seekers (as opposed to the positive portrayal of men who do the same)
21. Use of sexist humour

VAWG

22. Portrayal of violence
23. Forms of violence
24. Rejection by a man

Women in public sphere

25. Instances of nationalism, love of the country, contribution etc
26. Female characters upholding nationalism
27. Films showing sisterhood
28. Films showing brotherhood

3. **Bechdel Test**

Developed by cartoonist Alison Bechdel in her comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For*, it first appeared in 1985. Also known as the Bechdel-Wallace test, it tests a film or work of fiction on its gender representation. It asks whether a film has (1) at least two women in it (2) who talk to each other, about (3) something besides a man. It is now commonly used to assess films and a large number of important and popular Hollywood films are known to have failed the test. While Bechdel test serves as a touchstone for gender fairness, it often does not provide an in-depth critical reading of structural issues of female objectification and inequality. Often a fleeting reel moment is required for the film to pass the test, even if it has been gender offensive otherwise.

The study also took into account newer and more personalised ways of consuming film content – such as leaked scenes over YouTube or shared messages on WhatsApp groups. Social media has caused a disruption that is even harder to measure. The constant presence of internet and mobile has shrunk the space of media consumption even further and at current, it is almost entirely unregulated. This has significant implications, for instance on the way film content contributes to inciting and perpetuating violence against women and girls.

4. Key Findings: Film Analysis and Community Responses

This section will at first provide an overview of film preferences of the community and an account of how gender impacts film viewing access. Subsequently, films will be analysed as per the indicators developed (see chapter 3 on methodology). Key findings from the film analysis will be read alongside the responses from the community of young men and women from the five selected states. The findings are presented in the following order – analysis of films followed by relevant community findings. A number of films feature in the discussion that are not part of the sample drawn for quantitative and primary textual analysis. These films are referenced either due to their overall popularity, specific relevance or as illustrations of the point being made.

4.1 Film preferences of the community

Top grossing Hindi films such as *Dangal* (94%), followed by *3 Idiots (88%)* and *Sultan (58%)* were the most watched. These films had the highest recall in all locations. Other such films mentioned were *Chennai Express* (2013), *Kick* (2014), *PK* (2014), *Ek Tha Tiger* (2012), *Baajrangi Bhaijan* (2015). Since the last leg of the research coincided with the release of the film *Baahubali 2: The Conclusion* (2017), it found mention in the discussions with communities in Odisha, particularly with young and unmarried male and female respondents. Part one of the movie had some popularity with the male respondents from Jharkhand, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. Several other popular movies were mentioned alongside the above some of which are included in the film sample reviewed in the previous chapter. Male and female respondents of all age groups watched 'hero' led blockbuster films. Adolescent girls of Kanadi village in Khunti district had limited access to films. They could recall almost none of the top grossing films. Their counterparts in Huttar village had access to mobile phones and spent considerable time watching films. They were well familiar with popular films. This disparity is evident in the percentage of film preference in the table below.

A high percentage of respondents reported viewing women centric and biopic films. Of the sample of women-led, women directed films, almost everyone (96%) had seen *Kahaani*. The next 'most watched' films were *Piku* and *Pink.* Except the urban respondents from Ranchi, almost no one recalled watching *Dear Zindagi* (2015). No other women-led films were specifically mentioned. One respondent from Siwan district mentioned *Damini* (1993), a film remembered for its representation of rape as a social issue and a woman's fight to bring justice. She also mentioned *Ram Teri Ganga Maili* (1985) as primarily a film about the plight of a woman. Occasionally, respondents mentioned films from earlier decades such as *Swarg* (1990) and *Hum Saath Saath Hain* (1999), both of which are family dramas. Older and married female respondents preferred these movies. A few adolescent and young adult males from various locations reported that they only watched Telegu and Hollywood action films, even if subtitles or dubbing were not always available.

Biopics were an immense draw. Since *Dangal*, which found more appropriate categorisation as a top grosser and not biopic, the most watched film about a person was *Mary Kom* (2014), across male and female respondents, in all locations. This was followed by *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag* (2013). It may be surmised that sports related films, particularly athletic sport, enjoyed immense popularity. Cricket

films such as *Dhoni* (2012) and *Azhar* (2016) were reported to have been watched widely but did not feature on the most preferred list.

It may be noted that unprompted recall of films was low in a number of locations. There is not much data to establish whether such low recall is due to an inhibition to talk about their film preferences since they are apprehensive of being judged by their family and community. According to a Babita, 30-year old married respondent from Siwan, "Who has the time to think about films? We watch and then forget about it. There is so much *filmi* stuff happening in our lives all the time." The reference to filmi or film-like life was meant to be a sarcastic reference to issues that crowd their daily existence, including marital trouble.

In Khunti district, 25-year old Sumitra Mokal, who has been married for seven years, has a few films that are her favourite but she cannot remember their names 'offhand.' Mokal explained:

> "I can safely say this for both men and women in our village. Sometimes the going gets too tough for us to bother about films. We watch and perhaps we enjoy at that time. But afterwards, there is too much uncertainty. Whether films influence us, I cannot say. The young boys maybe. But the biggest influence of all is alcohol."

Location wise film preference:

	Superhit	Women centric	Comedy	Family	Action	Biopic	Regional
Siwan district, Bihar							
Females 13 -18	85.71%	100.00%	42.86%	42.86%	14.29%	100.00%	71.43%
Females 18 – 30	100.00%	80.00%	50.00%	100.00%	0.00%	80.00%	70.00%
Males 13 – 18	100.00%	100.00%	75.00%	0.00%	100.00%	100.00%	75.00%
Males 18 – 30	83.33%	66.67%	50.00%	66.67%	33.33%	100.00%	66.67%
Khunti district and Ranchi, Jharkhand							
Females 13 -18	56.00%	56.00%	0.00%	0.00%	22.00%	44.00%	0.00%
Females 18 – 30	85.00%	77.00%	31.00%	77.00%	0.00%	31.00%	0.00%
Males 13 – 18	100.00%	50.00%	100.00%	25.00%	75.00%	75.00%	0.00%
Males 18 – 30	100.00%	42.00%	100.00%	79.00%	89.00%	84.00%	0.00%

Bhubaneswar, Odisha							
Females 13 -18	92.00%	85.00%	46.00%	38.00%	31.00%	85.00%	92.00%
Females 18 – 30	86.00%	57.00%	43.00%	71.00%	29.00%	71.00%	100.00%
Males 13 – 18	100.00%	60.00%	70.00%	20.00%	80.00%	90.00%	80.00%
Males 18 – 30	100.00%	50.00%	67.00%	17.00%	67.00%	83.00%	83.00%
Muzaffarnagar district, Uttar Pradesh							
Females 13 -18	60.00%	40.00%	0.00%	20.00%	0.00%	40.00%	0.00%
Females 18 – 30	88.89%	88.89%	44.44%	66.67%	11.11%	88.89%	55.56%
Males 13 – 18	100.00%	80.00%	80.00%	0.00%	100.00%	80.00%	80.00%
Males 18 – 30	100.00%	85.71%	71.43%	50.00%	64.29%	92.86%	50.00%
Janjgir-Champa district, Chattisgarh							
Females 13 -18	66.67%	66.67%	33.33%	0.00%	0.00%	66.67%	0.00%
Females 18 – 30	84.62%	76.92%	46.15%	84.62%	23.08%	76.92%	0.00%
Males 13 – 18	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	0.00%	50.00%	75.00%	0.00%
Males 18 – 30	100.00%	90.91%	81.82%	18.18%	45.45%	81.82%	9.09%

4.2 Gendered spectatorship

Films are rarely consumed in cinema halls in the sample villages were the FGDs took place. Other than the urban population interviewed in Bhubaneswar and Ranchi, majority of the respondents reported watching films on their mobile phones. Some, mostly older and married females watched films only on TV. In the villages of Siwan, Khunti, Sakti and Muzaffarnagar districts, girls have limited access to mobile phones. Very few reported owning a device and even if they did, it was often not possible for them to download films from the mobile shops. Boys, from the age of 14 or 15 years have full access to a mobile phone since they are often tasked to recharge the phone. Shrinking of the viewing space has rendered it ungoverned and private. Younger boys are watching films of their choice, often in groups. Young girls watch when they get a chance. They too are free from family or community restrictions on the type of film they choose to go to. There was a general consensus that newer films are unfit for family viewing. Hence even if there are recent releases being shown on TV, they are careful about watching with the rest of the family. Married women with children have less leisure for consumption of films. Most reported not having the time to relax but there were a few who watched films with vivid sexual content with their husband. They were largely nonchalant about how it impacted the sexuality of the men.

A major differentiator has been the deep penetration of internet as an agent of social change. Cultural memory and consumption is now made to order. Since all films are online, the horizon is limitless. Many of the young male respondents reported watching Hollywood action films even if they did not understand the narration. India ranks 3rd after US and UK in proportion of pornographic traffic worldwide over Internet. Indian actresses are one of the top searched categories and Sunny Leone, who has acted in a number of Hindi films besides dancing to item songs, ranks as the 3rd most watched pornographic star globally.[16] It is telling that about 20% of young male respondents ranked Sunny Leone as their favourite actress.

Indian men are desiring actresses online and the internet is a ready accomplice. There has been a recent surge in internet access through the widespread penetration of Reliance's Jio network. According to the villagers, this was credited as the top most reason for the spurt in movie viewing in villages by most male respondents.[17]

Film legacy carries on for much longer. A number of male respondents reported watching films such as *Mera Naam Joker, Bobby, Ram Teri Ganga Maili* and *Satyam Shivam Sundaram* and various other films from the 1980s and 1990s. In urban areas, where the use of social media such as WhatsApp is more prevalent, carefully curated and compiled articles on sensuality of actresses or memorably vivid scenes from cinema are often circulated. Leaked clips of videos from films – such as Radhika Apte's performance in *Parched* that are not watched otherwise, find a parallel and completely independent trajectory.

4.3 Unequal Cast

THE UNEQUAL CAST
73.4%   27.2%

WOMEN HAVE SIGNIFICANTLY LESS SCREEN PRESENCE THAN MEN

One of the purposes of this study was to depict how women are represented in Indian mainstream films. According to the report Gender Bias Without Borders (2014)[18] which analysed a sample of 120 global films from all countries with major film industries, including US, UK, Brazil, Russia, China and India, the percentage of female speaking characters in top grossing films have not changed over the last half century. Female actors occupy a large share of entertainment media, the film industry folklore and publicity campaigns, that is, they are ostensibly visible. But this often does not translate to equal and non-objectified representation within the film narrative.

This study surveyed the cast, including all actors in speaking or named roles, of 45 mainstream Hindi films. Data on the cast was extrapolated from www.imdb.com. Male actors comprise 73.4% while female actors represent only 27.2% of more than 1300 characters. Therefore, there are at least 2.5 times more male characters than there are female ones.

On studying these films for a share of lead roles, it was found that in 23% of films lead roles are played by female characters. In 76.7% of films women fulfil a romantic function, either as a co-lead in a romantic role (37.2%) or as a romantic interest (38.5%). Including those in lead roles, about 48% of women were found to make some contribution in moving the plot. However, in about 2/3 of films, the plot movers do so driven by revenge, retribution against violence and by playing a romantic role. Men dominate the narrative, playing the lead role in 77% of films. In a majority of non-women led
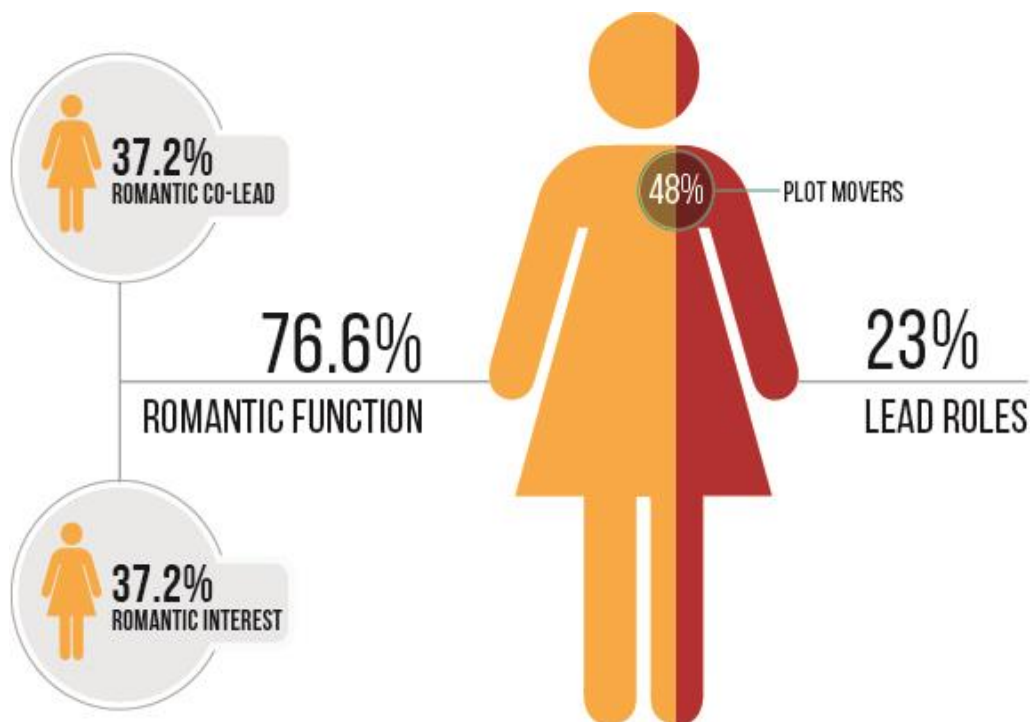
MEN DOMINATE THE NARRATIVE WHILE WOMEN ARE MOSTLY IN ROMANTIC ROLES

films men have a powerful opening, aided by panaromic shots, action sequence, dramatic entry etc. The main female actor is introduced to the screen much later, often as late as fifteen minutes into the narrative. Her depiction was found to be almost always accompanied with strong visuals, music and dance or set in a domestic and personalised context.

4.4 Women as sex objects in films and its impact on youth

4.4.1 Decoding objectification

The sample of films were studied for the frequency with which and ways in which they sexually objectified women and men. Objectification by itself is a contentious issue. Feminists and feminist film and cultural theorists, thinkers and campaigners have developed strong and equivocal maps and arguments of what comprises objectification. Issues such as the body as an artistic tool, being able to choose what one wears without the fear of sexual assault, sexuality as an aesthetic project, intersect with a normative definition of objectification. In Indian films, objectification ranges from direct and explicit to constructing the frail and submissive woman through the use of stereotypes.

To study objectification of women in mainstream films in obvious and less obvious ways a set of parameters were considered. The idea behind this decoding was to ensure that the normative or accepted ways of depicting a woman, which are often considered as common parlance or harmless, be taken into account as well. Therefore, objectification was broken down in the following ways:

1. Women imagined in stereotypical roles – romantic partners, survivors or revenge seekers of VAWG
2. Sexist portrayal – clothes, make up, body language
3. Naiveté and fragility
4. Inability to choose, take the right decision, the perpetual and easily seduced sinner
5. Taming of the Shrew – taking down of the strong woman
6. Triumph of the conventional woman
7. Power seekers punished or humbled

Men too are objectified in films, although much less frequently. Since in almost all occasions the body is put on display either during a fight sequence or during a choreographed song and dance sequence, the discussion on 'men as objects of desire' has been placed below in the section on 'item songs' (see Section 4.6)

4.4.2 Most top grossers and super hits depict women as sex objects

Women were found to be objectified in 88% of the films studied. All top grossers, particularly those with a strong male cast, such as *3 Idiots* (2009), *Dabangg 2* (2012), *Student of the Year* (2012), *Dhoom 3* (2013), *Chennai Express* (2013), *Krrish 3* (2013), *Kick* (2014), *Happy New Year* (2014), *Sultan* (2016), objectified women as per at least one or more of the indicators developed for this study. This included sexist portrayal, women in sexually revealing clothing, gestures and actions which are akin to sexual violence, assault and harassment. Women were portrayed as naïve, fragile, unreasonable, quietly tolerant of misogyny and disrespect. They are often unable to choose or take the right decision. Almost all such films, uphold notions of the conventionally good woman.

SEXUAL OBJECTIFICATION OF WOMEN IS PROFITABLE

Films	Earnings in crores
Baahubali: The Conclusion	1725 crores
Baahubali: The Beginning	650 crore
Baajrangi Bhaijan	626 crores
Dhoom 3	585 crores
Sultan	584 crores
Chennai Express	423 crores
3 Idiots	395 crores
Kick	352 crores
Happy New Year	345 crores
Ek Tha Tiger	300 crores
Dabangg 2	249 crores

In 67% of the films women wore clothing meant to exaggerate their sexuality. These clothes were either scanty or worn in a manner that was suggestive of disheveled helplessness or seduction. They were clothed in ways that are unreal – such as the oft used two-piece garb reminiscent of dancers in temple carvings of India or artistic representation of mythological characters. The traditional saree receives a hyper-sexualised treatment removing it from the quotidian and realistic. Clothes are almost always stripped off functionality such as the costume design for female characters in *Krrissh 3* (2013), *Baahubali* (2015), *Chennai Express* (2013), *Hate Story* (2012), the *Masti, Housefull* and *Golmaal* series of films, *Dilwale* (2015) and many others. Often a large budget is allocated for costume design and fashion designers are roped in. For instance, the budget for costume designing for Kriish 3 was reportedly Rs. 1 crore. Manish Malhotra, a top Indian fashion designer, created both Kareena Kapoor's sexually revealing costume for the song '*Fevicol Se*' from *Dabangg 2* (2012) and Katrina Kaif's costume for the song '*Chikni Chameli*' from *Agneepath* (2012). Both costumes are for women portraying the role of a sex worker and exotic dancer. A voyeuristic camera works in collusion with the sexist narrative in 58% of films. Significant screen time allocated to female characters is spent with the camera gazing up close on her body, using close ups, usually in conjunction to some sort of background music. Films such as *Piku* (2015), *Kahani* (2012) and other non-hero led, low budget films or biopics feature women in more realistic clothes.

Films such as *Tanu Weds Manu* (2011)[19] and its sequel (2015) despite a powerful performance by Kangana Ranaut who plays a whimsical young woman, seducing men at random and refusing to play the submissive wife, still does objectify. A scene in *Tanu Weds Manu* depicts the sober and apparently submissive doctor played by R. Madhavan steal a kiss from Kangana Ranaut while she is sleeping. He goes as far as taking a photo of her on his phone, in direct violations of her privacy and indulging in a sexual overture without her consent. Yet, they find easy currency in the film and with the audience for whom romance is constructed in specific ways only. *Drishyam* (2015) which falls in the category of a social thriller since the plot is about a stalker, relegates the women as victims. *Airlift* (2016) a film based on a true incident, typifies the wife. In face of real danger, that is, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait (1990) when Ranjit Katyal played by Akshay Kumar, evolves overnight from a frivolous businessman to a messiah, the wife is portrayed as an objecting, self-serving woman. None of the women in the cast, which is a large one, rises to the occasion or is shown to play any role in the massive evacuation of Indians in the midst of war.

Apart from women almost never upholding the public sphere or public causes such as nationalism (to be discussed later), women also lack ambition – a major underlying factor or assumption that deepens their objectification in films. *Student of the Year* is a sophomore film about a class of senior school students. The boys in lead characters have ambitions – either the goal setting normative ones or artistic ones. Whether or not the female lead played by Alia Bhat has any ambition or eventually takes up a professional path is at least never disclosed on screen. She and her female counterparts are almost always shown as pursuing romance, cheerleading or being bodily preoccupied - a dangerous gap in films that specifically target youngsters on the brink of making their life-choices.

WOMEN CHARACTERS ARE OBJECTIFIED IN VARIOUS WAYS

88% FEMALE CHARACTERS ARE OBJECTIFIED

67% FEMALE ACTORS WORE SCANTY/SEXUAL CLOTHES

58% MOVIES HAVE SEXIST CAMERA WORK

4.4.3 Alternative scripts, engaging stories – unchanging attitude towards women as sex objects

Heroines and female characters in the recent years have become more real and identifiable. Quite a few popular film makers have claimed a space of difference for themselves with scripts that are not run of the mill and make a clean break from the heavily stereotyped 1990s. One such director in Rajkumar Hirani whose film *3 Idiots* broke box office records when it was released in 2010. It was a strong comment on the elite education systems of India and more than anything it was a well-made film. But it failed to prevent itself from the obligatory objectification – the heroine dancing in the rain in a chiffon saree – even if it was meant to be a satirical comment on the ideas of romance. The net result was a leading, highly paid heroine, Kareena Kapoor, serving time on screen as the male lead, Aamir Khan's romantic interest. She like, 52 % of women in films that were studied, is not a plot mover. Neither does she have any agency. Her arrogant and materialistic lover is an obviously wrong choice. Yet when Aamir Khan disappears, effectively abandoning her, she is seen, several years hence, settling for a marriage with the lover who treated her badly. In 83.7 % films women are at some point or the other brushed off by her lover or by another man. From the despotic father to a paternalising fiancé to a nerdy lover who puts his profession and other moral obligations over her, Kapoor performs to the archaic ideal of a woman. It is a continuation of powerlessness that has halted modernity which arrives on the liberating pillars of choice and identity, for women in India. The incidental portrayal of her as a doctor, deflects our attention. It is her choice, which allows for a woman to relate to social and patriarchal structures in multiple ways, to be a professional yet 'traditional' and 'compliant' in her ways as a lover and a daughter.

In the film *Ek Tha Tiger* (2012), the female lead played by Katrina Kaif is a Pakistani undercover spy. Her espionage role does not exempt Kaif from the objectification that she is normally subjected to in other films. Her first appearance is as a housekeeper vacuuming the carpet. The camera, which is Salman Khan's eyes on her, sees her derriere, moving to music. Khan on behalf of the audience sighs and gestures at such a sight. Even though she is a spy, her profession is undermined by portraying her in the stereotyped sexual portrayal of the maid. Scenes and dance sequences objectifying the woman, even if they are not item songs, often gain cult status and quickly become part of the folklore – on in which extremely problematically, entire families including children participate. Such as the songs *'Kaamli Kaamli'* in *Dhoom 3* (2013) and *'Lungi Dance'* in *Chennai Express* (2013). *'Kaamli Kaamli'* is a

thinly veiled striptease, once again performed by Kaif. She makes a dramatic entry overdressed for a circus audition, hat, boots, trench coat etc – accessorised for the strip-down through dance that follows. Another noteworthy aspect of objectification of the female body in popular films is the manner in which it bends and twists itself at impossible angles, simulating the grotesque of pornography – a body bending in utter subjugation to male control. The *'Lungi Dance'* tribute to Thalaiva or the superstar of South Indian films Rajnikanth, is an afterward kind of song performed together by Shahrukh Khan and Padukone – in which she is nothing but a dancing aide in the larger than life tribute to male superstardom by another male superstar.

The problem presented by films like *Baahubaali* is in their representation of strong women characters. Mahishmati, Mahendra Baahubali's mother, fights off soldiers and carries her baby aloft with one hand across a raging river. Avantika is a rebel warrior, who has organized an army for a coup against the evil king. She is more skilled in war fare than Baahubali. Yet he must transform her, force her to become a version of woman that would be sexually acceptable to him. Visual grandeur and qualities of epic and the pulse of mass entertainment that works by reducing the woman as a sex object, are invoked to explain away the violations. Cinematographic splendor and epic sweep of plots are other contrivances which heighten sexual objectification. In such films, strong women are still 'the woman behind a man'. She works to realise a man's ambitions and to reinforce stereotypes.

Public verdict in such cases is oblivious of such transgressions. All of the above mentioned films earned more than 200 crores and were declared a super hit (the definition of which in Bollywood is varied but generally means to have box office collection of 175-200% more than actual investments). The script of sexual objectification is therefore securely linked to the market. It is critical to also study this hegemony in relation to the professional imperatives and discrimination that women actors face within the industry.

4.4.4 The Heroine and I: Young girls constructing sexuality and selves

Representation of women in films were observed to have a direct impact on the idea of femininity among respondents – male and female alike. It mingles and correlates with the image of the perfect woman perpetuated by family, community, religion and other sources of symbolic representations. This strand of query was particularly important to situate VAWG within the triad of tradition, a woman's sense of self and body imaging, the combined power of cinema's symbolism always raising the bar, and lure of consumerism and market. With the public rhetoric in India replete with claims that "girls invite rape",[20] the study examined how young women negotiate aspirations regarding the self, fashion consciousness, body imaging etc. Discussion with female respondents threw insight into how cinema sets a benchmark for body imaging which is then immediately strangulated by tradition and fear of being assaulted. While more and more girls are experimenting with and challenging the fixed notion of how a village girl should look, they continue to be immensely susceptible to stigma and assault.

Adolescent girls were found to be resentful and fascinated in varying degrees by the mythical heroine. In Siwan (Bihar), Khunti (Jharkhand) and Muzaffarnagar (Uttar Pradesh), more than 70% felt that the

heroine was a hyperbolic and urban representation of women. What caught their attention most was the fashion, the exaggerated clothing she wore. They were appreciative of 'style' but felt that it was relevant to women in big cities. Almost no one spoke of affordability. It was always a question of appropriateness – "women and girls in our villages cannot wear such clothes." When the discussion moved to depiction of village women in Bhojpuri films, they felt it was nearer to reality, had a local flavor, but too vulgar for them to have a sense of identification. The distinction between reality and fantasy was very clear. "They get paid to wear such clothes" or "they do it for money" were the primary responses. A smaller percentage of young girls spoke appreciatively about the preoccupation with the body. "It may be a good thing to take care of oneself. Go to the gym, have a slim body. Look good. If they were allowed, many girls here would." There is also a suppressed outrage at the disparity in possibilities of styling oneself.

Sita, a 17-year old girl from Usri village in Siwan, who spoke passionately on many subjects and as a result was immediately identified as a disrupter by the other girls, said "we have to surrender to the fact that we can never dress like that. It is our destiny. Who would not like to dress like them? But if we do, those vultures will rip us apart."

In Bhubaneswar, where the respondents were from an urban slum, the body and beauty ideals represented in the heroine were far more complex. The female respondents in this groups viewed films once in a while at the Cineplex, where the movie going experience, by their own admission, is interwoven with the thrill and glamour of branded shops. Fashion is more accessible and hence, there are aspirations that are influenced by the cinematic splendor. Here as well, affordability does not occur to the eager young minds. They feel stymied instead by the oppressive gaze of their community and the male peer group. Sunita Digal, a 17-year old girl who aspires to join the police force, engaged in a polemic about dress codes and sexuality. A few others participated in that discussion. They tried to understand why it was important for them to stick to dress codes, citing reasons such as concern of parents that it might make them appear sexually available, 'fast' and 'easy', envy of other women and neighbours.

> *Sunita:* Nothing is ever enough. Whether we wear salwar kameez or shorts, they will talk about us. Whether we are thin or plump, dark or fair. I am tired of the eyes on us, the constant talk – like poison filling up our lives.
> *Interviewer:* Who are they?
> *Rojalin:* Everyone, our neighbours, the elders mostly. Relatives and friends.
> *Interviewer:* But not the boys?
> *Nandini:* They are the worst. We don't care what they say because we are not going to obey them are we? We care only about those whose talk makes our parents upset. But there are times when because the boys are whistling at a girl, she gets talked about.

Their counterparts in Buccha Basti, a Dalit village in Purqazi block of Muzzafarnagar, had found their own explanation – which is also the rhetoric of tradition and male hegemony – "If a girl wears jeans but has good character, it may be alright." Tradition imposes limitless and whimsical sanctions on what is considered appropriate clothing. Also, the definition of a 'good girl' is ever changing and

slippery. Girls shoulder the moral burden of corrupting influences such as vanity, *filmi* fashion and modernity.

Women community leaders in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, while sharing their insights regarding the influence of the sexualized attire of the heroine on the sexuality of the region, spoke from within the context of traditional thought. Modernity according to them, could be measured by parameters such as access to mobile phone or propensity to 'dress up' like a heroine. Rehana Adeem, community leader and president of the NGO Astitva in Purqazi, spoke of fashion imitations that the girls bought from local melas. "They don't match up to clothes that heroines wear or the big brands and look terribly tacky. It makes the girls who wear them look like wannabes, fakes. And that says something about their character. When a village girl wears such clothes, she is liable to get teased by the boys or criticized by the elders." The connection is unclear but there is enough to point to the fact that heroines create an aspirational image in young women that is completely at odds with the moral limits of their lives.

Lajwanti, a 13-year old girl from Huttar village, Khunti (Jharkhand) is an aspiring player. She wanted to know if the actor, Priyanka Chopra had received actual training as a boxer to play the role of Mary Kom in the film of the same name.

4.4.5 The exotic other: an object of fantasy for young boys and men

Indian female stars continue to reaffirm social stereotypes. However, in the recent decade of film making, a new generation of female stars have broken barriers, as discussed in the previous chapter. Simultaneously, the mythical powers of the elusive and unreachable heroine have suffered a setback. This may be correlated with the emergence of a diverse audience with niche demands and the self-consciousness of female actors who wish to play roles that are more realistic.

In the 1970s and 1980s, art house films or the parallel cinema offered creative and meaningful roles to female leads. Throughout the 1990s, female actors had little choice in scripts. Sridevi and Madhuri Dixit built their popularity playing the stereotyped sex object or romantic interest. With the audience becoming more and more segregated, such unilateral superstardom is no longer possible for a single female lead. It may also be linked to the career trajectory of senior male actors all of whom have delivered blockbusters in the last few years. These ageing male stars are always romantically accompanied by a much younger actress, further curtailing the career trajectory of a heroine. Market results indicate that the success of a film is almost entirely hero-led, unless, as in specific occasions, it is story or plot led.

Discussions with the community revealed that heroines continue to be objects of fantasy. A large majority of male respondents (80%) reported that they would not watch a film if it did not have a heroine. When asked if a heroine was the reason they watched a film, most respondents asserted that they watched a film for the merit of its story or for the star power of the male lead. At the same time, they felt that the visual pleasure offered by a heroine was compulsory for the success of a film. About 30% male respondents shared that a film with a female lead would not be worth watching and as many as 90% said that they would not watch a film with an all-female cast. When asked why not, most

said that watching women go about their lives, possibly cooking, or shopping and dressing up – since those were the actions they most associated women with - can never make for a good story line. The most common reaction was "it works in TV serials which only women watch". A man-woman tension or interaction was important for the film to be worthwhile. Yet they did make concessions for a wholly male cast. "That is different. It can be enjoyable." In more than one location they cited the film *Dhamal* (2007) as one that worked without a heroine.

A clear distinction was made between a 'heroine' and a female lead. A heroine was said to be a female actor who is "very beautiful or attractive, who the hero is in love with and can do anything to win her love." Whereas the definition of a female lead did not emerge as clearly. The respondents gave examples of *Piku* (2015) played by Deepika Padukone and of Vidya Balan in *Kahaani* (2012). As Munna Majhi, 20-year old from Bisarpura village, Siwan (Bihar) said, "They are also beautiful but that is not important. They now have other goals in life, they take their own decisions." Munna is a poet and singer who hopes to let his wife choose her path, "work or study if she wants to." They make exceptions for other women-led and women centric films such as *Mary Kom* (2014) or *Daangal* (2016). Both films mentioned were biopics, documenting real stories, real struggles. Some confessed that watching Priyanka Chopra in a different role was what pulled them to the film.

When asked about the role of a heroine in a film, the responses were as follows:
- To show romance;
- As the hero's muse;
- Enjoyment of the audience;
- Organic presence of women in our lives; and
- Beauty and glamour

In a majority of films studied, more than 50%, sometimes as high as 75% of screen time spent by female characters are in a song setting which has little or no connection with the actual plot. In an increasing number of films, leading female characters are performing a cameo in a song routine. Despite the disparity in the status, earning power and glamour between themselves and the heroines, most male respondents were found to be patronizing towards female stars.

4.5 Item songs by women actors: Erotic spectacle and tool for sexual harassment

The hyper-sexualized item song is specially written to draw audiences and ensure that the film has a recall beyond its plot. In such song and dance choreography, the female actor's specially constituted role as a spectacle and as the subject of the look, is most evident. Natural contours of the body are frequently distorted, additional make up is used to engorge her body parts and create unnatural shadows, (B Nair, 2002).[21] Male actors also routinely perform to such songs. The masculinity on display and power arrangements are in sharp contrast to performances by their female colleagues.

"These songs, such type of songs, where the heroine is wearing those clothes and making those moves, make us too emotional" – Kumbh Karan, 25, Usri

An item song may take place in a public space such as streets of a city, or in places where women don't usually enter such as a bar, a nautanki, a men's only gathering of political goons and mafia. It may also take place in a train station, backstage of a circus etc. The dancer who is often a famous and well-paid heroine or a female actor who commands a high fee and fame specifically for her role as a sexual object, subjects herself to tremendous violations. This space is equally coveted by Kareena Kapoor, Priyanka Chopra and Sunny Leone. It is to be noted here that Leone's identity as a pornography star has been used by the film makers and marketers to increase her marketability. Leone too has participated in this fetishisation of her role as a sexual performer. In most of these dances, the choreography simulated gang rape or mass molestations - the dreaded street crime that women are subjected to where male hands become disembodied violators. A common sequence in item songs is the dancer's body being lifted up by hundreds of men, their hands roving over her body (*Raees*, 2017).[22] The community perceives the willingness of a heroine to sexualise herself as such as means to earn money. Women respondents are almost empathetic towards the compulsions of the heroine's profession. Male respondents, while appreciating the motive, also feel empowered as the audience that makes such a performance profitable. Her earning is somehow linked to them since they are paying to see her perform for their viewing pleasure. Being able to pay to see a woman who is otherwise the exotic goddess creates a euphoria of access.

When *'Fevicol Se'*, an item song from the film *Dabangg 2*, was played as a cue in Usri village, Siwan (Bihar), 25-year old Kumbh Karan, a local personality and mimic artist, had this to say:

> "These song, such type of songs, where the heroine is wearing those clothes and making those moves, make us too emotional. She is dancing like that and looking so irresistible and we are watching her. Would not any man do anything to just spend some time with her? That is why it is so wrong, a man loses control and ends up losing all his money… He will get emotional on watching this song and then the first girl that comes within his sight – be it a neighbor or his own sister in law – he will want to hold her hand. Yes, that is the sort of thing such songs do to us. Heroines are in films for the song."

20-year old Madhumala Kumari from Usri village said she felt angry and helpless most of the time.

> "Why do you think these songs have been put in films? To make the boys more powerful that is why! They see these songs and they walk with their chests puffed up – as if they own the world, and all the girls. They pick up lines from these songs and use it at the girls – as if they are mighty poets."

A handful of respondents, all of them adolescent girls, were of the opinion that such songs should be banned. One such respondent from Bhubaneswar, Odisha wanted to know if there was an authority that regulated film content. When the role of Censor Board was explained, she initiated a discussion about legal provisions and how they routinely failed to safeguard women.

Odia and Bhojpuri films abound in lewd lyrics and dances that are completely sexually provocative. According to Urmila Devi, president of the NGO Sakhiree in Siwan, item songs emulate the *nautanki* or the rural burlesque. In recent times stage shows called Orchestra – sexually explicit dances are performed to live music in the form of popular film songs or item songs, have gained more popularity. The village *vyad* or bard specialises in enhancing the sexual content of mainstream Hindi and Bhojpuri songs. The oppressive and often dangerous lives of these dancers have been recently documented in the *Anarkali of Arrah* (2017).[23] Actress Swara Bhaskar plays an erotic dancer who objects to a police man's assault while she is on stage, performing. Her mother who was a dancer like her, was shot dead on stage. Based on real incidents, this film illustrates how mainstream Bollywood films choose to remain oblivious to messages and narratives emanating from within its own community.

Most of the female respondents, while expressing outrage at their content and provocative use, also agreed that they were melodious and feet tapping

With their folksy diction and rural proverbs, item songs are widely used tools for sexual harassment. 95% of young girls reported that boys and men played those songs on their mobile phones or sang them out loud when they walked to school or went somewhere to run an errand. It is further problematic that such songs gain an acceptance – blared as they are over loudspeakers in all festivities including religious festivals, by becoming part of the community space. Most of the female respondents, while expressing outrage at the provocative content of these songs, also agreed that they were melodious and feet tapping.

4.6 Item songs by men actors: Celebration of male prowess

The male body as desirable has had a difficult journey in screen and film theory. On screen it is to be read in correlation with the portrayal of a woman making sexual choices, asserting her sexual need. Off screen, since the complex map of psychoanalysis, spectator studies and audience research is not within the scope of this research, community responses have provided an understanding of how women view the objectified men and whether it offered pleasure.

Several prominent heroes have crafted and displayed their bodies on-screen and off-screen as the quintessential male pin-up. Noteworthy among them Salman Khan, Shahrukh Khan, Hrithik Roshan, Aamir Khan, Shahid Kapoor, Ranbir Kapoor, Ranveer Singh, Tiger Shroff and many others. The backstories of how these actors build their body, achieve the fabled six packs, become part of the media lore and add to the masculinity portrayed on screen. Work out sessions are shared on social media. Analysis revealed that objectification of men in Indian, specially Bollywood films, has been restricted to putting up a well-crafted body on display. Hence, the study has primarily looked at whether the objectification of a man erodes his power position, does it make him vulnerable and in doing so empower the woman as a spectator and provide similar agency in her sexual choices in life? What is the primary purpose of such objectification?

The manner in which men and women are objectified differ significantly. In *Ram-Leela* (2013), a vibrant song and dance sequence is used to introduce Ranveer Singh, the male lead. The dance

showcases Singh's well-toned body, dancing skills and popularity as a Casanova. When he puts his body up for display there is no accompanying threat or violence – women keep a safe distance and there is nothing to indicate that he will be mauled or violated. Instead women swoon and are shown as overcome when he directs his pelvic gyrations at them. Item songs by men often double up as wooing numbers. *'Jumme Ki Raat'*, a song from *Kick* (2014) depicts Salman Khan making his signature moves, displaying his masculinity while pursuing the female lead. His dance chorus is a veritable crowd of men who are pursuing Jaqueline Fernandes in this case with equally aggressive sexual display. At one point, Salman Khan lifts the hem of Fernandes' dress with his teeth. He is at the point of disrobing her when she notices and moves off in a huff. Later in the song she gives in and hands herself over to Salman Khan's mob of men.

The fundamental difference is this – in item songs women offer themselves up as the object of desire, literally marketing their flesh – "*main toh tandoori murgh hoon yaar, gatkale saiyan alcohol se*" (roughly translated as: My flesh is succulent like a tandoori chicken/eat me up with a swig of alcohol.) Such cannibalistic lust is to be seen in contrast with the '*Pappi Song*' from *Heropanti* (2014) in which Tiger Shroff displays his remarkable dancing skills and well-toned body in equal measure. The song solicits a kiss from the reluctant female lead, every now and then Shroff pulls her face forcibly towards himself, squeezing her cheeks. Even as he occupies the centre-stage and bares his chiseled torso, bits of cleavage, legs and butt cheeks of young women flash on the frame.

A woman desiring a man has given rise to another stereotype in films, more prevalent in Hollywood. It is played to legendary fame by Sharon Stone in *Basic Instinct* (1992) and Glenn Close who plays the more formulaic female stalker in *Fatal Attraction* (1987). In earlier Indian films, the woman who actively desires a man was typecast as a distraction or trouble maker in the plot. Recently, films such as *Dev D* (2009) have portrayed the female lead as actively desiring her male counterpart. Mahi Gill who plays Paro in the film, sends intimate photos on the phone and actively seeks sexual gratification from men other than her lover. Anushka Sharma in *Ae Dil Hai Mushkil* (2016) wants to be 'friends with benefits' with the male lead, Ranbir Kapoor. Yet how do these apparent sexual choices play out in the arrative? Do they translate to creating a different paradigm for the women in question? Arguably not since Paro, the character played by Mahi Gill is rejected by her lover for her promiscuous ways and must be married off forcibly elsewhere. The other leading lady, Chanda, the sex worker's back story is gravely problematic. Played by Kalki Koechlin, Chanda was till not too long ago an affluent city girl. Her love making sessions with her boy-friend from school is leaked – a clear reference to an actual incident which had raised the earliest alarm about digital media, privacy and safety of children. Chanda's situation is shown as hopeless. Her father commits suicide and she takes up sex work. A remake of Sarat Chandra Chattapadhyay's *Devdas*, the epic love story which has been made into a film multiple times in Indian cinema, is merely a change in the setting with bolder female characters wearing their sexuality on their sleeves and a sex worker who can and does somewhat precariously escape her line of work.

Women are not the intended audience for the sexual objectification of a man. Even if they are, it is meant to enhance the sexual prowess of a man, to establish him as the seeker and availer. Young girls from Jagannath Busti, Bhubaneswar, were clear that such songs only added to the confidence of the

young boys around them. They were more conservative in their reactions to the viewing pleasure of a well-toned, strong male body, as were most of their counterparts in other locations. A few girls from Siwan, Bihar and Rasulgarh, Bhubaneswar professed to admiring the male body. It made them feel 'romantic' they said. Yet most felt that a six pack ab was for the benefit of the male audience. "They lose their head over a Hrithik Roshan, Shahrukh Khan or Tiger Shroff and start going to the gym," was the commonly expressed opinion.

Masculine display is more about narcissism and a celebration of male prowess than it is about re-appropriation of the gaze by female spectators. Hence, when Bollywood put out their men for display it is almost never about exploitation. It is not within the scope of this study to go beyond the hetero-normative limits of pleasure and sexuality. Mainstream films rarely depict the performativity of gender except in two cases recently – a fleeting scene in *Ae Dil Hai Mushkil* when Ranbir Kapoor, heartbroken, gains a feminine aspect. But that is also the moment when he becomes the true artist. Therefore, his feminine masculinity is more about the empathy and softness of an artist and less about performing gender. One of the stories in the film *Bombay Talkies* (2013) depicts a young boy's alternative sexuality. Some films such as *Dedh Ishqiya* (2014) do explore how pleasure and objectification may be constructed in same sex relations. But such depictions are rare and have no impact on the heterosexual tide of using women as sex objects.

4.7 Explicit content in films, sexual violence and early sexual awakening

4.7.1 Simulating pornography on screen

Sexually explicit representation derives its strength or efficacy from objectification of women and is therefore, a form of violence which has much in common with pornographic representation.[24] A recent spurt of sex comedies (*Grand Masti, Great Grand Masti*) have created a new space for sexual innuendoes and pornographic simulation. Masochist movies depicting intense male bonding and slapstick humour and farce include the *Housefull* and *Golmal* series. All these movies perform well at the box office and soon after their release find a way for pirated consumption on smart phones. The film *Great Grand Masti* (2016) depicts simulations of pornographic content, including references to ejaculation, erection, various sexual positions. Non-consensual sex including rape, voyeurism and assault are constantly referenced. A brotherhood of three grown men help each other in obtaining sexual partners. The camera works to cinematically render this hyper-sexual narrative, resorting to intimate body gazing. Dialogues full of sexual innuendoes add to the vulgarity. Most problematic of all is the depiction of the women as unaware and oblivious. They are only meant to incite desire but not act or participate in the continuous seduction.

Sex comedies in Bollywood parlance is one that is entirely directed at men, about men and at the cost of women. Worst stereotypes are enacted in these films – a desirable female domestic help, a village woman, a ghost, tired un-obliging wives etc. These films not only find successful runs at the theatre, they also spawn a timeless body of erotic jokes over WhatsApp and are replicated over internet as YouTube videos. During the course of the research, these films were used as conversation triggers. The following chapter will highlight how these films have become part of the sexual lore and are

deeply entrenched in the masculine psyche and fantasies of young men and boys across the country. It is pertinent to note that *Great Grand Masti*, a film replete with vulgarities and forms of sexual violence that would be punishable under the Indian Penal Code, passed the CBFC without much obstacles. A few minor and voluntary cuts were proposed – none of which were meant as a sensitive response to how women have been portrayed.[25]

Offences committed against women in *Great Grand Masti*
- Joke about gang rape
- Episode recreating the urban phenomenon of rape in a moving car
- Sexualisation of a domestic help
- All forms of sexual harassment – through use of lewd remarks, gestures
- Mental cruelty towards wives

4.7.2 Consuming vulgarity as information

Obscenity in films is a debatable concept that touches upon freedom of artistic expression, freedom of speech, creative taste and role of cultural products. The CBFC has had a problematic role in this regard. Films depicting sexuality that is not considered normative such as *Lipstick Under my Burkha* (2016),[26] *Fire* (1996) or those attempting a realistic depiction of sexual violence such as *Bandit Queen* (1994), have been banned or censored. Yet, every year, films such as *Great Grand Masti, Housefull, Ragini MMS 2,* which denigrate its women characters as sex objects and are full of sexually suggestive content, pass muster with a few cuts.

Respondents of this research were encouraged to create their own definitions and thresholds of vulgarity and obscenity in films. When asked to qualify vulgarity in films, a majority talked about clothes worn and amount of skin shown by female actors, sexually explicit actions, on screen kissing and love-making and sexual innuendoes in dialogue and action. Hindi sex comedies, films featuring Sunny Leone, item songs and Bhojpuri films were mentioned in particular.

Opinions about vulgar content featured prominently in all discussions. It ranged from disapproval and nonchalance to frank confessions about enjoyment. A significant number of young male adults and adolescent boys felt that sexually explicit content in films is educative and necessary for their sexual maturity. Muton,[27] a 20 year old man from Huttar village in Khunti district (Jharkhand) gave an example of his soon to be married friend who was receiving tips from films. 22-year old Laxman from the same village said frankly, "We watch films like *Grand Masti* because we get to learn many things from them. We follow what is shown in films," an opinion shared by young men in other locations as well. Most reported the double meaning of dialogues as the main source of enjoyment. These were private jokes that they confessed to sharing within friends and sometimes directing such remarks at girls. But mostly, they felt that it was harmless fun that men liked having. A few admitted that such depictions were sexually arousing.

Young female respondents felt that vulgarity was a problem in Indian films mainly because it denigrated women. "Showing sexual activity is not vulgar", said Pooja from Ranchi. "It is natural

between man and women. But what they show is inappropriate and harmful." Many female respondents felt they had nothing to derive from such content – "not even a laugh because most of the jokes are on us."

Both male and female respondents felt that films had become exceedingly vulgar which prevented family viewing.

> "A sister cannot sit with her brother, a father cannot sit with his children and have some harmless fun. We have to be cautious. Sometimes we have to get up and leave the room during a movie. So now we find it easier to watch by ourselves or with friends. That way watching films on the mobile is better. But yes we cannot sit together as a family and watch." - Ravi Kumar, Odekheda, Chattisgarh[28]

Some respondents related consuming of vulgar content to unemployment. Munna from Bisarpura, pointed out that many young people were unemployed. With unlimited time on their hands and cheap mobile data, they spend their days watching what they like. "There is no structure in their lives, no guidance."

4.7.3 Films as a catalyst for early sexual awakening

Viewing sexual or sexually suggestive content in films has been time and again linked to early sexual awakening. A considerable body of research exists probing this connection. This research could affirm that sexually provocative content in mainstream films, which are more easily accessible than pornographic material, is perceived to have instigated early sexual awakening.

Discussions also confirmed that films or erotic visuals in popular culture are not the only trigger for heightened sexual awareness and activity in adolescents. It intersects with other factors such as peer pressure and notions of masculinity in boys, curiosity, physical pleasure, hesitation in young girls to displease their romantic partner.

One of the associated reasons for a problematic way of viewing vulgarity on screen is a regressive and sexually repressed social environment. When male respondents were asked if they were friends with any of the girls from their community, almost 100% of them stated that it was an impossibility. Even in Bhubaneswar, which is an urban settlement, the boys reported that they never mingled with girls of their age group. In Jagannathpur Busti (Bhubaneswar) some of them reported being friendly with girls from other communities but within the shared social space such interactions are forbidden by families. Female respondents reported the same constraints about mingling with boys. Forming a romantic or sexual relationship is fraught with perils in most locations. In Muzaffarnagar, where honour killings were reported to be a common occurrence, romantic relationships are considered a taboo. Civil strife due to Maoist presence and prominence of other criminal activities restrain the movement of girls in Khunti district. In Siwan, however, there is a high prevalence of romantic and sexual relationships within adolescents and young adults. Rasulgarh of Bhubaneswar was another place where inspite of an orthodox community, most young people were in a relationship. Community workers and elders of the village who participated in the discussion, unanimously pointed to films as the cause for early and immature romance. "So much of it leads to heartbreak and drop-outs", said

Urmila Devi, Sakhiree, Siwan. A major part of her intervention efforts went towards "bringing the young people on track. They watch films and their sexuality gets aroused prematurely." She further linked early sexual activity to a distinct increase in child marriage and elopements.

During the discussions it was shared anecdotally that there is tremendous pressure on boys and girls to acquire a romantic partner. Boys as young as 12 or 13 were anxious to be sexually active. Mating calls or propositions are rarely seen as distinguishable from sexual harassment and stalking. Ironically all young boys and men were fully aware that this was a punishable offence as they were conscientious of not crossing boundaries. But as a young community worker confided on conditions of anonymity,

> "there is too much sexual need. The boys just want to find a girl and have sex. Girls also don't care that much. Of course, they are more cautious but there are some who go around with more than one boy. Problem arises when sometimes a girl gets forced…"

Within the community, boys and girls blame each other equally – often the girls are accorded a larger share of the blame by their own peer groups of both gender as well as the elders of the community. Urmila Devi apportioned significant responsibility on the changing aspirations of girls as she did on the early sexual awakening of adolescent boys. In the villages of Jharkhand, women reported that boys as young as 10 or 12 took to alcohol due to boredom brought on by lack of age appropriate activities, sports and a lacklustre schooling environment. It made them more susceptible to 'bad ideas' which they got from films and from the young men who were also unemployed and spent their leisure watching films.

4.8 Carnival of Violence

4.8.1 Films liquidating the notion of consent, celebrating aggression

Mainstream cinema in India denigrates its women through the use of sexist humour. Benign scenes, dialogues and 'good humoured', even affectionate teasing constitute its primary treatment of female characters. Ford et al, (2008)[29] argues that sexist humour has immense social consequence and establish through an experiment that "sexist humour can promote the behavioral release of prejudice against women." It allows men to express their sexism without fears of disapproval of their peer group. According to Ryan and Kanjorski (1998) it also justifies a wide range of negative responses including 'rape proclivity' towards women.[30]

86% of the films studied for the purpose of this research used sexist humour in various forms – some as subtle and affectionate jibes or jokes that nevertheless reinforce and perpetuate stereotypes about women. Mirth is used in Indian films to create a shared and legitimate space for sexual assault. In this perpetual carnival, sexual violence or transgressions of choice and consent are performed in the guise of music, dance and a collective merry making. It is an event in which rules, inhibitions and restrictions and regulations which determine the course of everyday life are suspended. In mainstream Hindi, Bhojpuri, Odiya and Telegu films, this extra-social space allows violations that can be penalised under the Indian law, to be played out for vicarious pleasure.

Special budgets are apportioned for the creation of such sequences, often in the form of a song. "*Chin ta ta Chita Chita*" a song from the film *Rowdy Rathode* (2012) creates a carnival on the streets. The leading man Akshay Kumar makes a gesture which is implicitly sexual or represents a sleight of hand, causing women, including a police woman, to fall for his ways. It includes a cameo appearance by leading actress Kareena Kapoor who along with a chorus of objectified women offers her body up for sexual ecstasy. Alongside is the first appearance of the romantic lead of the film, Sonakshi Sinha who is depicted as a simple minded and naïve woman. The backdrop for this song sequence are city streets and public locations. A gang of dancing and euphoric men, including the male lead, occupy those spaces and sing lines such as "*Mil jae koi chhori, kaali ho ya gori*" (If only I could get any woman, be she dark or be she fair...) depicting their sexual hunger. In one brief moment, Kumar is seen groping a woman as she walks by. Sexist humour occurred even in a film such as *Piku* (2015) which had a female lead and earned considerable box office success. The humour in this case was subtle and guised as gossip amongst drivers but it was nevertheless a typification of the successful working woman.

4.8.2 Stalking as romance

Raanjhana (2013), a film on unrequited romance, crosses dangerous thresholds. The male lead, Dhanush, a popular Tamil star, begins to stalk Sonam Kapoor, the female lead, when she is barely a school girl. She is accosted by him on the streets of Benaras. No place is safe for her. One section of critics and liberal media raised questions about the way this film legitimised, even romanticised harassment and stalking. Dhanush's character dies at the end talking of how he wasted his life – the film's moral message concerning itself with how young lives are wasted on the pursuit of fruitless romance. The girl who has steadfastly rejected his advances is accused of being heartless and responsible for his ruin. Nothing in the film ever points to the strangulation of her space, the violation on multiple counts as inscribed in the Indian Penal Code (IPC)that he perpetrates. *Raanjhana* belongs to a long tradition of Indian films that have valourised forced romantic overtures. The early films of Shahrukh Khan, *Darr* (1993), *Anjaam* (1994) which earned him the epithet of negative hero were primarily about stalking and deception. Even more problematic is the persistent sub text of romance as endless persuasion. A perfectly normal and acceptable romantic song or sequence as discussed above (*Baahubali, Heropanti*) will be about demurring the woman into acceptance.

"to follow a woman and contact, or attempt to contact [her] to foster personal interaction repeatedly, despite a clear indication of disinterest by the woman..." - IPC sec. 354D

Romance in the film *PK* (2014) appear to make an exception. The romantic hero played by Sushant Singh Rajput is a Pakistani Muslim who is bullied by Anushka Sharma's conservative father and a godman to stay away from her. Here is a story of sacrifice due to pressures of tradition and family which too does occur commonly. Instances of endearing romance abound – such as in films like *Vicky Donor* (2012), *Lunchbox* (2013), *Barfi* (2012). All of them are still safely framed within acceptable social boundaries and women still play traditional roles. Romance as disappointment, misaligned

personalities, a site for egoistic clashes and protest against sexist behaviour, is the refreshing romance of *Dear Zindagi* (2016), directed by Gauri Shinde. It rarely makes an appearance.

A recent online petition started on Change.org by Iswarya V, a feminist researcher based in Chennai, highlights stalking as a norm in Tamil films.[31] The petition states that stalking is shown as a 'cool romantic thing to do.' It points out that films routinely promote "stalking as acceptable, even preferred way of wooing a woman… These films continually reinforce the message that stalkers will ultimately be rewarded for their persistence… It also denies women the right to say 'no' to their stalkers."

Bhojpuri and Odiya films abound in such depictions as well. Almost all the films studied for this research portrayed women as the object of romantic and sexual overtures. Much of cinematic aesthetics is devoted to the act of sexual pursuit. Costume design, cinematography and music come in aid to create a hyper aesthetic space within which non-consensual sexual overtures, violation of private space and strangulation of choice, gain sanction.

4.8.3 A new realism for VAWG – sensitive but inadequate

The films studied were replete with depictions of sexual violence. At least 88% of the films analysed portray various forms of VAWG. Unlike, the 80s and 90s, during which period depiction of rape or attempt to rape was a recurring theme in all films, recent films purport to uphold a new realism where rape depiction is not as common. They are shown not as plot twists to justify the revenge genre but mostly as part of a realistic depiction – often in stories inspired by true events. *Gulaab Gang* (2014) and *Mardani (2014)*, are two films in particular which show rape, trafficking and other forms of extreme sexual violence. In both cases, depiction of violence is central to the plot and such films attempt to play the role of a feminist/activist. *Gulaab Gang* was not a popularly viewed film among the respondents, inspite of the rural and feudal setting similar to their lived realities. The men in particular were uncomfortable talking about the film. In Purqazi, which is not too far from Banda district where the actual Gulabi Gang were active, the film had no takers. It may be surmised that a woman avenging sexual violence does not have the same cathartic function as other revenge films. The idea of a group of women coming together to fight sexual violence discomfits the men.

KIDNAPPING HONOUR KILLING MOLESTATIONS USE OF FORCE TO INTIATE ROMANCE RAPE UNLAWFUL RESTRAINT GROPING LEWD COMMENTS BREAST STARING MENTAL CRUELTY IN MARRIAGE DRUNKEN BEATING OF PARTNER STALKING POLYGAMY STEREOTYPED MOB MOLESTATION FEMALE FORCED TO GIVE UP WORK FOETICIDE DOWRY ABANDONMENT SON PREFERENCE SEXUAL HARASSMENT AT WORKPLACE

A woman assaulting a man is unacceptable, in sharp contrast to ready and popular acceptance of VAWG on screen.

Mardani, a film based in Mumbai and Delhi, depicting a woman police officer's fight to bust a trafficking ring was slightly more popular. Organised crime brought in a sense of distance, which the rural rapes and quotidian exploitations of the village upper caste men could not achieve. Yet it was Hrithik Roshan avenging his blind wife's rape and suicide in the film *Kaabil* (2017),[32] that found more resonance than any of the other films. For the spectator, a reassertion of male supremacy, is critical in film viewing. Even when another man or section of men are perpetrators of violence – the corrupt others – a larger than life man i.e., the hero is the preferred rescuer.

The film *Pink* has been hailed as a sensitive and matured depiction of sexual assault and the patriarchal and social conspiracy of vilifying the woman concerned. A powerful and strongly feminist script has put rhetoric and star power to effective use. Amitabh Bachchan has been roped in as the lawyer to present the most problematic premise of sexual violence – consent. The film has done extremely well in box office which has meant wide dissemination of its message. Upon a closer textual analysis of the film, a number of problems arise. In order to play safe and formulaic, the narrative requires Amitabh Bachchan, a supreme male star, to play the messiah. One does question whether or not it is Amitabh Bachchan speaking remarkable lines that has sold the tickets. Nuances of the court room argument to prove that 'no is a no' often harp on other sexist stereotypes, such as the stigma of soliciting sex, as does the title of the film – Pink, a colour now symbolic of the feminine and of empowerment.

4.8.4 Narratives of male supremacy and Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)

A sequence from *Dabangg* (2010) was used as a conversation trigger in all locations. In the interaction between the male lead Salman Khan and his romantic interest Sonakshi Sinha, Khan says to Sinha that she should accept his offer of money when offered lovingly as it is well within his right to 'slap' her into accepting his bidding. Seventy percent of the female respondents, of all ages, were of the opinion that this was a romantic conversation hence, the hint of violence is excusable. It was discussed that often between lovers and married couples such informal exchanges may happen. A small minority admitted on probing that it was not right but could not qualify further. About 40% of the adolescent girls stated that they would not accept such behaviour from their romantic partner.

When asked about the qualities of an ideal man, 95% said that he should be above all loving and caring, be able to earn consistently for his family (90%), have a good personality (86%) and spend time with their wives (70%). Only about 60% talked about physical attractiveness and masculinity. When probed on the notion of manliness, most equated being a caring person, having a good personality and earning consistently with masculinity.

When asked if any of the male characters in films embodied those ideal qualities, several instances were cited such as:
• Salman Khan in *Sultan* because he repents and grieves for the loss of his child and loves his wife loyally.

- Akshay Kumar in *Airlift* for his patriotic fervor.

- Ajay Devgn in *Drishyam* for his ability as a common man to defend his family.

- Aamir Khan in *Dangal* and Shahrukh Khan in *Chak De* for their motivational roles.

- Actors such as Ranveer Singh and Siddharth Malhotra were mentioned for their masculine attractions.

About 90% of the female respondents in the age group 18-30 years, admitted to either being recipients of IPV if they were married, or spoke of IPV as an accepted social norm, if they were not. Only two women said that their spouses had never hit them. Most reported forms of partner violence include slaps, pushing, rebukes and mental cruelty. There is a very high incidence of extra marital affairs by men in all locations.

Vishakha Kashyap, 27, from Buchha Basti, Purqazi, is B.Ed pass and has aspirations of going back to teaching in a few years.

> "A man is superior to us. That's how the world is. He goes out to earn, faces the world, comes back tired. He knows about things which we village women don't. It may be different in the cities. My husband is a nice man but he too has his days of frustration."

Most women felt that it was acceptable to be hit once in a while. "*Wohi sawarenge, wohi dulharenge…toh wohi na marenge…*" (he is the one who loves us, takes care of us…so what if he hits us once in a while…) was a common sentiment. In the villages of Jharkhand where extreme poverty and unemployment exist, IPV was universally linked to excessive alcohol consumption and financial distress.

A number of male respondents who were in their early or late 20s expressed their outrage at instances of 'wife beating' in their communities. Some wanted to know how it might be possible to intervene and there was a discussion about helpline numbers and the efficacy of police. Young men of the same age group who were married, felt however that being aggressive with wives was sometimes unavoidable. Kumbh Karan (25) from Siwan was vehemently against the notion of marital violence but confessed to teaching his wife a lesson every now and then when she made mistakes. Respondents who described themselves as film buffs were the only ones to state a link between how women were in real life and how they were portrayed in films. Take the example of Sonakshi Sinha or Kareena Kapoor. They are adorable and soft and that is how men like their women. 'We don't like it, at least in the villages, that our women should know it all and be over-smart". Some cited Arushi (Shradhha Kapoor) in *Aashiqui 2* (2013) as the ideal woman. Her selfless dedication to her alcoholic singer-boyfriend and frail innocence were often mentioned as desirable qualities.

4.8.5 Women ask for it, No means Yes, and other myths

Myths regarding physical and sexual aggression of men, rape myths including consent and provocation, were found to have almost universal currency among the communities interviewed for the research. These myths, which are false but widely held beliefs, serve to justify sexual aggression in men.[33] These include persistent prejudices such as "the beautiful victim", the "women who ask for it", the prevalence of false charges, a woman who teases men deserve anything that might happen. Interviews with both male and female respondents revealed that such beliefs and attitudes prevail universally.

"Such things happen. A little bit of teasing between girls and boys will always be there. It is the course of nature. You think the girls don't enjoy it?"
— Roshan Sangha, 20

About 30% of male respondents openly expressed their conviction that girls enjoy the attention they receive from boys. Majority of those who spoke freely about teasing were also those who were outspoken and frank about their attitudes. Almost all of them were unemployed youth and at least one respondent from Huttar village in Khunti district was reported by others to be under the influence of an addictive substance at the time of the interview. Despite the inhibitions of majority of male respondents to engage in a conversation about wooing a girl, once the probe was made more generic and they became information providers about the 'others', a rich and insider conversation ensued. Comfortable speaking in the third person, they distanced themselves and spoke of '*lakdi patana*' – the commonly used colloquial term for wooing or romantic pursuit with full confidence. Rajkumar, a 25-year old from Usri narrated a story about his friend. "The girl was not coming under him. He was getting desperate. So he called his friends in and they started talking to her whenever she stepped out to stroll with her friends, or on her way to school".

"Women who talk too much get targeted. They should remain docile and quiet if they want to avoid getting assaulted and harassed by men."
Puja, 24, Odekheda

Use of the word 'under' while colloquial is also an indication of how romance is viewed by the youth. It is considered to be a conquest which requires devices of various sorts. These include roping in friends and playing songs on the mobile when she is passing by. The male respondents, particularly those in the age group 18 – 25 years of age were self-indulgent. It was considered harmless banter and youthful pursuit by about 60% of the youth. The rest, more self-conscious youth, distanced themselves from such behaviour.

The male respondents treated the discussion around *chedh khaani* or eve teasing with an air of levity in all locations, except in Jagannath Busti, Bhubaneswar, where the young adults belonged to the Christian community and had close ties with the church as musicians. Such was also the case with young Muslim men from Purqazi town, in the age group 18 – 30 years. Their insecurities were specific to their status as a minority community. Religious orthodoxy has a strong influence in Purqazi due to its proximity to Deoband on one side and Haridwar on the other. Since inter-caste or inter-community relationships can be leveraged to cause carnage, there is tremendous caution in establishing romantic relationships or engaging in pursuits. "Unless they are absolutely sure that girl belong to their own caste and community, a girl is usually not subject to *chedh khaani*", says Rehena Adeem of the NGO Astitva. "The young men and boys here are at multi-fold risk. They could be accused of terrorism,

inciting communal violence and now lately anyone could become a victim of *gau rakshak*s. It is also a widely held apprehension that the state government's anti-Romeo squad could be misused to victimize young men from the minority population."

The young men of Bisrapur, Siwan were also more restrained than their counterparts in Usri. This deviance was largely due to the presence of Munna, a poet and artist, in the group. These groups of young men and boys were socially aware, conscientious and deliberately avoided making frivolous or derogatory comments about sexual violence or treating women as objects. In Munna's own words, it is acceptable to watch these films to the extent that "one should see what is wrong to differentiate between the good and bad."

4.8.6   Sexualisation of daily chores

In *Gangs of Wasseypur* (2012) Durga, a character played by Reema Sen, has sought shelter with a family. She is said to be an epileptic. Her hand trembles while she serves food to a row of men, who talk about her. The camera fixes itself on her breasts and bare back. Later she is shown carrying water, washing clothes and performing household chores, occasions for the camera to pan on her body with the desiring eyes of Manoj Bajpai. When a woman goes about cleaning, washing, drying, she is offering herself up to a sexual feast. It is a seduction that she is not unaware of. The camera participates as much as Bajpai by focusing and lingering on her bare back and breasts. The complicity of the director, the technical team ensures that the woman is not just the object of desire for Bajpai – as part of the plot – but for the general consumption of the entire audience.

Fetishising the daily rigour of village women has been till recently a common trope in Bollywood and other regional films. Bhojpuri films are replete with such depictions. Women drawing water are shown as particularly susceptible to sexual harassment. Field work is fraught with sexual possibilities. One of the respondents from Buchha Busti, Muzaffarnagar (Uttar Pradesh) drew the reference of a popular songs *'Ganne ke Khet Mein'* to which Madhuri Dixit performed (*Anjaam* 1994). The lyrics are a barely disguised reference to rape in the sugarcane fields.

The field visit to Purqazi block, Muzaffarnagar, took place during the harvest season in late April. Wheat was being plucked at a frenetic pace to hoard granaries for the rest of the year. It was a critical time of the year when no time is lost to ensure that the maximum yield is brought home. The workforce was significantly skewed – with women forming the majority. Only a few men were seen to be participating and this observation was affirmed through community discussions. Young girls and women walked to the fields at dawn, came back for a brief rest in the afternoon or stayed back in the fields tending to their children. They finished their day after sundown, walking back several miles through fields of tall crops. According to 'talk' amidst the older women, every other day a woman was assaulted. Rape in the villages of Purqazi is completely silenced and treated as a hazard as most forms of sexual violence are.[34]

Female respondent: "She suffers the assault in the fields. Usually the sugarcane land owners who have a lot of money harass the women who work on their fields. But during harvest season everyone is at risk. When we come back late in the evening… through the fields."

Interviewer: What do these women do? Do they report the assault?

Female respondent: Never. Unless she is murdered and her body is found, she says sarcastically. Even her own husband will not spare her. And if he is different, if he loves her, he will want to complain and end up losing his job, both their jobs. But mostly it is because of the shame.

The male respondents showed awareness of such incidents but found it hard to link them with *Gangs of Wasseypur* and the song from *Aanjaam* which were used as conversation triggers. Talk of rape was met with silence and resistance. In Buchha Busti village, where the women were vocal about outrages in the field, the young men avoided talking about it. When some of them responded or were willing to engage in a conversation, they were able to distance themselves from it.

Interviewer: Do you know of any such incidents?

Maangey Ram: One gets to hear…

Interviewer: They talk among themselves about an incident in another village…

Maangey Ram: Not here. We are respectful to our women. They are safe.

4.9 Women in the public sphere – gender gap on screen, new films bring new aspirations

4.9.1 The Working Woman

The Gender Pay Gap Report (ILO 2016)[35] revealed that gender gap in workforce is one of the highest in India – with men earning at least 30% more than women in similar jobs. The lowest rung of the workforce comprises of 60% women while only a small percentage of women break into the highest rung of jobs. It was revealed in the report that a large majority of women held care giving jobs such as nursing and were underpaid within the sector as well. A reflection of this glaring disparity is found in films as well. In the new decade of film making, more and more women are shown as professionals or having some form of income.

The scripts have come a long way from the films of 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s when women would be shown as teenagers or young adults without any career plans, waiting to be wooed before they marry. As the plot demanded there could be revenge, mistaken identity and other forms of histrionics thrown in. In mainstream films, such as *Karan Arjun* (1995), the female lead Kajol is a young heiress, as is Raveena Tandon in all films except in *Mohra* (1994) where she is a journalist. Yet her most memorable screen presence is a popular song in which she dances in the rain and at one point her flesh is literally kneaded by Akshay Kumar the leading man. In other films, leading ladies are often the hapless exotic dancer like Madhuri Dixit in *Tezaab* (1988).

New scripts show more and more women participating in the workforce but a closer analysis found that they are rarely represented as decision makers, business leaders or in command. Her financial independence does not in most cases impact the plot or allow her to have more agency. The profession often becomes an attention to detail that lends a contemporary flavor.

Therefore, it is not telling enough that in the films analysed for the research about 58% of women are shown as professionals. Also the pyramid is literally inverted when it comes to professions chosen for women. Most of them work in low paying or mid rung jobs which is in sharp contrast to the frequent projection of men at the helm of affairs. Women professionals, such as Anushka Sharma, the eager reporter in *PK* (2014) or Katrina Kaif, an acrobat looking for a break in *Dhoom 3* (2013) are all rookies compared to Boman Irani, channel owner and employer and Aamir Khan, circus owner and legendary magician. In most cases she is either junior to her male counterpart, relinquishes her profession, is shown as taking on the legacy of the leading man or operating under his shadows. She is never as good or better than the male characters in what they do – other than in biopics. In *Ek Tha Tiger* (2012), *Vicky Donor* (2012), *Prem Ratan Dhan Pao* (2015) etc – a random sample of films where women have an income – they are either in junior positions, struggling to make ends meet or their job is a ruse to ensure a romantic tangle and they are not as good at it as their romantic co-lead is.

In *Raanjhanaa* (2013), Sonam Kapoor takes on the legacy of her dead lover, a union leader at Jawahar Lal Nehru University (JNU) played by Abhay Deol. Her ex-lover and stalker Kundan played by Dhanush, neither a student nor educated or politically inclined before, comes with no other intention than to stalk her again or to seek her forgiveness. But such is his natural flair as a leader that Sonam is asked to step aside for him. Eventually, although he is only always acting for love, his ideology is shown to be much stronger than hers whose motives are always petty and personal.

Such constant undermining is present in the film *Sultan* (2016) as well. Anushka Sharma who is a female wrestler in *Sultan*, quickly moves from being a powerful woman to one whose frail ankle becomes an object of worship. Eventually she gives up her sporting career when she becomes pregnant, willingly retreating from public life and mouthing a line that has caused outrage in select media and social media platforms – *"What better medal than this could I have won?"* implying that her pregnancy was a bigger win that the world championship. Earlier, she is shown as the established wrestler who spurns the romantic attention of Salman Khan because he has no professional identity. To prove his love for her, or to win her over, he decides to prove his superiority. What was earlier a skill to be learned over the years, quickly becomes a skill that comes naturally to the superhero.

Only in the film *Drishyam* (2015), Tabu plays the role of an Inspector General of Police. But she is foremost a mother of a son guilty of sexual assault and blackmail, who is subsequently murdered. She

is therefore, shown as unreasonable and easily outwitted by a common man, played by Ajay Devgn, protecting his family. In Bhojpuri and Odia films female actors have no significant professional identity.

MORE WOMEN ARE SHOWN AS PROFESSIONALS BUT MOST OF THEM ARE IN LESS PAYING, JUNIOR JOBS AS COMPARED TO THEIR MALE COUNTERPARTS

MEN GO TO WORK AS

Top jobs — PM, CEO, King, RAW boss, Circus owner, Top cop

Law and Order or Defence
Senior CBI officers | Senior RAW & ISI officers | Senior advocate
Judge | Army officer | Navy officers

Politics, government and world order:
Politician | Minister | Prince | Trade union leader | Rebel forces | Terrorist

Politics, government and world order:
Senior officials of selection committee | Olympic and commonwealth selection board

Crime : Mafia don
Science and Technology : Scientist | Cryptologist
Skilled forces : Pilot, doctor, renowned psychotherapist
Arts and Humanities : Author | Principal | famous singer | Rockstar | Film director
Stage artist | Magician of legendary status | | Celebrity photographer
Industry & capital : Businessman | Bankers from Wall Street & London | TV channel owner | landlord

Services : Butcher | Theif

MEN ARE ALMOST ALWAYS IN LEADERSHIP AND PROMINENT POSITIONS AS COMPARED TO THEIR FEMALE COUNTERPARTS

When a woman has real, cutting edge ambition, it never does end well and almost always fatally. *Aitraaz* (2004) a Hindi remake of *Disclosure*, portrays Priyanka Chopra as the company owner's young wife and not a careerist, unlike her Hollywood counterpart. To make matters worse, for all her wrong doings, that is, sexual harassment at workplace, she must embrace death at the end. Madhur Bhandarkar's series of films on working women – *Page 3* (2005), *Corporate* (2006), *Fashion* (2008) and *Heroine* (2012) are stories without hope. Each of them have run well, receiving critical and commercial success. In fact, critically they have been read as a new genre of hard hitting films. His earlier film *Chandni Bar* (2001) did itself credit by depicting the gritty realism of a bar dancer's life. It depicts the extreme violence and exploitation of young girls and women, rendered with finesse by the actress Tabu. But his later films, become formulaic – a talented, naïve girl in search of success crushed by a ruthless world. Most of the female characters are made to succumb to stereotypes. Nothing can work in face of market driven collusions. The world of work, according to Bhandarkar, is a men's club. Ambition and success, even if it does come fleetingly is at such cost that there is no aspirational quality in any of the films.[36]

4.9.2 Women centric films creating a new narrative space

The selected period from which films were sampled, saw a significant prevalence of women directed and women centric films. More importantly these were films that were box office surprises and were declared super hits i.e., films that more than doubles the investment. They received critical acclaim as well as audience popularity. Noteworthy among them – *English Vinglish* (2012), *Queen* (2014), *Revolver Rani* (2014), *Bobby Jassoos* (2014), *Piku* (2015), *Dil Dhadakne Do* (2015), *Nil Battey Sannata* (2016), *Margarita with a Straw* (2016).[37] Many of these films broke stereotypes (*Bobby Jasoos)*, armed women with an alternative, depicted sisterhood (*Queen, Nil Battey Sannata*) and uncoupled sexual needs or fulfilment from marriage and provided a different definition of physical beauty (*Margarita with a Straw*). All of these women interacted with the public sphere on their own terms and without the backing or inspiration of a man. In that regard, the hugely successful *Dangal* even though a story based on woman wrestling champion who broke gendered barriers, is also basically a father's longing for a son who would carry on his legacy as a champion. It is only when the daughters show promise as potential wrestlers, that the father gets over his disappointment.

The film *Piku* (2015) was found to be very popular among the respondents. To the young girls in particular, this film has become a new benchmark for films that could have a female protagonist and yet be a mainstream comedy and hearty family drama. It depicted a slice of urban middle class life, without casting the woman in a stereotyped role as an avenger of violence or one fighting for social reform. In case of *English Vinglish* (2012), a woman directed feature, the plot was unusual, depicting a woman's personal aspiration which is neither gendered nor stereotyped. The main protagonist, Deepika Padukone's role in *Piku*, was instrumental in hiking her earnings per film in an industry which is notorious for its gender disparity in wages. She has recently made it to the Forbes list of 10 highest paid female actors. It is ironical that despite such success her fees continue to be much lower than her male counterparts who have not managed to attain commercial success.[38]

4.9.3 Inspiring young girls to make autonomous choices

Both films have been watched widely by male and female respondents of this study – particularly adolescents and young adults between 18 – 25 years old. *Piku's* character as the independent norm-defying young woman has inspired many of the young girls and women who were interviewed – particularly in Bhubaneswar, Ranchi and Siwan. She presents to them a role model of how they might be able to negotiate family expectations and gendered roles in future. Rojalin, a 20-year old woman from Jagannathpur Busti, Bhubaneswar, currently employed as a domestic help, is the sole earner for her family of an ailing mother and young siblings. According to her, the depiction of *Piku's* choice lifted the gloom from her daily burdens.

> "It was her choice to care for her father. She was successful, she could have moved on. But she stayed, refused to get married and performed her responsibility so efficiently. People have always told me that I will ruin my chances of getting married, settling down, if I continue to care for my family. Piku has shown me an alternative. I am trying to get a seat for vocational training."

For 26-year old Puja, a journalism student from Ranchi, *Piku* is 'like us'. According to her, the film depicts the stories of young women of her generation. "I and my friends live that life. You will see that most elderly parents are being taken care of by their daughters. The fact that a film like *Piku* was made is a reflection of how the long held norm that sons are the providers of care during old age, has been altered. Our generation has proved that daughters are far more selfless and good at performing this responsibility." Other women centric and women directed films such as *Pink* (2016)*, Mardani* (2014) and *Gulaab Gang* (2014) will be discussed under films depicting VAWG.

4.9.4 Women deprived of nobler ambitions and solidarity

(A) Public Sphere Unpopulated by Women

48%

It is not surprising that in 48 % of the films, men perform a nationalistic function, serve the country, society or community in some form.

17%

In 17 % of the films, women perform a similar function.

(B) Men Function in Groups, Women Usually Do Not

84% films show some form of brotherhood.

© Can Stock Photo

28% films show some form of sisterhood

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4.10 Turn for the grassroots

There is a decisive turn for provincial and rural themes in Indian films – particularly Bollywood which no longer considers Mumbai, its city of existence, as a metaphor for India at large. Noteworthy among them *Welcome to Sajjanpur* (2008), *Billu* (2009), *Peepli Live* (2010), *Gangs of Wasseypur* (2012), *Gulaab Gang* (2014), *City Lights* (2014), *Manjhi: The Mountain Man* (2015), *Dum Lagake Haisha* (2015). New sensibilities and concerns are finding cinematic expressions. The aesthetic as well as music have undergone major shifts. Folk tunes are inspiring songs. More importantly, rural people are no longer stereotyped as incorruptible and wide-eyed. They are real contemporary people affected by real concerns. However, this change of world view has not altered representation of women, who continue to be objectified or portrayed as victims. *Manjhi: The Mountain Man* creates a narrative space where the daily hardships of rural women find realistic depiction. Directed by Ketan Mehta, this film is based on the real story of Dashrath Manjhi,[39] a poor labourer from Bihar. The film highlights several important social issues – caste based violence including rape of Dalit women, lack of medical facilities and the daily rigours faced by the poor and marginalised. It even shows a man in an intimate relationship with the mountain – a profound statement on the environment. The plot turns when Phaguniya, played by Radhika Apte, heavily pregnant, must traverse a cliffy road to carry lunch for her husband. She falls and cannot be saved in time because there are no medical facilities within reach. Despite the centrality of a woman's burden as its theme, the film neglects to make any strong statement regarding VAWG or gender based rights. The intersectionality of caste and gender based violence is touched upon merely as a vignette of rural life. Majhi is a Musahar Dalit – a community whose women are extremely vulnerable. Phaguniya, the Musahar Dalit woman becomes a plot mover in the film posthumously because her husband decides to treat her death as an impetus for action. It is a missed opportunity that mainstream Indian films depicting poverty and inequalities of rural life fail to do so through the lens of women, who are at the heart of all deprivation. They fail to highlight critical issues such as malnutrition, maternal and infant mortality all of which are urgent concerns that affect women and children primarily.

Gangs of Wasseypur (2012) shows its women in the throes of child birth and dying due to childbirth. But it is an objectified depiction in which the woman is a nameless, voiceless character, a mere turn in the plot to ensure that its protagonist, Sardar Khan grows up an orphan and revenge becomes the

abiding motive for action. Both parts of *Gangs of Wasseypur* have received critical acclaim for its depiction of a gritty and violent coal wars. Women play completely subverted roles of a wife who is cheated upon but must continually bear children, victims of domestic violence, sex workers and the mistress. In the second part, Huma Qureshi may keep her lover and later husband, from straying but that is hardly a comment on her agency as a woman and an equal. These films may depict reality but that reality is an incomplete one, and only the dominant male narrative is chosen over all others.

Furthermore, the rural setting has provided a legitimate space for *nautanki,* an extremely vulgar form of rural entertainment, involving bawdy songs and lyrics and sexually suggestive performances by a female dancer in front of a male audience. A *nautanki* like song and dance routine or what is now popularly known as the item song has replaced the erstwhile cabaret. Such a performance is included in almost every other film as a musical highlight. Songs such as '*Munni badnaam hui'*, is a call out to the women of the village, many of whom bear such names, and it has direct repercussions on the lived realities of young women and girls in the villages.

5 Conclusion

The study concluded that Indian cinema has considerable influence on patriarchal attitudes, legitimization of VAWG and sexist behaviour across all aspects of life and society. Films are the primary and to an extent, the only cultural good consumed by the communities that were part of this research. The film analysis itself, strengthened by literature reviews and media articles, pointed firmly to its role as a proponent of a strong and regressive patriarchy. Due to the pluralism inherent in India and its pockets of uneven distribution of wealth, education and progress, this regression is sometimes camouflaged. A set of indicators, specially developed to critically analyse this form entertainment that works well across population, helped study the subtext.

Key conclusions are the following:

- Alternative scripts and progressive films may have gained critical acclaim. But they have neglected to represent women as equal and full of agency.

- Most top grossing films are hero driven and tend to objectify women. There are some exceptions of women-led and directed films that have performed well. But in terms of market share and reach, they are far behind.

- Several women-led films have been made recently and many have enjoyed commercial success. Yet many of these are not watched by the young girls and boys of the community.

- Inspirational stories of women characters feature in mainstream films. While it is a good start, such films are usually biopics, about a social concern or about retribution and revenge.

- The objectified image of a woman on screen deeply influences young girls and women. They find themselves caught between tradition and aspirations. Fear of assault is connected to the way in which girls dress up.

- Women on screen frame the notions held by young men and boys about how a woman should be. More dangerously, notions of consent as mandatory has been completely liquidated by mainstream films.

- Films have a role to play in early sexual awakening. Acquiring a romantic partner is considered to be a real goal. Exposure to explicit content encourages irresponsible sexual behaviours.

Recommendations on an engagement roadmap for Oxfam India

Film industry
1. Women led narratives which are not about women as recipients and survivors of sexual violence, abound in the lived realities of the community that was studied. It is important to discover those stories of resilience, humour and inspiration to subvert the masculinity of cinematic narratives. Case studies may be developed as a repository of creative inspiration for plots. Workshops may be conducted to educate film makers on the possibility of a more gender equal and gender just entertainment. 2. The link between literature and cinema should be strengthened. Indian regional writing is rich with a provincial reality that depict women as real and strong people. Writings with strong feminist and marginalized voices should be encouraged as inspiration for screenplays. 3. A campaign to Convert the Heroine would be critical. Female characters are potentially the most important influencers in the industry. Sensitising them would be important if underlying sexism of the male dominated industry is to be addressed – including wage gap, casting couch, hero-led scripts, participation in 'item songs'. If the heroines are sensitised to boycott film that fail to pass the gender equality test, the paradigm shift would be achievable. 4. Women directors should be incentivized with larger awards and funding opportunities, film festivals organized on a larger scale and an active global community of film makers instituted as a creative common for gender equal films.
Influencers, policymakers, local government
5. A Circle of Influence comprising of artists, intellectuals, academics, women politicians and law makers, corporate leaders may be constituted as an informal top body governing and advocating gender equality in films. It could emerge as a feminist Film Certification Board which certifies a film based on its representation of women. 6. Gender sensitisation workshops with policy makers and parliamentarians with a focus on social norms that repress a women and girls' freedom to consume culture, access technology, make personal choices.

Youth
7. Gender sensitisation workshops with adolescent and young adults with a focus on critical viewing of films and other cultural products.
8. Arming the youth with a set of tools would impose on them the role of an 'active citizens.' Use of mobile, in the form of a feedback application would resonate with the technology friendly generation and give them a sense of immediacy and participation.
9. Cultural activities involving young girls and boys to overcome inhibitions and taboos associated with free mixing. Theatre based interventions to break gender based stereotypes.
10. Analyse behaviour and influences in the ungoverned spaces of WhatsApp

Annexure 1:
Film Sample

Hindi Films
1. Dabangg 2 (2012)
2. Student of the Year (2012)
3. Ek Tha Tiger (2012)
4. Rowdy Rathode (2012)
5. Gangs of Wasseypur (2012)
6. Cocktail (2012)
7. Dhoom 3 (2013)
8. Ashiqui 2 (2013)
9. Chennai Express (2013)
10. Ram-Leela (2013)
11. PK (2014)
12. 2 States (2014)
13. Bajrangi Bhaijaan (2015)
14. Prem Ratan Dhan Pao (2015)
15. Baahubali – the Beginning (2015)
16. Tanu Weds Manu Returns (2015)
17. Piku (2015)
18. Dangaal (2016)
19. Sultan (2016)
20. Airlift (2016)
21. Rustom (2016)
22. Mary Kom (2014)
23. Neerja (2016)
24. Bhaag Milkha Bhaag (2013)
25. English Vinglish (2012)
26. Dear Zindagi (2015)
27. Queen (2014)
28. Kahaani (2012)
29. Gulaab Gang
30. Mardani (2014)
31. Drishyam (2015)
32. Talvar (2015)
33. Pink (2016)
34. NH10 (2015)
35. Lunchbox (2013)
36. Vicky Donor (2012)
37. Ae Dil Hai Mushkil (2016)
38. Housefull 3 (2016)
39. Great Grand Masti (2016)
40. 3 Idiots (2009)
41. Happy New Year (2014)
42. Ragini MMS 2 (2014)
43. Raanjhana (2013)
44. Dilwale (2015)
45. Kick (2014)

Bhojpuri Films:

Nirahua Rickshawala 2 (2015)
Bam Ban Bol Raha Hain Kashi Rakhwala (2013)

Odiya Films:
Tu Mo Love Story (2017)
Love Station (2016)

Annexure 2

Sample questionnaire for Focus Group Discussions

Focus Group Discussion on Impact of Indian Films on Violence against Women and Girls

Purqazi, Uttar Pradesh, India

Guiding questions

Group: Young men (18 – 25)

Introduction
- Purpose of the research explained
- Round of introductions (name, age, education, occupation, caste, religion)
- Expectations – a free discussion

Consumption of films (a free chat with prompts)
- Do you like watching films?
- What films have you watched lately?
- What makes you choose the films you watch? Friends decide, or posters, radio, TV?
- If old films are mentioned, find out why they are such classics/favourites? (Ram Teri Ganga Maili, Sagar etc)
- Who did you watch it with and where?
- What was the one most memorable/enjoyable part of the film?
- Any film you didn't like and why?
- What role did the woman play in the film? How did you feel about that…
- *open question according to the answer*

Discussion on films that are mentioned and some others:
Why do you enjoy the violence and action?
What are some of the realistic depictions in films?
What would you say about the role of women in such circumstances?
Can films be made about their lives – as they go about their daily work and routine?
Would you be entertained by it?

Gangs of Wasseypur
What did you like?
What was the story about?
What role did the women play?
Polygamy – need to have more than one wife. Views on that. (not to make it a question of religious or legal sanction)

Gulab Gang
Have you heard about the real Gulaab Gang?
What do you feel about their way of avenging themselves?
A discussion.

Play Fevicol Se
- Have you heard this song before?
- Where? Can you describe the context?

- Can you comment on the lyrics. Do you understand what she is saying?
- How do you feel when you listen to this?
- Does this reflect real life?
- Have you heard the term item number?
- Can you talk about some more such songs?
- Why do the women in such songs always wear such clothes and sing such lines?

The ideal heroine
- Do you talk about heroines amongst yourselves?
- Who are your favourites?
- Why did you like her in that particular role?
- Who is an ideal heroine?
- Why are women always shown as young and beautiful?
- What do you think of Sunny Leone/Kareena/Sonakshi/Ashiwaria etc?
- If you were to meet a particular favourite, how would you spend your time with her?
- Do you think a woman can do comedy? Can you give an example?
- An open discussion about how women are often at the receiving end of jokes that they don't understand – sexual innuendoes.

Clips from Grand Masti (may not be possible to show) or Chikni Chameli
Ask if they know the film. If not, introduce it as a movie about few friends.
- Have you watched any movies where a group of friends get together and have fun?
- Are they vastly popular and why?
- It is often found that young men like to watch titillating scenes and song sequences. Do you think the item numbers are choreographed in a way that young men enjoy?
- What is the reason why they are put in films?
- Good and bad aspects of such songs.
- Upon getting excited/aroused (*uttejit/masti/mazaa* – more innocuous and less direct but unambiguous Hindi words will be used) do the boys feel the need for romance?
- What is the environment for romance here? Do you get a chance to interact with girls freely?
- Why was the anti-Romeo move taken here?
- Who are the Romeos? How do they behave?
- Influence of films, music on their behaviour. Have you or your friend indulged in such harmless *ladki patana*?
- Do you think the girls expect a little bit of whistling and comments?
- Does it offend them or otherwise?
- Talk about what sort of actions are allowed – whistling, singing, wooing methods, not taking no for an answer.
- When you and your men friends get together do you talk about girls?
- What sort of jokes go around about nagging wives and demanding girl friends?
- Share a sexist joke. Why do you think this is funny?
- If one of you were to be really attracted to another girl, how would you express your romance/propose?
- How many times?
- If your friend were to love another woman would you help him?
- What are some creative ways to persuade a girl?
- What do you think of all the outcry against eve teasing?
- What is more harmful eve teasing or rape? Can they be compared? Why not?
- Can you recall any films that show this?

- Do you have women friends?

- Did you have girls who were friends in school?
- If yes, what are they doing now? Do you still communicate?
- If no, why not? Discuss barriers, customs, etc.
- What are the goals and possibilities for girls in your village?
- Tell us about your mother, the role she played.

The manly man
- Who is your favourite hero?
- What are the qualities that you would like to emulate?
- What are some qualities that you like in the hero?
- Describe your ideal man.
- What is honour? (*Izzat*)
- How do you ensure honour is preserved for the wife, daughter?
- What is your role as a protector? What do you do? Do you think your wife and daughter needs to be protected? From what and how?
- If your wife wants to go away to another city to work would it be acceptable?

Play Dabbang clip
What does Salman Khan mean when he says "Pyar se de rahe hain rakhlo, varna thappar maarke ke bhi de sakte hain"
Akshay Kumar, Kambakht Ishq
Marriage se pehle ladkiyan sex object hoti hain, aur marriage ke baad they object to sex
Salman Khan, Wanted
Tu ladki ke peeche bhagega, ladki paise ke peeche bhagega. Tu paise ke peeche bhagega, ladki tere peeche bhagega

Sexual violence in films
Scenes of sexual violence in films – will show if appropriate
OR – ask about recent films they have seen. An open discussion encouraging them to choose the films for discussion.
- How did you feel? Expand on this.
- Does this happen a lot in your village?
- What are some of the reasons of violence?
- What do you think of the way women are shown while facing violence?
- Do you think women in films are shown as fulfilling men's desires too often? Is that how women are in real life also?
- Usually, who are the perpetrators of violence and harassment in films?
- Have you had any conversations with your partner about these film scenes?

Violence:
- When you have arguments with your wife, what are they usually about?
- Do you get very upset?
- Who usually wins these arguments?
- Why do they win?
- Why do you think sometimes wives are beaten? / Have you ever hit your wife? *(Language and directness as appropriate)*
- Do you know of any men who have hit their wives?
- These days do you think marriages have become more complicated? Why?
- Do films represent ideal women? Can you name any?
- How many children do you have?
- Why is it important to have a son?

- What are some films that you might want your son to see?

Open house
- How can films change?
- Are films important in your life? Or are you more influenced by TV?
- How are women depicted in TV?
- Repeat some questions with respect to TV.
- How are the men influenced by films?
- We hear a lot of news about women from weaker sections being subjected to violence. Why does that happen? Do you feel women from your community are particularly at risk?
- How do you propose that such a risk be mitigated? What can the society do?
- What role do the elders of your village have in that matter?
- Should young girls and women always listen to what is being said by the elders because they are aware of the real threat?

Other questions
- How are women represented in news – TV and print?
- What are the usual news items related to women?
- Is the world becoming more dangerous? Why? What the reasons for those threats?
- How have the films changed? Depiction of women and why?
- Role of modernity

Note:
Depending on personalities and willingness to talk discuss:
- Personal relationships
- Eve teasing and propensity to harass
- Viewing women as sexual objects
- Recent comments by politicians
- Religious and social customs
- Explore the notion that 'it is a done thing.'
- Violence is not violence – this is just how we are

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