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Representation of Folk Traditions in Indian Cinema

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Abstract

This research paper studies the complex and changing relationship between Indian folk traditions and mainstream cinema. As we all know, Indian films have deep roots in traditional performance arts like Parsi Theatre, Nautanki, and Yakshagana, which have shaped storytelling in our country for a long time. The study looks at an important change in today's media, where folk culture is slowly moving from a community-based and ritual performance into a more polished "celluloid product." By using qualitative content analysis of well-known films like Teesri Kasam and Tumbbad, along with visual and sound-based study, the research shows that folk elements are no longer just in the background but have become the main driving force of the story. While cinema gives a big platform to protect and show these fading art forms, it is also commonly seen that "Disneyfication" and "itemization" of these traditions happen, which can remove local social and political meanings for wider commercial reach. The findings show a mix of cultures, especially seen in the growth of "Folk-Pop" and myth-based fantasy genres. In the end, the paper says that even though cinema works as an important cultural record, filmmakers should be more careful and sensitive so that regional identities are not simplified too much. The study suggests that we must understand and respect the ritual roots of these arts, so that the true spirit of Indian folk culture stays alive even in this digital age.

Keywords; *Folk Media, Ethnomusicology, Cultural Identity, Regional Cinema, Mimesis, Bollywood, Ritualistic Performance*

Introduction

The evolution of Indian cinema is not happening alone; it is closely connected with our country's rich oral traditions and regional performances. As we all know, even before the first camera started rolling in Mumbai, storytelling was already strong in our culture through many colourful folk forms. Indian films have taken their base from very old theatre practices. Parsi Theatre, known for its grand shows, music, and emotional drama, gave the basic structure for today's "masala" films. At

the same time, regional forms like Nautanki from North India and Yakshagana from Karnataka added their own style, with mythological stories, unique costumes, and rhythmic dialogues. In our country, these were not just for time pass; they were community events where people came together and shared values and history.When these folk elements moved into cinema, one important problem started to appear. There is always a struggle between showing real culture and making films that attract a big audience. When a filmmaker shows a village dance or folk song, the focus often changes from saving culture to making it look attractive on screen. The natural and simple beauty of folk life—like local language, rough settings, and community details—is commonly seen getting hidden under modern visual shine. To reach all-India viewers, filmmakers sometimes clean and polish these traditions, replacing their raw feel with perfect dance and studio sound. The main idea of this change shows both positive and negative sides. Cinema has surely helped in recording and bringing back many fading art forms, which otherwise may have disappeared. But at the same time, it has also changed their original nature. Community Performance: Earlier, these were group activities, full of rituals and linked with social and political life of people. Celluloid Commodity: After coming into films, they become products for mass viewing. In this shift, the original ritual meaning is often lost. A sacred dance, once performed for a deity, may become just a background scene in a romantic song. When folk culture becomes a product, its deeper social meaning is reduced so that it does not disturb wider audiences. So, what happens is that the outer look of tradition remains in films, but its inner spirit slowly fades. This creates a cinema space where tradition looks alive, but its real depth is missing.

Objectives of the Study

- To trace the historical trajectory of folk influences from early talkies to the contemporary era.
- To analyze the technical and narrative methods used to integrate folk music and dance.
- To investigate the impact of "Pan-Indian" films on the global visibility of local folk myths (e.g., the *Bhoota Kola* in *Kantara*).
- To evaluate the socio-cultural implications of reimagining folk "others" for an urban audience.

Literature Review

One important work in this area is Vijay Mishra's *Bollywood Cinema: Temples of Desire*. Mishra explains that Indian films are not just copies of Western Hollywood style, but they are strongly connected with a "subtext of folk." According to him, story patterns, sudden songs, and larger-than-life heroes are coming from our regional oral traditions. In our country, this folk base works like a hidden structure, making cinema easy to understand for common people and connecting old mythology with modern city life. Many recent studies focus on the "itemization" of folk dances. This idea explains how traditional dances like Kalbelia of Rajasthan or Lavani of Maharashtra are taken from their real social setting and shown in films as "item numbers." Researchers say this creates a kind of visual show where looks are more important than meaning. Earlier, these dances were used for identity and storytelling, but now in cinema, their deeper value is often reduced. This change brings some important points: Aesthetic Sanitization: The natural and rough feel of folk dance is replaced with bright lighting and perfectly trained dancers. Erosion of Meaning: A dance linked to rituals or harvest festivals is used in films for general scenes like club celebrations. Commodification: The tradition of folk artists becomes a product for sale, often separated from the original community. To understand how Indian films tell stories,

scholars often look back at the *Natyashastra*, an old text on performing arts. It explains ideas like Rasa (emotion) and Bhava (expression), which still guide how actors perform and how audiences feel while watching films. Because of this, Indian cinema is more about experience and emotion,no just story. At the same time, some studies compare this with the "Griot" tradition. Though this word comes from West Africa, in the Indian context it is used for village storytellers or travelling singers. Commonly seen among Indian people in rural areas, these storytellers influenced the "Sutradhar" role in early films. This shows that Indian cinema is not something fully new, but it is a modern extension of our old storytelling traditions, which were spoken, performed, and deeply connected with people.

Methodology

The main research method is based on a "close reading" of selected films, treating them as important texts. Movies like *Teesri Kasam*, *Lagaan*, and *Tumbbad* are taken as examples to understand how folk elements are included in the story. Instead of just watching for entertainment, this method carefully studies dialogues, song lyrics, and character journeys. The aim is to check whether folk identity is a core part of the story or just used for decoration. For example, in *Teesri Kasam*, Nautanki is central to the plot, while in *Tumbbad*, folk mythology shapes the full mood and moral message. This stage looks at the visual signs used by filmmakers to show rural and folk settings. In our country, these visuals are very important to create a local feeling. This analysis studies: Costumes: Traditional clothes, ornaments, and ethnic styles that show cultural truth. Set Design: Creation of village areas, mud houses, and spaces used for rituals. Visual Motifs: Repeated symbols like religious images or farming tools that connect the film to a specific place and culture. To understand how cinema thinking has changed over time, the study uses comparison between different periods. It compares the Social Realism of the 1950s—where folk culture showed the spirit of a new nation and village struggles—with the Mythic Fantasy of the 2020s. In today's time, folk elements are often shown in a bigger and more dramatic way using technology like CGI. Because of this, films move away from the simple and realistic social themes that were commonly seen in early cinema after independence.

Analysis

Unlike the simple "beginning-middle-end" pattern seen in many Western films, Indian cinema often uses the Sutradhar or narrator. This character connects the audience directly with the story, which is commonly seen among Indian people from old folk theatre. Also, many films follow a circular style of storytelling, where the story comes back to the starting point or repeats certain ideas. This is similar to folk epics, where the journey matters as much as the ending, and moral values are taught through repeated and rhythmic narration. The sound world of Indian films is deeply influenced by regional music. Instruments like the Dhol and Ektara, which were once played in village settings, are now part of big film music compositions. Music directors mix these natural sounds with modern electronic music and orchestras. While this helps in taking folk music to a wider audience, it also changes its original feel. The beat and energy remain, but the close and community feeling is often replaced by a more dramatic and designed sound. Festivals and local rituals are often used as key parts of film stories. In our country, these scenes serve two main roles: Cultural Authenticity: They make the film feel real and connected to a specific place and life. Exotic Appeal: For city or foreign viewers, these rituals are shown in a colourful and dramatic way to create attraction. Whether it is a temple festival or a harvest dance, such rituals give a strong identity to the film and help in storytelling. The

study also looks at different ways of showing folk culture through films and regions. In earlier films of Raj Kapoor, village life was shown in a soft and ideal way, full of innocence and simple values. But in recent times, directors like Anurag Kashyap show a more realistic picture. Their films present rural areas like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh in a raw and serious manner, focusing on social and political issues. This change shows how village life in cinema has moved from beauty to struggle. In recent years, South Indian films have become very popular by using local folk stories, horror, and fantasy. These films take inspiration from regional myths and gods, creating stories that feel both personal and widely relatable. This "Mythic Turn" shows that audiences today are more interested in real and local stories than copied Western ideas. By using their own cultural roots, these films have given new value and strength to folk traditions in the digital age.

Discussion

One main question is whether cinema is protecting folk culture or taking control of it. On one side, films give a big platform to traditional arts that may otherwise disappear. When a rare folk song comes in a popular movie, it often creates new interest, especially among young people. But this kind of preservation also has some problems. The film industry often makes a "standard" version of the art. By mixing many regional styles into one polished Indian look, the small local details—like dialect, instruments, and village history—are commonly lost. What we finally see is something familiar, but not fully original in depth. Folk art is not only about beauty; it is deeply connected with social systems in our country. The way caste and tribal identities are shown in films is an important topic. Many times, cinema uses folk elements just for effect, without showing the real struggles of the communities behind them. Tribal Representation: Local rituals are sometimes shown as simple or mysterious, instead of being understood as meaningful knowledge systems. Caste Dynamics: Traditions from lower social groups are often used by dominant characters in films. Real representation means going beyond dance and visuals, and showing the true social background of the artists. Even though some recent films are trying to improve this, there is still a gap between showing culture and respecting it properly. Another important point is the "Disneyfication" of Indian folk culture. To attract NRI and international viewers, filmmakers often present a clean, colourful, and simplified version of Indian life. This creates a kind of "postcard" image of India—bright, attractive, and easy to understand. In this process, the real struggles and raw life of villages are replaced by big-budget visuals made for global audiences. These changed folk elements become more like a brand than a living tradition. While this helps in gaining money and global attention, it also risks turning sacred practices into just fashion or background scenes. The real challenge is to balance global success with respect for original culture. This balance will decide how India's traditional stories are shown to the world in the future.

Research Results

The findings from studying the link between folk arts and Indian cinema show a big change in how traditional culture is used today. As we all know, this change clearly shows that folk is not just for decoration anymore, but it has become a strong base for modern filmmaking. One major result is the change in the role of traditional culture. In earlier films, folk songs and dances were mostly used as background elements or small parts to add local touch. But now, in recent cinema, folk has become the main driving force of the story. Full film plots are based on regional legends, tribal beliefs, and old myths. This shows that audiences are slowly moving away from common city-based stories and are more interested in

unique cultural roots that give a feeling of connection and curiosity. Technology has changed how we experience folk performances in films. In our country, traditional arts are usually simple and natural, but now with CGI and advanced sound, they are shown in a more polished way. Digital tools help filmmakers show mythological scenes and rituals in great detail. While this makes the visuals very impressive, it also changes the original feel. The natural and raw style of village performances is often replaced by a perfect and highly edited version made for cinema. The final outcome of this change is something called "Folk-Pop." This style mixes old folk music with modern sounds like electronic beats, rap, and rock. Through films, Folk-Pop has become very popular among young people. It helps the new generation connect with their culture in a modern and interesting way. Instead of keeping folk only in history, this mix keeps it alive in music and entertainment, even though sometimes it focuses more on catchy style than the deeper meaning of the original traditions.

Conclusion

The study of Indian cinema and its link with folk traditions shows a deep and complex journey of change. As we all know, the film industry works like a powerful but double-sided space for preserving our culture. While films help in saving old art forms from disappearing, they also change their original meaning in many ways. Cinema gives a big platform for regional voices, helping traditional songs and dances reach a wide audience. But this kind of preservation also has its own problem. When a community ritual is turned into a digital product, the local depth is often reduced for wider appeal. The final result is a colourful and attractive version of reality, where the real history and struggles of artists are sometimes hidden behind big visuals and production scale. The study clearly says that filmmakers must handle these traditions with care and responsibility. In our country, it is very important to avoid "cultural flattening," where different regional identities are mixed into one common folk image. Respecting rituals and giving proper recognition to the communities behind them is necessary. Real creative success comes when folk culture is shown as a living identity, not just as something to decorate the screen. Looking ahead, there is a need to focus more on how digital platforms are changing folk expression. Future studies should look at how small and independent regional films are using simple technology to tell real stories. These creators, commonly seen among new filmmakers, often give more honest voices without commercial pressure. Also, studying how social media and independent cinema help folk artists share their own stories, without depending on big studios, will be very important to understand the future of India's cultural storytelling.

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