

NEGOTIATING INDIANNESS: REPRESENTATION OF THE FARMER IN BOLLYWOOD

Dr Jyotsna Pathak*

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the evolving depiction of farmers and rural India in Bollywood cinema, tracing shifts from post-independence realism to post-liberalization romanticism. Through an analysis of films such as Do Bigha Zamin (1953), Mother India (1957), Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge (1995), and Lagaan (2001), the study explores how cinema reflects agrarian distress, socio-economic transformations, and the ideological framing of the farmer's role in nation-building. The Indian countryside with its hegemonic structures has been acknowledged as an area where reform is needed if an equal society can be envisaged in independent India. The depiction of these exploitative conditions and the means of alleviating the same then become an interesting point of study in Indian cinema. The paper argues that while early films critically engaged with rural exploitation and systemic injustice, later narratives often idealized the countryside, obscuring persistent agrarian crises.

Keywords: Farmer, nation, distress, justice, equality, Bollywood

INTRODUCTION

Speaking in the Constituent Assembly in 1948, Shri Satish Chandra Samanta, member of the Legislative Council, in his 'Demand' from the Ministry of Agriculture, used phrases "not looking after them," "cannot get sufficient food to eat," "they are dying," "milch cow," "wretched condition," "wretched lives," (*Constituent Assembly of India (Legislative) Debates Tuesday 16th March 1948 Official Report*, 1948, p. 2217) while talking about plight of Indian farmers in the Parliament. He questioned the effectiveness of the "Grow More Food campaign" launched by the government of the day. Talking about farmers he said, "...they produce milk from their cows but they cannot consume it. They produce the crops but they cannot keep them for themselves or for buying their needs." (*Constituent Assembly of India (Legislative) Debates Tuesday 16th March 1948 Official Report*, 1948, p. 2217). Similarly, Ch Ranbir Singh, a member from East Punjab said that farmers were apprehensive that they would receive a "step motherly treatment" (*ibid.*, p. 2221) from the new Government. According to him, government

*Dr Jyotsna Pathak is Associate Professor, Department of English, Delhi College of Arts & Commerce, University of Delhi, New Delhi. She has more than two decade of teaching experience, with specialisation in American Literature. Email: jyotsna.pathak@dcac.du.ac.in

policies of price control favoured urban residents and argued that “nobody takes care of his [the farmer] interests” (*Ibid.*, p. 2221). He went on to note that price decontrol favoured the rich while farmers suffered heavy losses. He mentioned the falling prices of *gur* in his speech to focus on farmer distress. He also brought to the fore the impact of “black market price” in “hiring an expeller (*kohlu*)” (*ibid.*, p. 2222) on the strained financial conditions of farmers in the country. Ch. Ranbir Singh’s contention was that setting a “fair price” for agricultural products would “set right the agricultural economy” (*ibid.*, p. 2222) and benefit the country. He also pointed out that “a villager who owns neither a car nor any newspaper, has too feeble a voice to make himself heard through the press” (*ibid.*, p. 2221).

The above debate shows that in the early years of independence even as the project of making a strong and self-reliant India was progressing, rural India felt that it was increasingly being ignored, and made invisible. This feeling was exacerbated during the decades of the 50s and 60s when the Five Year Plans were executed and India launched an effort to revitalise its primary sectors and moved towards industrialization. This was a period of great optimism and paradoxically equally great distress. This idealism as well as agony is reflected in the movies of the period.

Bollywood has always been a mirror of society: even as it entertains it has been an agent of cultural change. The forward march of the country as well as the social stresses it created are reflected in the Hindi movies of the 50s and 60s. The New Wave cinema of the 1950s focuses on realism and naturalism and is serious in tone. Movies like *Do Bigha Zamin* (1953, directed by Bimal Roy) and *Mother India* (1957, directed by Mehboob Khan) are searing in their realistic depiction of rural India and the agricultural distress brought about by outmoded modes of production, adherence to limiting social structures and behaviours, and, a rapidly changing economic scenario. These movies show Indian peasantry at the mercy of feudal chieftains and bourgeois leaders and businessmen as agricultural land is converted to industrial uses. The conversion of farmers to migrants in their own land is also the story of India. Movies like these make it apparent that even as the euphoria of independence and the project of nation building had gripped the nation, serious questions were being raised and the ‘idea of India’ was put under scrutiny.

Do Bigha Zameen is a watershed movie: it lays bare the conflict between “progress” and the rights of the people. Bimal Roy, the director, through the character of Shambhu Maheto (role played by actor Balraj Sahni) depicts the cost that marginal farmers and the socially disadvantaged have to pay in the process of nation making. This movie strips away the romanticised image of the village and asks a fundamental question: can a ‘new India’ be created on the backs of the destruction of the dreams and rights of its most disadvantaged groups. The economic charlatanism that occurs when the rich deprive small and marginal farmers, landless labourers, tribals and women of their rights is depicted in poignant terms when Shambhu sells all that he can; his household items and his wife’s gold earrings to collect 65 rupees he owes the moneylender Harnam Singh. He is shocked to learn that his debt has

ballooned to 235 rupees since the accountant has forged the papers and refuses to consider labour done by Shambhu and his son for Harnam as due payment. The caste angle, as reflected by the names of the characters, is also evident. The trials and tribulations of the family are encapsulated in the scene where Shambhu races another rickshaw puller, almost like horses in a derby, to earn money. The commodification of the farmer and the labourer is complete at this point. The movie ends with him losing his land. He cannot even take a handful of dust from his land since the guard accuses him of stealing.

The movie takes a jibe at romantic Nehruvian socialism. Shambhu's dispossession of his land is a forgone conclusion once it is revealed that Harnam Singh wishes to construct a mill on the land. At the same time the movie takes a hard view of the urban landscape: its impersonality and anonymity leaves the subaltern vulnerable to exploitation and dehumanisation. While Shambhu is reduced to an animal when he participates in the rickshaw race, his son is forced to stealing in order to gather the amount needed to reclaim their land. Bimal Roy highlights the dehumanising influence of the city. The only people who treat Shambhu as an individual are those who themselves have migrated from the countryside: Laloo Ustad and Chachi. Shambhu brings his sensitivity to the urban landscape and is overwhelmed by the din of the imposing city. Similarly when his wife Paro (role played by actress Nirupa Roy) travels to Calcutta in search of her husband, she is accosted and nearly raped. She is injured in a car accident and Shambhu has to make the agonising decision to spend his hard earned money to save his wife.

The court scene where Shambhu goes before the judge to argue his case but is overwhelmed by the judicial process and lingo points to the degree to which the poor and destitute have been removed from the process of justice. Shambhu, working within the confines of his rural morality, assumes that his word would be enough. He truly cannot understand how his claim that he is telling the truth before God is not taken at face value while Harnam's false documents are. The director here is marking a distinction between justice and equity. The driving force behind Shambhu's actions is his desire to reclaim his ancestral land. The movie shows that he cannot eke out a sustainable living from the land, but he is nonetheless emotionally bound to it. This aspect of the movie foreshadows the current scenario of rural distress and unemployment we see in the country currently. With an increasing share of small and marginal farmers, agriculture has long ceased to be a viable profession. In the face of rising costs farmers are slipping into debt and committing suicides in large number.

According to FEED in its Annual Survey of 2023 the average landholding size of marginal farmers in India is mere 0.38 hectares (Dr. Sanjeev Chopra; *Development Intelligence Unit*, n.d., p. 9) with only 37.17% of their income coming from crop production (*ibid.*, p. 10). These marginal farmers now own 47% of land area. The share of small and marginal farmers has steadily increased due to further division of land holdings as they pass from father to son. Consequently farming has become unviable. The lives of the peasantry is marked with bankruptcy, indebtedness, family problems, failure of crops, illness and drug abuse/alcohol addiction due to their inability to eke out a livelihood from their small landholding. The

increasing rates of farmer suicides is proof of the same. As per NCRB data (*"Farmer Suicides in India,"* 2014, p. 226) a total of 5650 farmers, i.e. 'those who own and work on field as well as those who employ/hire workers for field/farming activities. It excludes agricultural labourers' (*ibid.*, p. 226) who have committed suicide during 2014, the first year such data was collected accounting for 4.3% of total suicides in the country. Some 5,563 agricultural labourers died by suicide in 2021. The number of suicides increased by nine per cent from 2020 and by around 29 per cent from 2019. A total of 10,881 persons involved in the farming sector died by suicide during 2021, accounting for 6.6 per cent of total suicides victims (164,033) (*Shagun*, 2022, para. 10) in the country. Nonetheless they are unwilling to let go of their land and move to cities in search of jobs and other livelihood. Land is not simply a means of livelihood, it is also a connect to their roots and history. Therefore their disenfranchisement from their land is done extremely reluctantly and causes extreme trauma and guilt.

Do Bigha Zamin historicises the creation of farmers as internal migrants within India and their alienation from their own homeland. In this movie, there is a scathing attack and critique of Nehru's First Five Year Plan (1951-56) which envisaged 'development of agriculture' as a means of solving the different problems that formed due to the partition of the nation and the Second World War. Rebuilding the country after independence was the vision of this plan. Another main target was to lay down the foundation for industry, agricultural development in the country and to provide affordable healthcare, education in low price to citizens. Since the state was to play an active role in all economic sectors to achieve 'development', Shambhu and his family walking empty-handed into the sunset in the last frame of the movie only serves to highlight its failure. The movie forces the audience to confront the uncomfortable question: *can an equitable country be created if the access to resources, and justice is denied to the marginalised sections of society?*

Radha, played by Nargis, the central character in *Mother India*, is the epitome of the new nation that is taking shape. Her sacrifices and struggles mirror those of the newly independent India. Even as the audience revels in the project of nation making and acknowledges that it is an active participant in the same; the movie forces us to again take an unvarnished look at the unequal and unremitting sufferings that the rural poor have to face. The opening credits of the movie are a pean to the development of the country: roads, electricity and the construction bridges and dams which herald the inauguration of a modern, industrialised India. This is followed by an aged Radha inaugurating the *nalla* which would bring water, and by extension prosperity to the village. (It should be noted here that hydroelectric power projects were established during the Second Five Year Plan). This inauguration by her hands is both a celebration of her contributions in ensuring the survival of the village despite natural calamities like droughts and floods and also in the face of social unrest brought about by her son Birju (played by Sunil Dutt) who becomes a bandit. She does not hesitate to shoot and kill her own son when he attempts to kidnap the daughter of the very man who is the source of his family's tragedy. Radha forms the moral centre of the movie; therefore when she shoots her son in the final moments of the movie, one can interpret this as a vehement rejection of Birju's

grouse against Sukhilal as well as his desire for 'justice.' This idea is further cemented by the representation of Birju (role played by actor Sunil Dutt) and Ramu (role played by actor Rajendra Kumar) as two moral opposites with no redeeming features in the former.

It is in retrospect that the audience sees Radha as a young bride whose future is stripped away by the greedy moneylender Sukhilal (role played by actor Kahanyialal). We see a young wife reduced to a widow ploughing the field herself. She has literally become the workhorse that will feed the family - it is poignant moment even as it is extremely problematic. The audience pays homage to the mother for her sacrifice in protecting, feeding and creating conditions where we as children and citizens can prosper. In the figure of Radha, the director portrays not only the 'Mother India' who sacrifices for her children, but also all mothers. Radha's depiction flattens the image of the mother to a long suffering figure who strives silently for the creation of a better future for her children. Her economic and psychological struggles are presented as turns of fate which a 'good woman' stoically withstands. Their connection to exploitative social and economic structures is not explored. In addition, a critical viewer cannot but notice the unquestioning acceptance of suffering by the rural poor in the process of nation making. Even as Radha is feted, the movie stops short of asking a fundamental question: does the arrival of modern technology release farmers and women in the countryside from the exploitative clutches of moneylenders and big business that would come with increasing industrialisation.

Both *Do Bigha Zameen* and *Mother India* should be seen as cautionary tales. The directors have shown great insight in foregrounding an issue that had yet to take centre stage: until the concerns of the rural poor are met, the project of making a new, modern progressive India is incomplete and fundamentally flawed. It is noteworthy that they could pinpoint and examine the looming agricultural crises amidst the euphoria of independence and industrialisation. Though melodramatic, both movies raise questions about the difference between justice and equity. These emphasize the idea that until all citizens are treated equally, justice will evade the diverse populations in the country. Both movies however evade answering the question as to the consequences if this state of affairs were to continue. While Shambhu and his family quietly fade into the sunset without even a handful of soil that was once their own; Radha kills Birju for daring to violate the honour of Sukhilal's daughter. This passive acceptance is problematic since it hints at the deeply accepted and entrenched feudal hierarchies. The central protagonists of both movies believe that hard work is the remedy for their troubles. Shambhu believes that he can earn his way out of an illegal debt. Similarly Radha tells Birju that hard work in the fields will improve their condition, as it has in the past. These responses suggest that the Indian farmer has reconciled himself to a subsistence life of barely able to feed himself even as he feeds the world. These responses also suggest a lack of awareness of systemic exploitation that are a salient feature of the modern industrial complex. Birju's rant against Sukhilal's mistreatment of his mother and other women of the village is the only moment when these issues are addressed. His transformation into a dacoit trivialises them and makes it easier for the audience to view the story through the simplistic moral binaries of good/evil.

The liberalisation of the Indian economy in the 1990s was another moment of profound change in the economic and social set up of the country. It heralded the freedom from the licence raj and raised the possibility of harnessing the youth of the country to create a new India. The term ‘population dividend’ was often touted during this time. This sense of hope and joy of the times is prevalent in the movie *Dil Wale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge (DDLJ)* (1995, directed by Aditya Chopra). The verdant green fields of Punjab and the happy families tending to their fields is no longer a mirage. This movie presents an India where farmers are appropriately compensated for their work and have found their way into the Indian mainstream. This is evident from the fact that even the non-resident Indians (NRIs) are returning to the motherland. A notable feature of *DDLJ* is that it is targeted at the non-resident Indian population who are nostalgic in their remembrance of the nation that they left years ago. They wish to return to this pristine fields of India which exists only in their memory; even as they are eager to return to their ‘real’ lives overseas. Raj (role played by actor Shahrukh Khan) proves that he is the ideal ‘Indian’ virtuous and obedient boy to Chaudhary Baldev Singh (role played by actor Amrish Puri) and marries Simran (role played by actress Kajol) with the latter’s approval. The dichotomy between the fact that the couple romance all over Europe but are unable to gather the wherewithal to marry without the approval of the elders is stark. It further highlights the NRI view that Indian children are virtuous and moral, while those raised with western values are corrupted and immoral.

This nostalgia for a nation that existed only in a ‘memory’ is the reason why the movie romanticises the countryside and presents it a verdant paradise. One never sees the fields barren or ready to be tilled. There is an absolute erasure of the backbreaking work that a farmer performs day in and day out. It is almost as if the fields are miraculously tended. In contrast to this, *Do Bigha Zamin* and *Mother India* focus on the untilled land where the protagonists perform backbreaking work to eke out a living. This pastoral representation in *DDLJ* is accompanied by an erasure of the caste and social barriers that are undeniable feature of life in India.

One can view this movie as young man’s hope that the endemic issues plaguing the country would be resolved in the post-liberalisation era. Though the movie was a blockbuster romance musical and cemented the lead actors, it reduces India and its populace, especially those in the villages as virtuous simple-minded people. The upper caste setting of the movie elides over the distress in the villages of India. Liberalisation resulted in the explosion of the Indian middle class. However it was a mixed blessing for rural India. While farmers with large land holdings could benefit from “vertical market integration.....characterised by large retailers or input suppliers controlling technologies, inputs and market access” (Marshall & Randhawa, 2017, p.9). However these proved barriers for small and marginal farmers and pushed them towards debt and insolvency. This eroded the profitability of farming for most farmers and resulted in greater rural distress. While nearly 9000 farmer suicides were recorded in 1998 this figure had ballooned to 12,360 in 2014. (Marshall & Randhawa, 2017, p.9). Clearly the possibility of rural progress and prosperity hinted by economic liberalisation remained a pipe dream.

Lagaan (2001, directed by Ashutosh Gowariker) needs to be seen as a spatial displacement of farmer unrest and distress. The *othering* of farmer distress and the transference of their frustration at unjust policies towards the British is a noteworthy ploy. The movie unfolds at the height of British power in India. The villagers of Champaner are forced to pay tax (*lagaan*) despite drought and failing crops. When they seek redressal from their ruler, Captain Andrew Russell (role played by actor Paul Blackthorne) who leads the regiment stationed at the court challenges them to a game of cricket. He suggests that if they win they would be exempted from all *lagaan* for three years. The movie takes on a nationalistic flavour as the villagers struggle to understand the rules of the game, form a cohesive team and finally emerge victorious at the penultimate moment. However there are notes of dissonance: Raja Puran Singh Chawla (role played by actor Kulbhushan Kharbanda) is an effete ruler who, like many of his ilk during the time, stays on the throne with the British support. Therefore he is a tool of British repression for the villager. He personifies the failure of leadership in protecting their citizens and ensuring equity. The movie is a masterclass of filmmaking because even as it lays bare this fact, it also baldly states that the only way rural India can emerge into its own is if it overcomes its caste and class prejudices to harness talent and work as a unit. One can view the cricket match as a moment of resistance against the status quo and a spark of rebellion: awareness of discrimination is the first step towards a demand for rights. However, this nascent realisation is lost in the face of the 'just' British keeping their word and forgiving the tax. One can see the echoes of Radha's assertion to Birju that if they work hard their future will be better and Shambhu's belief that playing by the rules will bring him justice. In both movies this outcome is negated in the loss of a child and land (akin to the mother) respectively. *Lagaan* is simultaneously escapist and realistic. The positive outcome in the movie is wish-fulfilment and therefore reminds the audience of its falseness. The movie historicises the pathetic conditions of the farmers even as it foretells the form any resistance from them might take. A salient feature of the movie is that it acknowledges that the solutions to the myriad problems the Indian peasantry face lie within it: it has the capacity to innovate and reinvent itself; all it needs is a little support and faith. Bhuvan (role played by actor Amir Khan) succeeds because the village rallies around the team. In this sense even as the Bhuvan and the villagers remind the audience of Shambhu and Radha, it can believe that Indian farmer, and by extension rural India can morph into the prosperous and confident Chaudhary Baldev Singh of *DDLJ*.

Taking a look at these movies it becomes clear that the hopes of reform in the farming sector and possibilities of amelioration of their sufferings have become undone. The farmer and rural India finds itself exactly where it was in the beginning of the 20th century. The contemporary farmer finds his lived reality to be no different from that of Shambhu, Radha or Bhuvan: prone to the vagaries of nature and fickle government policies. They too are losing ownership of their land through changes in land use laws, entry barriers and the advent of commercial farming. Rural India stands at a precipice and needs urgent support and attention. Reforms in the farming sector are the need of the day. They need to be targeted and tailored state- wise and even region- wise as one size will not fit all. Otherwise there is a real risk

that farming will become unviable and more farmers leave it and will be reduced to daily wage workers. It is important that the policy shift from only land holders to improving the livelihoods of small and marginal landholders and the landless labourers. Nevertheless all is not lost and the possibility of a resurgence of Indian farming remains high. This is the final message of *Lagaan*, and hence the importance of the movie.

REFERENCE

1. Analytical reports. (n.d.). PRS Legislative Research. <https://prsindia.org/policy/analytical-reports/state-agriculture-india>
2. Constituent Assembly of India (Legislative) Debates (Tuesday 16th March 1948). Official Report. (1948). South Asia Commons. <https://southasiacommons.net/artifacts/2333358/constituent-assembly-of-india-legislative-debates-tuesday-16th-march-1948-official-report/3095194/>
3. Dr. Sanjeev Chopra, Development Intelligence Unit. (n.d.). Annual Survey of State of Marginal Farmers in India. *Development Intelligence Unit*. <https://www.developmentintelligenceunit.in/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/3.-Annual-Survey-for-Marginal-Farmers.pdf>
4. *National Crime Records Bureau*. (2014). Farmer Suicides in India. In Chapter 2A. *National Crime Records Bureau*. <https://www.ncrb.gov.in/accidental-deaths-suicides-in-india-year-wise.html?year=2014>
5. Marshall, F., & Randhawa, P. (2017). Economic liberalisation and rural-urban transformation. In India's peri-urban frontier: Rural-urban transformations and food security (pp.8–11). *International Institute for Environment and Development*. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep02716.4>
6. Shagun. (2022, September 1). An agricultural labourer died by suicide every 2 hours in 2021: NCRB. *Down to Earth*. <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/agriculture/an-agricultural-labourer-died-by-suicide-every-2-hours-in-2021-ncrb-84616>