

Audience perception of sports women in India cinema: A case study of 'Dangal'

Mr. Agni Kumar Behera

Assistant Professor

Department of Journalism & Mass Communication

Berhampur University

email: agnibehera@gmail.com

&

Ms. Pravati Sahu

Masters Student

Dept. of Journalism & Mass Communication

Berhampur University

email: prabhatisahu20@gmail.com

Abstract

Cinema has played a pivotal role in both reflecting and influencing societal perceptions of women in India (Gupta, 2003). Traditional cultural norms and family dynamics have reinforced these inequalities, with women being under the influence of their parents before marriage and their husbands after marriage (Chakrapani & Kumar (eds.), 1994). These inequalities are further reflected in the media, including the Indian film industry, which has historically been male-dominated (Ganti, 2004). The current study makes an attempt to understand audience perception of sports women in the film and the role of cinema in creating awareness about unconventional sports in India.

The study employs survey method in Berhampur University, Odisha through a structured questionnaire for the purpose. The study reveals the scope of cinema as a pedagogical tool to bridge in the knowledge gap among the youths. The film also helps in changing the perception towards unconventional sports as well as sports women.

Key Words: Indian Cinema, Audience Perception, Dangal.

1. Introduction

Cinema has played a pivotal role in both reflecting and influencing societal perceptions of women in India (Gupta, 2003). Historically, India has grappled with deeply ingrained gender inequalities, with women often viewed as inferior and relegated to subservient roles in practical life (Altekar, 1955). Traditional cultural norms and family dynamics have reinforced these inequalities, with women being under the influence of their parents before marriage and their husbands after marriage (Chakrapani & Kumar (eds.), 1994). The preference for sons over daughters has further perpetuated gender discrimination, and practices like female feticide and prenatal sex determination have resulted in an imbalanced sex ratio in many parts of the country (Dilip & Mishra, 2005).

While the Indian Constitution granted women equal rights in 1950, and various laws aimed at addressing gender inequality were enacted, cultural norms have been slow to change (Chakrapani & Kumar (eds.), 1994). Women still face domestic violence and harassment (Menon-Sen & Shivkumar, 2001), and female children often receive unequal treatment from birth (Agnihotri, 1996). Women's participation in the workforce remains lower than that of men, and they typically earn less (Human Development, 2003). These inequalities are further reflected in the media, including the Indian film industry, which has historically been male-dominated (Ganti, 2004). While some progress has been made in recent years with women taking on various roles within the industry, the number of women behind the camera remains limited (Nandkumar, 2011), and the portrayal of women on screen often reflects male directors' perceptions and societal expectations (Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 2004).

Commercial Indian films have frequently portrayed women in stereotypical roles, often as mothers or wives, reinforcing traditional patriarchal values (Richards, 1995). These films have tended to glorify the image of the "ideal Indian woman" as submissive, self-sacrificing, and chaste (Dasgupta & Hegde, 1988). In contrast, "bad" women are characterized as individualistic, sexually aggressive, and not conforming to societal norms (Saidullah, 1992). Violence against women has been a recurring theme in many commercial Hindi films (Dasgupta & Hegde, 1988).

Cinema and society in India have a reciprocal relationship, with films both reflecting and influencing societal beliefs and practices. Commercial films, in particular, have often adhered to a formula that includes romance, action, violence, family drama, and elaborate song and

dance routines (Acharya, 2004). In such films, women are frequently objectified and relegated to roles as the hero's love interest (Nandkumar, 2011).

Cinema in India has played an essential role in shaping and perpetuating gender roles and identities, often reinforcing traditional and unequal views of women's roles in society (Bagchi, 1996; Ram, 2002). While some progress has been made, there is still much work to be done to challenge and transform these deeply ingrained perceptions and promote gender equality in both cinema and society.

1.1 Dangal (2016)

"Dangal" is a 2016 Indian sports drama film directed by Nitesh Tiwari. The film is based on the true story of the Phogat family, specifically the lives of Mahavir Singh Phogat and his daughters Geeta Phogat and Babita Kumari, who are accomplished wrestlers. The movie stars Aamir Khan as Mahavir Singh Phogat, along with Fatima Sana Shaikh and Sanya Malhotra, who play the roles of Geeta and Babita, respectively.

The story revolves around Mahavir Singh Phogat, a former wrestler who is determined to train his daughters in the sport of wrestling, despite societal norms and opposition. He faces many challenges and prejudices as he trains his daughters to become champions in a male-dominated field. "Dangal" is a heartwarming and inspirational film that showcases the hard work, dedication, and resilience of the Phogat sisters as they overcome obstacles to achieve success in wrestling.

The movie was a major success both critically and commercially and received widespread acclaim for its performances, direction, and the empowering message it conveyed. It became one of the highest-grossing Indian films of all time and garnered numerous awards and nominations. Aamir Khan's transformation for the role, where he gained and lost a significant amount of weight to portray the different phases of Mahavir Singh Phogat's life, also received considerable attention. "Dangal" is known for promoting women's empowerment and breaking gender stereotypes in India.

Thus the film becomes a site of introspection with respect to its audiences' perception towards sports women in general and the film's message in particular. The current study makes an attempt to understand audience perception of sports women in the film and the role of cinema in creating awareness about unconventional sports in India.

2. Review of Literature

Vikram Singh (2017) examined the portrayal of women in Hindi cinema, a medium that had historically depicted women in traditional, submissive, and timid roles for many decades. However, Singh's study specifically focused on the recent film "Dangal," which defied these conventional norms by challenging the patriarchal system and granting women an equal status to men. The film positioned itself as a feminist narrative, advocating for the cause of women against an oppressive patriarchal society.

In a society where gender norms have long imposed preconceived notions on both men and women, crossing these stereotypical boundaries has been a challenging endeavour, particularly for women. "Dangal" emerged as a significant cinematic effort to encourage people to transcend their biased mind-sets and rethink these established norms. The film served as a powerful illustration of how women can assert their presence in domains traditionally dominated by men. It depicted the triumph of women over the societal odds that often hindered them from exercising their agency.

Singh's study aimed to analyze how "Dangal" effectively challenged the various gender stereotypes deeply embedded in society, unveiling multiple layers of meaning within the film. Furthermore, it explored how the movie portrayed the two central characters, Geeta and Babita, as they set a new benchmark for the entire female community by asserting their identities in a predominantly male-dominated society. The film thus served as a symbol of women's empowerment and a beacon of hope for gender equality in a traditionally patriarchal setting.

Vilsaraj (2019) explored the relationship between the representation of sportswomen and Indian cinema, particularly Bollywood, which often addresses societal concerns. The study highlighted how Indian women in sports, despite facing numerous obstacles, have become national heroes, with cinema playing a role in portraying their stories.

Chakravarty (2020) examined the use of film as a pedagogical tool to teach students, analyzing films like "Chak De India," "Marry Kom," and "Dangal" to understand the portrayal of sports women. The study revealed that these films often predominantly associate sports with masculine achievements, reducing women's successes to supporting narratives, thereby upholding traditional gender roles. Mehmet (2023) explored the impact of the sports-themed film "Dangal" on adolescents' perceptions of wrestlers, indicating that movies can be effective tools in shaping individuals' views and generating interest in sports.

Khandavalli Ashoka (2022) conducted research on the representation of women in sports and their gradual acceptance in this field, especially in the context of changing cultural and societal norms. The study addressed how cinema, like literature, reflects societal dynamics and discussed the persistent portrayal of women as meek, submissive, and objectified in cinema, as highlighted by Laura Mulvey's feminist film theory.

Mehmet's (2023) study explored the immediate impact of the sports-themed film "Dangal" on adolescents and their perceptions of wrestlers. The research aimed to determine whether movies could serve as effective tools in shaping people's perspectives. Upon evaluating the data collected in the study, it became apparent that films had a rapid and significant influence on individuals. The study found that the metaphors generated by the participants before watching the movie were predominantly focused on physical appearance, reflecting certain stereotypes. However, the metaphors created after viewing the film shifted towards a more positive and affective portrayal of wrestlers. This suggests that movies, such as "Dangal," have the potential to effectively influence people's perceptions and generate greater interest in sports.

3. Methodology

The current research focuses on perception of mass audience about sports women in India and their portrayal in popular culture like cinema. For the name purpose the study adopts a quantitative research method to measure audience perception of women athletes in India. The study focuses on youth (18 - 30 years) since they form the measure bulk of the movie goers (Jha, 2017).

The study opted to use Berhampur University students as the sampling frame due to the university's diverse student body, representing various regions of Odisha. Berhampur University is recognized for its strong sports culture, particularly in unconventional sports like weightlifting, which encompasses both men and women categories. As a result, the university emerges as an ideal choice for sampling because its student population demonstrates a pronounced interest in sports. This characteristic ensures that the sample drawn from the university is likely to provide valuable insights into the study's focus on perception of sports women.

In this research, data is collected from 100 students at the university, representing various academic streams, to assess their perceptions of the portrayal of women and sportswomen. The sampling method employed is simple random sampling to ensure a diverse and unbiased

sample. Data for the study is primarily gathered from the respondents through a structured survey questionnaire. Additionally, the research incorporates secondary data sources such as published literature and box office data to enhance the findings.

The data collection process involves the administration of a systematic survey questionnaire comprising 18 questions organized into four sections. The first section focuses on demographic variables, including home location, age, gender, and educational qualifications. The second section assesses awareness variables, such as the respondents' knowledge of sportswomen before watching the movie "Dangal." The third section contains questions related to the retention of memory regarding female athletes. The fourth section examines the impact of male or star characters in cinema on the respondents' perceptions.

The collected primary data is systematically tabulated and analysed using Microsoft Excel, with the primary method being percentage analysis. The results and findings are presented graphically through bar diagrams and pie charts, facilitating a clear and visual representation of the data and its relation among various variables. This method ensures a structured and comprehensive analysis of the respondents' perceptions and attitudes towards women in general and sportswomen in particular in the context of cinema.

4. Findings and Discussion

The sample has fair gender distribution with majority of being females (61.1%). The students are young and belong to the age category of 19 to 29 years with majority (77%) belonging to the age group of 22 to 26 years. All the members of the sample are pursuing master's degree at Berhampur University and they are frequent cinema goers. Maximum number of students come from urban or semi-urban background (55.5%) while few (16.7%) come from rural background. Most of the students (77.8%) have watched the film 'Dangal' in theatres as well as on internet. The demographic distribution of the students shows that the sample is well represented across different social indicators.

The majority of the respondents (77.8%) were unaware about the Phogat sisters prior to watching 'Dangal' who have won multiple national and international medal in wrestling. 83.3% of the respondents don't have any knowledge about women wrestling or any other international women wrestlers or India's status in global wrestling competitions. However, 'Dangal' seems to bridge the knowledge gap among the students. After watching 'Dangal' 88.9% of the respondents feel proud of Indian women wrestlers while 72.2% were interested

in life stories of Phogat sisters. They (88.9%) even encourage their female friends to participate in women wrestling or boxing those who are good in sports.

The star presence of Amir Khan seems to have massive bearing on the success of the film. Though most of the students (77.8%) feel the movie to be a feminist film focusing on the success story of the Phogat sisters, 50% of the respondents feel Amir Khan to be omnipresent throughout the cinema. 33.3% of the students even think that the film couldn't have been made without Amir Khan.

5. Conclusion:

The study examines audience perception of sports women in Indian cinema and reveals interesting insights into the concept. The demographic distribution shows that the sample has good representation in terms of gender, age, educational qualification, rural/ urban distribution. The research sheds light on audience perception as well as awareness level prior and post watching 'Dangal'.

Being part of a popular culture and massively consumed by the masses the film has been able to create awareness about an unconventional sport like women wrestling in India. Thus, the film acts as a pedagogical tool bridge in the knowledge gap among masses.

The study also reveals the impact of star actors like Amir Khan. The star presence drives the financial success of the movie as well as helps in reaching to the wide audience groups. However, the star presence also seems to hijack the feministic efforts by posing Amir Khan as the male savior.

Further these sports movies brings into dialogue the concept of female masculinity as a discourse within the public narrative and proves the existence of different identities that exist between the society's set constructed gender polarities of masculinity and femininity. The fact that Dangal is based on true, realistic stories further adds more credential to the possibility of a gender fluidity and clearly points to the fact that gender demarcation of what masculinity or femininity entails is anything but a social construct that can be deconstructed. To quote Butler, "Gender ought to not be constructed as a stable identity or focus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylised repetition of acts"(Butler, 191). In this manner the focus has today shifted from gender rules on gender performance to individual preferences and choices, where

wrestling, boxing and the likes are no longer considered exclusively masculine thereby deranging entrenched gender zones.

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