

## **The Representation of Women Farmers in Hindi Cinema: A critical analysis of Mother India**

**Ms. Priyanka Singh, Dr. Aanchal Praveen**

Assistant Professor, Lucknow Public College of Professional Studies

### **ABSTRACT**

Cinema in India is an integral part of the everyday lives of millions. Since its inception cinema has been a medium where on-screen stories reflect societal opinions and shape certain perceptions. In the enormous landscape of regional cinema Hindi cinema holds the baton as the biggest industry. The representation of women remains a subject of intrigue and inquiry. With changing times, it is evident that women's representation has increased in all areas and more women-centric films are coming out than ever before. One such sector is agriculture which has been an important part of Indian society and women have always played crucial roles in agriculture. The representation of women in popular films often shows them in stereotypical gender roles, mostly as background characters. This study looks at how women farmers are portrayed in Hindi movies. It examines how women as farmers are shown on screen, using storylines, visual symbols, and other images. The aim is to show the complex interplay between cinematic representations, gender roles, and rural life in India by analysing films from different genres and periods. By studying these depictions, we can better understand how society sees female farmers and their roles in agriculture. The paper emphasizes the complexities and potential impact of how women farmers are portrayed in Hindi cinema, focusing on how this representation might affect Indian rural livelihoods and gender dynamics.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Women have always made contributions to society, no matter what form those contributions may take. In India as well as in world, due to cultural and societal norms women were more often than not restrained in gendered roles. With the passage of time women started defying societal norms and challenging stereotypes. They have been at the pivotal positions like queens, warriors, intellectuals and artists, playing important roles in safeguarding and perpetuating the culture of India. India's freedom struggle also saw women fighting shoulder to shoulder with men. They are at front advocating gender equality, education and social justice. Be it science and technology or politics, women are breaking barriers and getting recognition. Similarly, women have contributed greatly to the economy of our nation. They are active contributors in agriculture and rural economy. However, many a times these contributions have gone unnoticed. Hindi cinema, a powerful medium reflecting and shaping societal norms in India, has often portrayed women in traditional roles. Their contributions to agriculture are largely overlooked or marginalized. This research paper delves into the representation of women farmers in Hindi cinema, examining how their portrayal has evolved, the prevalent stereotypes, and its possible impact on societal perceptions and women's empowerment in the agricultural sector.

### **OBJECTIVE**

- To understand the frequency of portrayal of women as farmers in Hindi Cinema.
- To analyse the most popular film with women farmer as a central character.

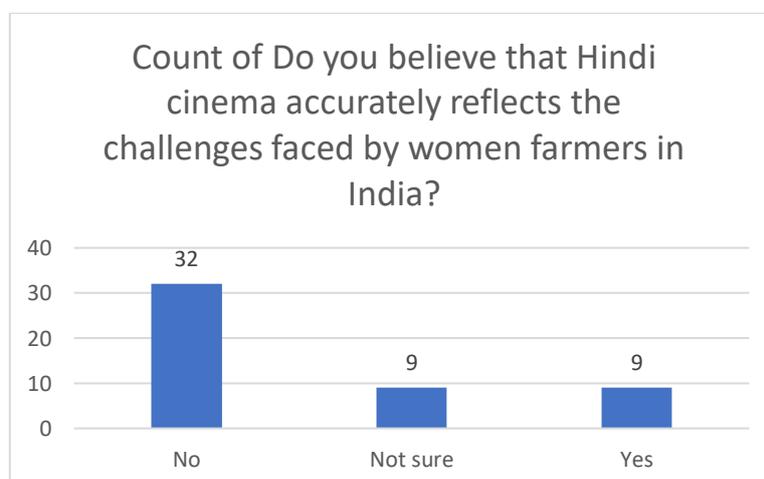
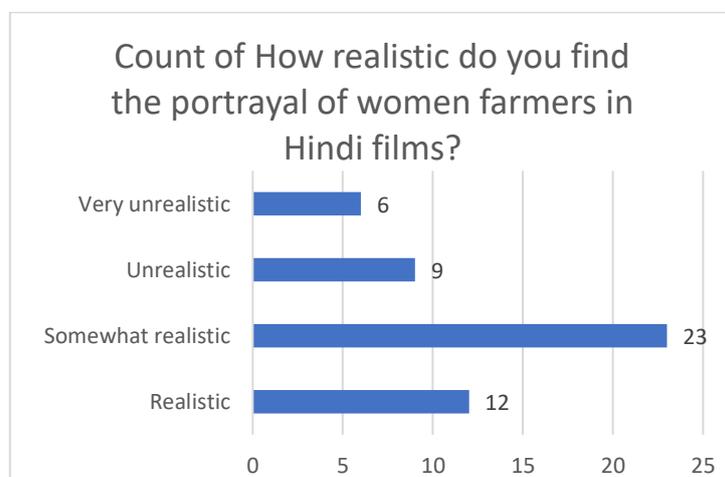
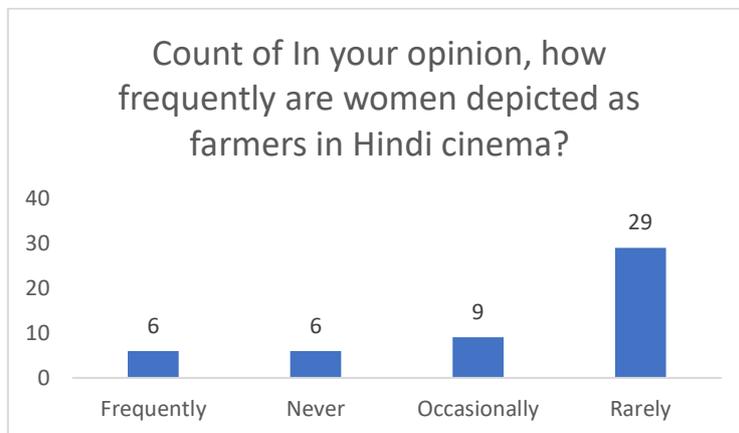
### **METHODOLOGY**

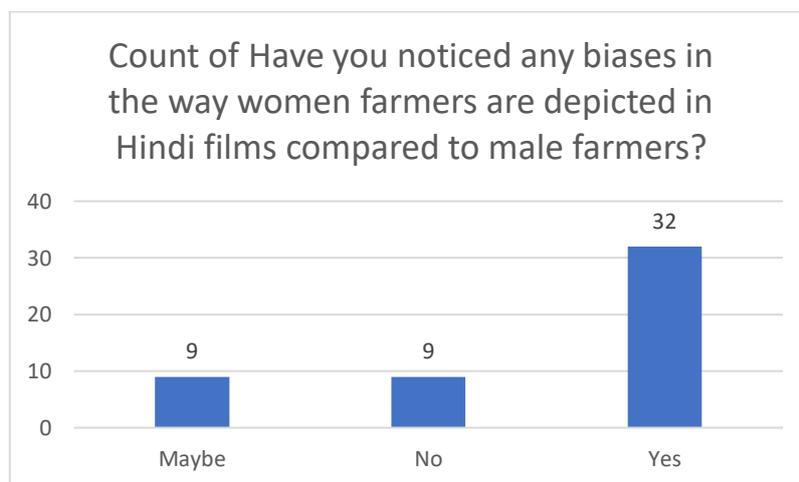
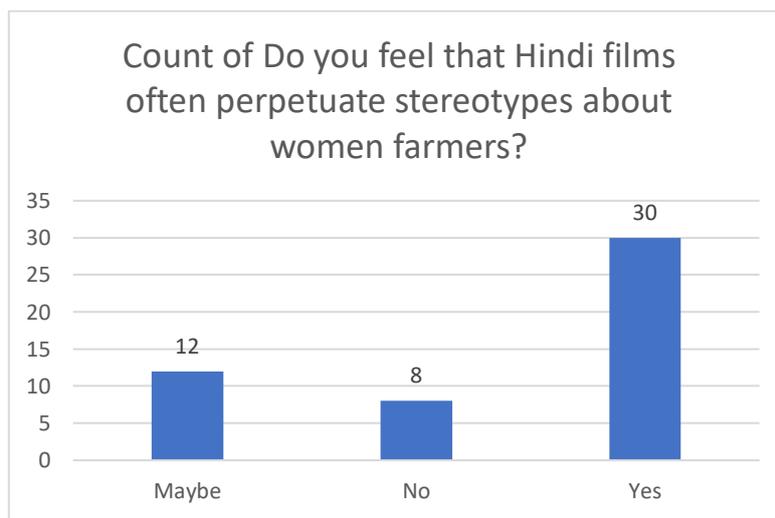
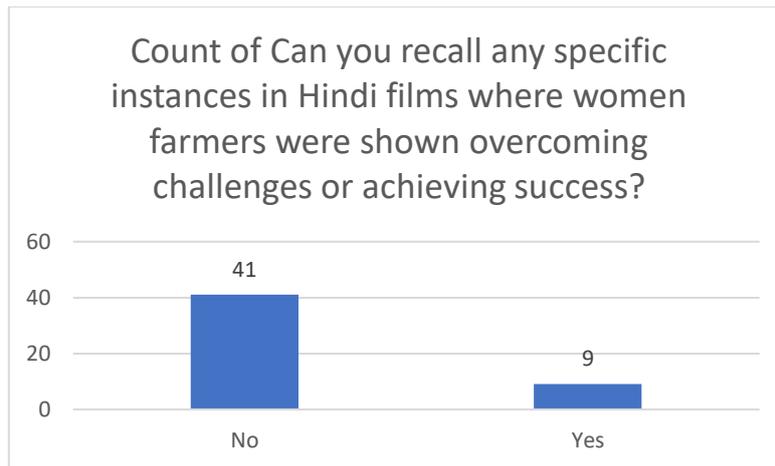
The study conducted here is essentially qualitative in nature. The sources of data were from both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources of data included information extracted from the respondents on their knowledge about portrayal of women as farmers in Hindi Cinema. Purposive sampling was used as the sampling framework for collection of information. The sample size for the study was purposefully maintained small. There were 50 responders, from all walks of life. Moreover, the study has tried to analyse film Mother India critically. The attempt is to understand the treatment of women in farming roles and as decision maker in family and society. This film has been selected based on the most common response by the respondents.

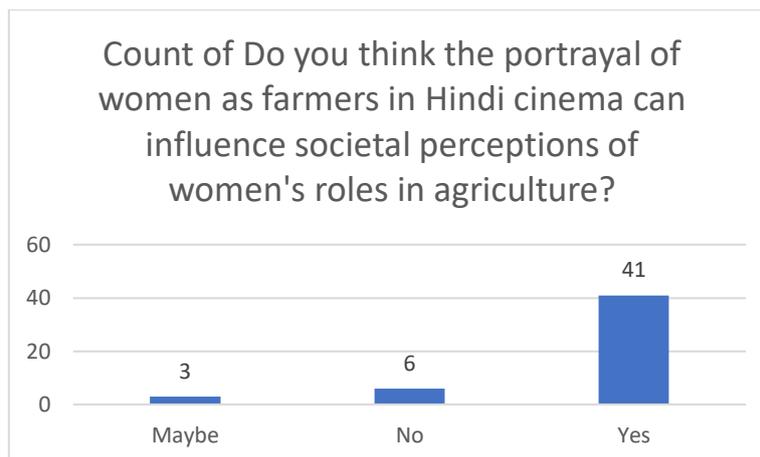
FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

**Survey analysis:** The online survey consisted of 20 questions that ranged from the age and occupation of respondents to their knowledge about the portrayal of women as farmers in Hindi Cinema. The important inferences from survey results are as follows.

The majority of respondent have watched film that depicted farmers in the past. However, very few of them responded to have seen women depicted as farmers and decision makers in agriculture.







On being asked about films they could recall that has portrayal of women farmer, 46 of them were positive about Mother India being one such film. Responses also came for few films like Kisan Kanya, Do Bigha Zameen, Manthan, Lagaan and parched, Gabricha Paus (regional), Kisan, Peepli Live and Sand ki Annkh. Out of these responses only Mother India fits the frame where the central character is a women farmer. In response to the popular stereotypes being used for women on cinema, the responders came up with the answers as victimhood, naivetes, lesser intellect and even lesser strength.

The classic imperilled damsel in distress to evil stepsisters and inappropriate older women. The common thread between many of these roles for women is that they drive the action by affecting other characters, rather than showing off their own thoughts, feelings or development. If shown as positive characters, they are restricted to simply being a farmer's wife, with their contributions limited to household chores.

Respondents wanted to see a cinema where stories of empowerment where women assert themselves in traditionally male-dominated spaces of agriculture is being told. Recognising women farmers through history, coming from diverse backgrounds (caste, religion, socioeconomic status) and depicting their experiences through biopics is what some other responded with. Highlighting women in various roles within farming communities as landowners, agricultural laborers, entrepreneurs was the gist for few others.

### MOTHER INDIA

Mehboob Khan's 1957 epic melodrama Mother India, which is considered to be the first in the canon of Indian film, served as a model for modern Bollywood cinema, whereby women were portrayed as warriors who sacrificed everything for the good of the country. Mother India presents us to her conflicted typical heroine in the very first scene. A close-up of Radha's heavily furrowed face depicts her as "Mother India." She picks up a handful of clay soil from her field, brings it up to her face, and allows the dirt, which is worn by a lifetime of labour-intensive manual labour, gently crumble in her hands. An optimistic note can be heard in the air as the camera pans out: the government is introducing modern technology to boost agricultural output and reduce the load on the peasantry. Radha is invited to open the new irrigation canal by the locals, who honour her for everything that she has accomplished. A memory rushes down the canal, water the colour of blood.

Newly married Radha enters her home and soon realises that she has to toil hard to fend for her family and her land (husband's). Radha is the one that suggests cultivating the barren land of 5 Bigha to produce more food and to repay Lala's debt. She is shown working equally with her husband, lifting stones and ploughing the field. In those terms, she is a farmer through and through. The husband once agitated raises hands on Radha and often orders her around. She sacrifices her jewellery and even household utensils. Radha takes her sons to schools as she realises the importance of education after getting fooled by the Lala. When the husband runs away from home due to the inferiority of being a burden to the family, Radha takes charge of raising her sons alone. She fights through floods, droughts like other farmers as well as the inappropriate demands of Lala.

Mother India is fairly traditional in several aspects. From a feminist perspective, its intended messages regarding women are retrogressive. The ideal lady is portrayed in the film as being hard-working, selfless, and caring. It fails to acknowledge the fact that women accomplished so little in return. Did women have a voice in basic decisions like having children, despite all their sacrifices? Not a lot. When the film was aired in the 1950s, women's legal rights were severely restricted. For instance, progressive laws pertaining to Hindu women's inheritance and marriage rights, which had been enacted by leaders such as B. R. Ambedkar and Jawaharlal Nehru, had been weakened and blocked in Parliament.

Mother India draws attention to the suffering of farmers, but she downplays or ignores the unique challenges encountered by women farmers in particular, such as their lack of resources, the invisibility of their work, and their self-deprivation during hard times. When there is a lack of food, adult mothers frequently deny themselves and their daughters of enough nourishment. They often choose to do it themselves (in the framework of patriarchal culture).

Mother India views Radha's tendency towards negation as a strength. Radha endures suffering for her husband and boys throughout the film without ever seeming to complain. In the actual world, this kind of exaltation of women's suffering supports an economic development system that exploits underpaid and overworked women. They receive lip attention at best, and sometimes not even that.

Last but not least, honour and modesty are major themes in the film. Above all, Radha cherishes honour, both her own and that of other women. A woman's first priority should be upholding honour. Her honour is not only her own, but also that of her family, the community, and ultimately the country. However, the issue with honour is that women's independence, movement, and sexuality have to be strictly regulated in order to preserve it.

Having said that, there are a few areas where Radha's portrayal in Indian cinema represents a victory for women's representation. She is a strong, resolute lady. She lacks education—she is unable to understand the moneylender's accounts—but she is tenacious and realistic. She has the abilities, wisdom, and determination to safeguard and nurture her kids. She never wavers or behaves foolishly. She is respected by the audience, the peasants, and her boys alike. In desperate circumstances, she must make difficult decisions. She dispels two myths: the idea that women are incapable of making thoughtful decisions and the idea that they don't enjoy hard work. Mother India believes that women are the ones who toil and sweat to create the country.

## **HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND EVOLUTION**

The question of whether cinema is only an artistic medium or if it may also serve as a vehicle for highlighting significant political and social issues has long been up for discussion. There is no doubt that cinema and society have an impact on one another. Women are shown in a variety of shades, forms, and capacities in the many roles that women play. Film women are conventional, contemporary, innocent, rescuers, balanced, smart, competitive, and nervous. It is anticipated that the variety of role depictions would mirror social realities. Despite this, different eras of film have presented their personalities in distinct ways. It has been a crucial tool for spreading ideas and making social criticism, not only for amusement. From the outset, Indian film has focused on the role of women in particular. They have frequently been represented as a selfless mother, loving daughter, and wife. In addition, women are presented as strong, independent individuals who overcome social obstacles to become role models for real-life women. An area's socioeconomic standing has an impact on how women are portrayed in Hindi cinema. However, via alternative film, Hindi cinema in recent years has attempted to show women as more autonomous individuals than merely adorning the frame.

In the early years of Indian cinema, women farmers were rarely depicted as central characters. When they did appear, it was often in stereotypical roles as devoted wives and mothers, their labour in the fields secondary to their domestic duties. This reflected the patriarchal norms of the time, where women's contributions to agriculture were largely invisible and undervalued. As Indian cinema matured, there were occasional attempts to portray women farmers in more substantial roles. Films like "Do Bigha Zamin" (1953) "Mother India" (1957) showcased the resilience and strength of women in rural India, but their primary identity remained tied to their roles as mothers and wives.

In later decades, there has been a gradual shift towards more nuanced and complex portrayals of women farmers. Films like "Manthan" (1976) explored the struggles of farmers, including women, against exploitation and displacement. However, these films often depicted women as victims rather than active agents of change.

### **CONTEMPORARY REPRESENTATIONS AND STEREOTYPES**

In contemporary Hindi cinema, the representation of women farmers remains a mixed bag. While some films attempt to portray them as empowered and independent individuals, others continue to perpetuate stereotypes. In Hindi cinema, the portrayal of women has often been limited by several common stereotypes:

- **The Suffering Wife/Mother:** One prevalent stereotype is the portrayal of women farmers as long-suffering wives or mothers, burdened by the hardships of rural life. They are often shown as passive victims of circumstances, enduring poverty, drought, or oppressive patriarchal structures. This portrayal reinforces the image of women as helpless and dependent on male figures for support. Women farmers are often shown as being at the mercy of natural disasters, economic hardships, and patriarchal structures. They are depicted as passive recipients of aid and support, rather than active participants in decision-making processes. Do bigha Zameen and Sujata, Deewar, Khoon Pasina, Suhag and Mard are a few examples.
- **The Passive Helper:** Another common stereotype is the depiction of women farmers as mere helpers to their husbands or male family members. Their role is often limited to assisting in agricultural tasks, without any agency or decision-making power. This reinforces the notion that women are not capable of independent farming or leadership roles. Women farmers are often shown as being subservient to their husbands and other male family members. Their labour in the fields is seen as an extension of their domestic duties, and they have little say in agricultural decisions.
- **The Romantic Interest/Damsel in Distress:** In some films, women farmers are reduced to objects of romantic interest for the male protagonist. Their identity as farmers is overshadowed by their desirability or vulnerability. This portrayal reinforces the objectification of women and undermines their contributions to agriculture.
- **The Rebellious Daughter:** Occasionally, Hindi cinema features women farmers who defy traditional norms and expectations. However, these characters are often portrayed as rebellious daughters who challenge patriarchal authority, leading to conflict and dramatic consequences. While this representation acknowledges women's agency, it can also perpetuate the stereotype of women as disruptive forces in rural communities.
- **The Comic Relief:** In a few instances, women farmers are portrayed as comic relief characters, often with exaggerated accents and mannerisms. This portrayal trivializes their experiences and reduces them to caricatures, further marginalizing their role in agriculture.

### **Impact on Societal Perceptions and Women's Empowerment**

The representation of women farmers in Hindi cinema has a significant impact on societal perceptions and women's empowerment in the agricultural sector. Negative stereotypes can reinforce patriarchal norms and hinder women's participation in agriculture. On the other hand, positive portrayals can challenge these norms and inspire women to take up leadership roles in farming.

Research has shown that media representations can influence attitudes and behaviours. When women farmers are portrayed as active agents of change, it can encourage more women to participate in agriculture and challenge traditional gender roles. Conversely, when women farmers are depicted as victims or subordinates, it can perpetuate the notion that women are not capable of being successful farmers.

### **CONCLUSION**

The Indian government has recognized the importance of women's participation in agriculture and has implemented several initiatives to empower women farmers. These include providing access to credit, training, and technology, as well as promoting women's leadership in farmer organizations. Programs like the Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana (MKSP) focus specifically on improving the status of women in agriculture and

providing them with opportunities for institutional credit. According to the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare, women constitute about 33% of the agricultural labour force in India. However, they own only about 13% of the land. Efforts are being made to design "women-friendly" farm equipment that reduces physical drudgery, alongside training programs that introduce women to climate-smart farming and digital market places. This highlights the need for continued efforts to address gender disparities in agriculture. Cinema can be a change agent in this area by showing more women character in strong and independent roles. Beyond policy and economics, the cultural perception of the woman farmer is a critical frontier for change. Hindi cinema, with its massive reach, serves as a powerful medium to challenge deep-seated biases.

The representation of women farmers in Hindi cinema is a complex and evolving issue. While there have been some positive developments in recent years, stereotypes and biases persist. It is crucial for filmmakers to move beyond these stereotypes and portray women farmers in all their diversity and complexity. By doing so, Hindi cinema can play a vital role in promoting gender equality and empowering women in the agricultural sector. The evolution of the "Kisan" (farmer) identity in films—from the struggling protagonist of Mother India to a more diverse, empowered female lead—can mirror and accelerate the real-world empowerment of women. When audiences see strong, independent women navigating the complexities of the agricultural sector on screen, it helps dismantle the psychological barriers that prevent gender equality in the fields.

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