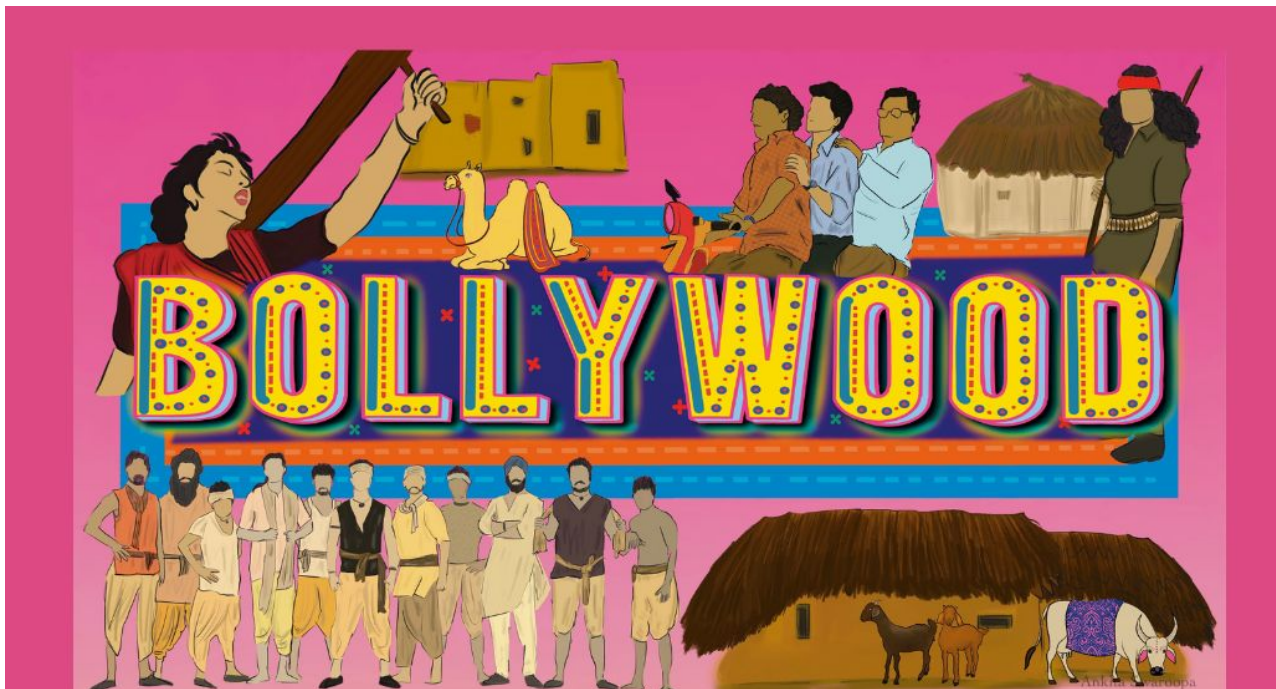


Do “reel villages” in cinema show real rural India?

villagesquare.in/do-bollywoods-villages-portray-real-rural-india

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Arup K Chatterjee Sep 21, 2022

Village Vibe

In the past villages in films were either idyllic or hopeless. But the present day productions are more realistic, bridging the gap between urban and rural perspectives.

Remember *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, the Kajol-Shah Rukh starrer of 1995? Yes, the film that showed us London and Switzerland in great measure.

Contrast that with *Panchayat*, the popular web series that started streaming in 2020. It shows us the fictitious Phulera village, shot in Mahodiya village in Madhya Pradesh.

Is there a connection? Quite the opposite.

“Until about two decades ago, the successes of films were connected to shooting in foreign locales and comprised elitist values,” says Anwar Shahab, political scientist and professor at Kolhan University, Jharkhand. “Of late, films and web series are shot in villages to engage urban, metropolitan and cosmopolitan crowds.”

Does it mean that the depiction of rural India in Hindi films is a recent trend?

Bollywood’s long love with Indian villages

Over the years many movies have been about rural India, as the [list of Indian films](#) set or shot in Indian villages released by the [Ministry of Panchayati Raj](#) shows. While some films are in other Indian languages, the majority are Hindi aka Bollywood films.

BOLLYWOOD

FILMS FEATURING: RURAL INDIA

Mother India	1957
Sholay	1975
Mirch Masala	1987
Bandit Queen	1994
Karan Arjun	1995
Virasat	1997
Lagaan	2001
Swades	2004
Malamaal Weekly	2006
Welcome to Sajjanpur	2007
Peepli Live	2010
Paan Singh Tomar	2012
Gangs of Wasseypur	2012
Maanjhi, Mountain Man	2015

List of prominent Bollywood movies that feature rural India.

Was the rural theme a real depiction of villages?

But, barring a few, the village was more of a cinematic prop depicting generic Indian ruralness rather than a deep delve into the life and times of any particular village or rural culture.

There were notable exceptions.

Shyam Benegal's *Manthan*, set against the backdrop of India's white revolution, brought alive the village of Sanganva in Gujarat. Ketan Mehta's *Mirch Masala* and Shekhar Kapur's *Bandit Queen* – both historical feminist masterpieces – were realistic representation of spaces and customs around Gujarat's Kutch region and Uttar Pradesh respectively.

Renowned social psychoanalyst Ashis Nandy once called popular cinema an index of the “slum's eye view of politics.”

He was referring to slums as “mimic villages,” manifesting a view of rural India that was more metaphorical or poetical than sociological.

For film and media historian Ravi Vasudevan the dystopian city in Bollywood expressed the antithesis of village life – the idyllic “object of longing.”

Though popular Indian cinema is a subject of critical thinking and research globally, the theme of rural India in cinema is less explored. So let's take a deeper look.

The long-forgotten 'village India' is back in Bollywood's fantasies and desires.

Arup Kumar

Authentic or exotic?

Most Bollywood villages, until about 2010, seemed to operate like any north Indian village.

Sholay, for instance, shot near in Karnataka, is set in a north Indian town. *Karan Arjun*, filmed in Rajasthan and set in a Rajasthani village, does not do much to justify the location.



Representation of rural India in cinema is an immensely under-explored subject (Illustration by Ankita Swaroopa)

But more recently, especially after 2010, Bollywood and OTT web series dramas, including the widely viewed and acclaimed *Masaan*, *Mirzapur*, *Gullak*, *Paatal Lok*, *Aranyak* and *Panchayat*, have curried favour with Indian and international audiences alike.

Ashwani Kumar, noted sociologist and professor at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, believes that there is something narcissistic about this revival of the village and small town.

“The long-forgotten ‘village India’ is back in Bollywood’s fantasies and desires. The sly, sleek and seductive images of fictional Phulera village in *Panchayat* have become tropes of uncanny rural chic with ancient fabrics and modern designs simulating homelessness as a fashionable lifestyle experience,” Kumar told [Village Square](#).

Village as the city’s “other”

“In Bollywood’s imagination, the village remains the ‘other’ to the city,” according to poet and scholar, Basudhara Roy Chatterjee. “And so it demands introduction, exoticisation and interpretation in terms of its vibrant identity.”

Many Bollywood protagonists have hailed from rural spaces, as she pointed out.

“But it’s generally in the city that the ‘heroism’ of the central characters can thrive. Rural spaces in cinematic imagination still seem to need the approval of the city dwellers,” she told [Village Square](#).

Meenakshi Mund, a programme producer at the All India Radio, echoes this view.

“Most of these films are made from the perspective of urban audiences, wherein certain aspects of village life are unrealistically glorified,” she said.

A new gaze on villages

Enthusiasts can be happy that villages and towns on the celluloid are marked by more versatile subjects, human subjectivity, political granularity and emotional universality, while continuing to challenge tradition, patriarchy and even modernity.



While shot near Karnataka, *Sholay* is set in a north Indian town (Illustration by Ankita Swaroopa)

Mund recalled the time before the '70s when films like *Do Bigha Zameen*, *Antarnaad* and *Nadiya Ke Paar* closely reflected the true essence of rural India – with serenity and sensibility.

“But films like *Pad Man* and *NH 10* that offer glimpses of village life suggest that rural India is plagued by social inequalities, rigid hierarchies and a general sense of doom,” she told [Village Square](#).

As stories from Indian hinterlands go global, the zeal to know about diverse Indian cultures without judgment or censure for their protagonists is only enhanced.

The new gaze on villages and towns is trying to combine controversial and tabooed subjects with undogmatic representations.

Where reel meets the real

While caste and class politics, superstitions and gender hierarchies pervade the narrative of *Panchayat*, *Dr Arora – Gupt Rog Visheshagya* explores the much-stigmatized topic of conjugal sexuality through the lens of a medical expert and his repressed clients.

Mirzapur serves an overdose of toxic masculinity and gun violence without attempting to glorify it or trying to suppress women characters owning up to their dark desires as anti-patriarchal agents.

And *Aranyak* features a strong female lead as an investigative cop in the hill station of Manali, marking Raveena Tandon's return to the small screen.

Villages are no longer about forlorn heroes leaning against peepul or jackfruit trees, serenading lady-loves.

"Rural India is no longer a spectral presence or a shadowy intruder; it has become such an intimate beast, often masked and veiled that neither Gandhi nor Ambedkar can recognise," says Kumar.



There is need for more true, nuanced representation of Indian villages in cinema (Illustration by Ankita Swaroopa)

He hopes for greater representations of Dalits and Adivasis on screen, particularly when it comes to rural India.

Bridging the gap with the “real” rural India

“Although a majority of India lives in its villages, there are still not enough movies made on rural realities,” opined Mund.

“While there are several films depicting migrations of protagonists from rural to urban spaces, there are hardly any that reverse this trajectory,” she added.

The battle for realistic and assertive reel life of modern rural India is certainly pressing against the limits of urban imagination. It demands a rethinking in politics and cinema for India's resilient and aspirational villages.

Titles such as *Bareilly ki Barfi*, *Panchayat* and *Sui Dhaaga* are bridging the gap between urban and rural mindsets, which is a much-needed step in the right direction, according to Shahab.

Shahab's view resonates with the opinion of senior journalist and editor Jairaj Singh.

“Not so long ago the idea of India, especially its rural sector, was idealised by a bunch of people sitting in Bombay offices,” Singh told Village Square. “But that changed with the arrival of multiplexes and OTT platforms that led to the hyper-localisation of content.”

Singh recalled how the late Irrfan Khan talked of spending long periods in villages where his movies would be set, “to master how people talked and behaved... to dig deeper into what life is like beyond Indian cities.”

Now actors, filmmakers and viewers alike share this perspective.

If there is one thing that all agree upon it is the need for a more authentic representation of rural India on screen.

The lead illustration at the top shows leading Bollywood movies which feature rural India (Illustration by Ankita Swaroopa).

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