

Single Parent Families in India: Representations in Contemporary Bollywood Cinema

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Abstract

The present research paper explores the representations of a single parent family in contemporary Bollywood cinema. The two chosen films, namely *Nil Battey Sannata* and *Angrezi Medium*, are analyzed through a conceptual framework evolved from family and childhood studies. The major themes of analysis are the role of education in the lives of children, home-school interface and parent-child relation in a single parent family. Insights presented are not exclusive to the mentioned themes and explore intersectionality to situate and document a single parent family in Indian context. The paper would be of interest to educators, research scholars, parents and film enthusiasts.

Keywords: *Single parent family, films, parenting practices, education, schooling and child*

Introduction

Family is the first unit where a child learns various skills, values and culture to become a suitable member of the society. Family also lays the foundation of a child's personality, emotional stability and mental health (Sinha, 1984). An individual derives their self-esteem from the family's distinction, prominence and affiliation. Families provide sustained support, filial loyalty and fraternal solidarity to its members who often participate in common economic, social and ritual activities (Kakar, 2012, p. 137). Indian family consists of children, parents and grandparents who share bonds of love and differences and always present a united front to the outside world. There is a noteworthy presence of joint/ extended families in urban India as it offers economic benefits and emotional support to its members (Kakar, 2006, p. 215).

Along with the prevalence of joint families in contemporary Indian context, there has also been a considerable rise in single parent families (Pandit, 2019). This observation is corroborated in a report by UN (2019) titled 'Progress of the World's Women 2019-2020' which states that lone-parent families comprise 7.5% of all Indian households, majority of which are headed by women. Further, certain studies undertaken during the recent Covid 19 pandemic which were published by Lancet and the Ministry of

Women and Child Development in India, have indicated the meteoric rise in number of single parent families owing to the death of a parent or separation of the parents (Basu, 2022). It is, therefore, imperative that alternate families are widely researched in the fields of family studies, human development, childhood studies and social work.

Single parent families, theoretically, have been understood as families where child/ children are yet to attain eighteen years of age (Bhatnagar' 2013) and are dependent on and must be primarily raised by one parent (D'Cruz & Bharat' 2001). They can have diverse family arrangements- divorced parents sharing the custody of a child one at a time, separated/ divorced parent family with or without childcare support, death of a parent or a parent with an adopted child. Single parent families have always existed in India and other parts of the world; however, their study is yet to emerge as a systematic and well documented research domain in India (Bharat, 1986; Schlesinger, 1995).

Contemporary Bollywood Cinema presents an interesting landscape in analyzing alternate family settings (with focus on single parent families) in Indian context. Two such films have been studied as part of the author's ongoing doctoral research work. They are Ashwiny Iyer Tiwari's directed film *Nil Battey Sannata* (2016)

and Homi Adajania's directed film *Angrezi Medium* (2020). These films are selected as they present the life stories of the protagonists located in specific socio-cultural relations rather than depicting them as deviations from the normative idea of a family. Both films present us with unique insights into themes such as the nature of parent-child relation, parenting styles and child-rearing practices, engagement of parents with the child's schooling and education, parent's identity as a being of human desires, negation and compensation of a parental absence in children's lives and nature of support systems.

The research paper is broadly divided into two sections. The first section details the plot summaries of the chosen films with a specific focus on parenting practices and parental involvement in their children's education. The second section analyses the life experiences of the protagonists through relevant theoretical insights and research studies.

Plot Summaries

This section consists of the plots of *Nil Battey Sannata* and *Angrezi Medium*, followed by analysis of few common themes emerging from both the films.

Nil Battey Sannata depicts a single-parent family of a young mother (Chanda Sahay) and her teenage daughter (Apeksha). Chanda works as a domestic maid and a worker at a roadside eatery. Being the only earning member in the family, she takes up other trivial and short-term work opportunities as well to sustain the family financially. She has high aspirations for her daughter, whom she fondly refers to as Apu. Despite being a high school dropout herself, Chanda hopes that regular schooling and notable academic performance will transform her daughter's life. Apu shares a contradictory view about the role of education in her life and believes that doing academically well will not be sufficient to overcome/ negate their life circumstances. She believes that she would continue the cycle of being a house maid, just like her mother. Chanda, in an attempt to change Apu's dismal and pessimist view about schooling, joins Apu's school as a student. She balances her student life and work life to

motivate Apu to work hard in academics. In due course of time, Apu realizes the importance of education for one's upward social mobility and appreciates her mother's efforts to educate her. The film concludes with a grown-up Apu appearing in a prestigious civil services interview and citing her mother as source of her inspiration and role model. The plot of film *Angrezi Medium* is summarized in the subsequent paragraph.

Angrezi Medium is a film revolving around the lives of a single father Champak and his teenage daughter Tarika. Champak runs a sweets shop in the city of Udaipur and often gets into funny banter and brawls with his brother, Gopi, who runs another sweets shop in the vicinity. Champak and Tarika live in an extended family household and are often surrounded by and cared for by the family members. Champak, however, is a very engaging and attentive father to Tarika. He is fully involved in the day-to-day activities of Tarika's life- preparing meals, doing laundry and folding her clothes, dropping and picking her up from school, taking her to enrichment classes after school and so on. Champak is also very encouraging and supportive of Tarika's childhood dream of studying in London. Tarika manages to secure a scholarship for the same and is very excited to go to London for studying and settling. She, however, ends up losing this golden opportunity due to her father's actions that offend the school principal. It leads to the cancellation of her scholarship and the squashing of her lifelong dream. Eventually, Tarika manages to reach London and keep working hard to secure admission in her college of choice. Unbeknownst to her, her father and her uncle managed to collect the required amount of money to ensure her admission to her dream college. They do so by auctioning their trademark family name (Ghasiteram) to their rival sweet shop owner in Udaipur. Upon learning the truth about her college fee, Tarika decides to move back to India to stay with her family and resume her studies there. She also apologizes to her father for her neglectful and rowdy behavior in London. The film concludes with Tarika being back in India amidst her friends and family. The following section

presents the prominent themes and key findings of both the films.

Analysis and Key Findings

There are some prominent themes as emergent from the life stories of film protagonists. First theme is the role of education in transforming the lives of children and ensuring their upward social mobility. Research studies (Coleman, 1966 as cited in Dickinson, 2016) have shown that a student's family background is the most significant determinant of how well a child would learn in school or child's educational success over many other factors such as physical amenities at school or funding. Both the single parent protagonists (Champak and Chanda), despite not being well educated and belonging to low/ middle income groups, attempt to replicate learning environments at their homes to aspire for success at school and academic accomplishment of their children. They do so in their own unique ways. Chanda, with her limited economic means, makes sure that Apu gets all the guidance and extra help through coaching classes after the school. She even does two jobs to sustain her daily expenses and encourages Apu by enrolling herself as a student in Apu's school. Champak, whole heartedly supports her daughter's dream of studying in London University. He motivates and encourages her to secure the scholarship by working hard and even arranges to pay for the expenses as incurred for the admission and stay at London. Achieving academic excellence is seen as an important aspect in the parenting practices of both the households. The following section discusses the ways in which parents attempt to make their homes as structured learning spaces, in continuity with that of a school.

Second theme centers around the home-school interface in their children's lives. Even with the best intentions to educate their children, Champak and Chanda have limited resources (material and cultural) and often struggle to meet the expectations and requirements of educational institutions. It has been documented worldwide that the social class of parents is a significant factor in shaping their attitudes towards parenting, cultural beliefs and practices about

child-rearing. Not only that, economic and material resources of a particular social class influence educational outcomes of children belonging to those classes (Lareau, 2003). The parents of middle and upper classes employ a peculiar way of parenting (termed as concerted cultivation), which focusses on 'children's structured activities, language development, and reasoning in the home, and active intervention in schooling' (Lareau, 2003, p.32). Parents practicing concerted cultivation actively volunteer, intervene and participate in educational activities of their children. They structure their children's lives by systematically organising leisure and extra-curricular activities, leaving no time for free play. In comparison to concertedly cultivating the children, parents of working and low-income classes value natural growth of children. It means that the focus is to allow the child grow into his/her own person, live a less structured and organised life and have freedom to play at his/her will.

The absence of concerted cultivation in Champak and Chanda's parenting prompts them to look for alternatives and support from elsewhere. The alternative is usually found in numerous tuition and coaching institutions, career counsellors and educated family members, friends or employers. Such informal and unstructured support systems help to enrich a learner's home-school interface by reducing the sole dependence on parents (especially single parents) of low-income groups. Both Chanda and Champak attempt to acquire such concerted cultivation which can enable Apeksha and Tarika (their respective daughters) to excel in their academics. The following section uncovers nature of parent- child relation in single parent households.

Third theme explores the nature of parent-child relation in the film protagonists' households. Such relations involve interactions between two known individuals (parent and child) over a sustained period and are typically characterised by temporality and reciprocity (Madan et.al., 2018, p.109). Temporality refers to these interactions as seen in daily routines and chores of present, past and future and reciprocity refers

to cognitive, emotional and behavioural processes exchanged between parent and child (and influencing one another).

The relationship of Chanda-Apeksha and Champak-Tarika presents us with nuanced intricacies and complexities of parent-child relations in single-parent families. Chanda expects Apeksha to fare well in academics while being honest about their financial struggles. While there is a strong maternal urge to protect and shield her daughter from the challenges and problems of the world, there is also an expression of vulnerability as a mother. Apeksha is also comfortable sharing her aspirations, fears, discontent and expectations with her mother. The relationship is also presented as strained and terse at certain junctures, eventually blossoming into having respect and pride for each other's individuality.

On similar grounds, Champak and Tarika also experience many ups and downs in their daily lives. The early demise of Tarika's mother situates Champak to take on the role of both parents. He balances his business and household to provide a nurturing space for his daughter. He also ascertains that he can support his daughter's dreams and aspirations through apt financial means. Tarika shares an equivocal relationship with her father where she feels free to correct, advise and care for her father in her own way.

The extended family, in this case, is presented as a reliable and nurturing support system for them. Not only does it provide a source of emotional strength, but it also contributes financially wherever it is required.

Concluding Remarks

The study of a single-parent family in contemporary Bollywood cinema presents some significant insights. First, education is considered as an asset for social mobility in life. Parents emphasise that their children perform well in academics and ascertain it by utilising all the economic resources at their disposal. Second, parents of low/middle-income groups who lack concerted cultivation look for alternatives around themselves. These alternatives are above and beyond the school and can be coaching/ tuition centres, educated employers or extended family members. Third, parent-child relation is characterized by both taking on the role of the caretaker/ nurturer at varied junctions and acting as a pivot for the emotional strength of one another. Certain aspects are emphasized routinely in children's lives- being responsible, making thoughtful and well-informed decisions, and being familiar and articulate about the struggles/ challenges that the family experiences, such as the loss of a parent, economic hardships and so on.

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