

**UNDERSTANDING CULTURAL CRINGE AMONG THE YOUTH OF INDIA (AGE – 18-29) WITH REFERENCE TO BOLLYWOOD MAINSTREAM CINEMA**

**Ms Sanika Kulkarni**, Asst Prof, Tilak Maharashtra Vidyapeeth

**Abstract**

An Australian writer, critic and teacher A.A. Phillips coined the term 'the cultural cringe' in 1950 to describe an Australian tendency to identify our literature and art as inferior to work produced overseas, particularly in Britain and the United States. The presence of cultural cringe in nation can disrupt the values and norms among the public and lead to cultural alienation. Cultural alienation in turn means abandonment of one's own culture.

The study therefore focuses on the role of Bollywood Mainstream cinema in shaping the attitude and beliefs of today's youth towards Indian culture. The idea behind taking the crux of mainstream cinema was to understand how it affects the masses compared to art cinema which is viewed by only some classes of society. The researcher chose to study the youth population as they are the majority audience which consume the film medium. A total of forty samples were collected based on their reaction to some popular Bollywood hits and their scenes depicting a general cultural view of India. The objective behind this study was to understand if cultural cringe does exist in the minds of the youth of India and if it does how cinema is giving a boost to it.

**Key Words:** Culture, Mainstream Cinema, Cringe, Cultural Cringe, Youth Culture

**Introduction**

An Australian writer, critic and teacher A.A. Phillips coined the term 'the cultural cringe' in 1950 to describe an Australian tendency to identify our literature and art as inferior to work produced overseas, particularly in Britain and the United States. In simple terms, Cultural Cringe can be referred to as internalized inferiority complex among the people of a specific culture who dismiss it and think of it as inferior to other cultures. Closely related to colonial mentality, it also might link to the anti-intellectual attitudes towards thinkers, scientists and artists who originate from a colonial or post-colonial nation

**Cultural Cringe & Origin**

The term Cultural Cringe was coined after the Second World War by the Melbourne critic and social commentator A. A. Phillips, and defined in an influential and highly controversial 1950 essay of the same name. It explored ingrained feelings of inferiority that local intellectuals struggled against, and which was most clearly pronounced in the Australian theatre, music, art and letters. The implications of these insights potentially applied to all former colonial nations, and the essay is now recognised as a cornerstone in the development of Post colonial theory in Australia.

Phillips was directly commenting on the local dramatists, actors, musicians and writers and based on his assumptions found them to be deficient when compared against the works of the British and European counterparts. In the words of the poet Chris Wallace-Crabbe (quoted by Peter Conrad), Australia was being made to rhyme with failure. The only chance local professional artists had was to build up public esteem by following the cultural fashion and trends of overseas or spend a considerable amount of working in Britain for many former Britons holding senior positions in Australia's public sector.

Cultural cringe can be associated with a familiar term known as cultural alienation; a feeling or a process of devaluation or abandonment of one's own culture. The post-colonial theorists Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin link alienation with a sense of dislocation or displacement some peoples (especially those from immigrant cultures) will feel when they look to a distant nation for their values.

### **Depiction of Indian Culture in Bollywood Cinema**

Oxford Learner's dictionary defines culture as the customs and beliefs, art, way of life and social organization of a particular country or group. It includes every aspect of our life the food we eat, the clothes we wear, the language we speak, the God we worship. It includes everything. "Sanskriti" is the Indian word, which can be associated with the word "culture." A country as different as India is represented by the plurality of its culture. It's transferred from generation to generation and includes all the material and non-material factors of group.

When we talk about the media industry in relation with the material factors, films are huge tools in shaping the culture of a society. They portray arenas of music, dance and many different traditions present in the Diaspora of culture. Not only these traditional values, but they also depict certain complex processes of globalization, modernization, nationalism, etc. Indian films have continually excited the audience by promoting western beliefs, emancipation of women, societal problems, Hindu-Muslim relationships and all the topics which otherwise are not discussed on a coffee table. Apart from topics of interest in the content of a movie, aspects like fashion, violence, sex and lifestyle have generated or triggered awareness among the minds of people.

This paper reflects on the understanding of the Indian youth's attitude and inclination towards their culture. To delve into this, the researcher chose the means of Bollywood or the Hindi movie industry as it largely occupies the share under the entertainment purposes of the nation. This industry, popularly known as Bollywood, has become a part of our daily culture and keeps on influencing the lives of many individuals. In fact it might be wise to say that Bollywood has become a religion for many. The most common example for this can be an Indian wedding, where one will find all the ladies wearing latest fashion trends they have seen in a movie and the people dancing on all the latest hit songs. The anarkali kameez dress is a classic example of cultural influence under the field of fashion largely influenced by the movie *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960) which consisted of long flowing churidars and kurtas. Not only fashion, but Bollywood movies have inspired generations to pursue the art forms of singing, dancing and theatre. Other than cultural influences, Hindi movie industry has also been on the social front taking in the issues of widow remarriage, dowry, respecting elders, corruption, bureaucracy, politics, etc.

The golden period of 2000 saw the Indian film-making industry take baby steps towards revolutionizing production and marketing by professional companies bringing in western-style studio practices. Now, 60 percent of the income is guaranteed to a production by just pre-selling of music, television, radio and in-flight entertainment rights, marketing of mobile ringtones, etc. Bollywood is number one in selling of tickets sold annually, surpassing even Hollywood. The growing reach and influence of Indian movies has had a major impact on foreign economies too. There is a tussle among foreign countries for hosting Bollywood roadshows and movie award ceremonies as these boost local economy. Despite the economic slowdown in country, Bollywood still manages to grab a handful annually for each ticket sold.

Naturally when we see a diverse culture and different kinds of people getting influenced by such a strong media, there is a possibility of certain stereotypes and biases developing among them or in the media. The idea of fair skin over dark skin, the idea of traditional attire getting classified under "downy village" clothes, fat-shaming, have become popular concepts in the recent times. The very need for English and western culture has made the demand for regional languages as well as regional media to be at the losing end. People who know English are given prime importance, as it is one of the global languages and it has become a part of trend.

Human beings are so very conditioned to believe that all is well that ends well, manipulates us to believe that everything will fall in place right at the end and the same is depicted in almost all the Bollywood movies. However strenuous and difficult the journey might be for the positive characters, but always it ends with – HAPPY END-ING, thereby manipulating the thought process and making individuals believe that everything will fall into place at the end. Similarly, there are various aspects in lives of individuals where they tend to believe that they can replicate the happenings in the movies thereby trying to emulate the characters depicted in the movies. This is because of the fact that we as individuals tend to associate ourselves with the characters of the movies

Sinha in his book, *Dynamics of change in Modern Hindu Family* talks about a study conducted by Orenstein and Micklin (1960), observed that Indian family household size remained similar from 1911 to 1951 but after this period there was a breakdown in the culture of Joint Families. People started to move from joint families to nuclear families (Sinha, 1993). Marriages play an important part in a society. A lot of classic Bollywood movies saw joint families and traditional arranged marriages as a crux of the story. Since the advent of globalization and westernized culture, examples of nuclear families, live-in relationships, courtships, love marriages, etc. is seen in the movies.

India has had a rich tradition of music and dance and they are an integral part of narrative expressions. Mainly, Indian tradition relies on oral tradition mainly to create images and this trend has been encouraged by producers and film makers while creating a story (Thoraval, 2000). Bollywood movies also show youngsters and teenagers getting into the habit of alcohol consumption and smoking. It might be considered as a style statement or coping mechanisms to different failures in personal or professional life. Hence, alcohol can be considered as the ultimate solution over anything for these youngsters. Other than alcohol and drug consumption, violence is also the means used for defence or coping mechanisms. There are multiple action movies depicting the protagonist of the movie to indulge in fights to win over a girl, to take revenge, etc. making him the ultimate hero. Research has shown that watching violent films result in violent behaviour and turns people more aggressive (Perry, 2014). Not only does it promote violence and aggression but sometimes also gives idea for ways to commit crimes. Impact of such hazardous things is more on adolescents as compared to grown up men as they are in the phase of shaping of their behaviour and world view. Thus, violence after becoming a part of behaviour is harder to get rid of and affects all the spheres of lives.

In addition to these flaws, homosexuality or gender neutrality is another such topic which is touched on a lot. In many Bollywood movies, homosexuality is presented as a comic element which makes it very insensitive. Before Article 377, it was a taboo in India making it a breakthrough in the Indian society. But it is still hard to find vital roles of LGBTQ in these films; most of them having a stereotypical image anyway. These movies received huge amount of public backlash due to stereotypes which have prevailed in the society related to homosexuals which resulted in decline in such bold films questioning the prevailing societal taboo but rather led to increase in homosexuality related jokes. Even now, it is a long way to imagine such films even though the change has begun. Acceptance and appreciation of movies like *Padmavat* (2018), *Margarita with Straw* (2014) shows the initiation of the much needed change in Bollywood.

### **Mainstream Cinema v/s Art Movies in India**

Most of us understand Cinema as a source of entertainment and pastime. But one can go beyond this mild definition and say that cinema is much more than that. Though it makes money and produces content which renders as entertaining as any other art forms, cinema or movies also create an impact on the minds of audiences making them analyze and over-explain the facts in the movies much later. Such is a power of cinema that one cannot forget their favourite dialogues, the characters, the scenes and in the case of Bollywood, the music numbers. Mainstream cinema, in this sense, is the source of entertainment which usually is made for the masses and for the profit or money making business. Art movies or parallel cinema is much more different than that.

The question or topic revolving around this kind of cinema is “Were these people being more creative and knew the medium better and thought the audience needed to be educated in better cinema?” A new line of cinema known as the New Indian wave came into limelight decades ago. Popularly known as Art Cinema or Parallel Cinema today, it focuses on themes of realism, naturalism, society and politics while adding a completely different film-making style to it. Introduced in the 20th century by eminent personalities like Satyajit Ray, Bimal Roy, Mrinal Sen, Guru Dutt, it was a by-product of Italian Neorealism. Among these, Satyajit Ray’s ‘The Apu Trilogy’ (*Pathar Panchali*, *Aparajito* and *The World of Apu*) and Bimal Roy’s ‘*Do Bigha Zamin*’ (two acres of land) are known as the prototypes of this cinematic style, addressing societal issues of

the era. However, keeping up in pace with the mainstream cinema over the decades became the biggest challenge to these parallel filmmakers.

Because of the spiralling costs of film production and increasing commercial competition in the early 1990s, the art films faced adverse effects. They were marginalized by underworld financial distribution which was majorly towards the mainstream movies, there was political and economic turmoil due to liberalization, the rise of television and piracy had an influence on the medium of cinema as a whole and then also it was confined to distinguished performances, critical appraisals, studies and textbooks of the art of film making. However, since 2000, new age Indian directors like Anurag Kashyap and Dibakar Banerjee have created a fresh genre that combines mainstream cinema (Bollywood) with art films. It is an amalgamation of the two, giving people a subtle taste of what an art film might be like; but at the same time, not losing its pace and theatrical effects to entertain people.

### Objectives of the Research

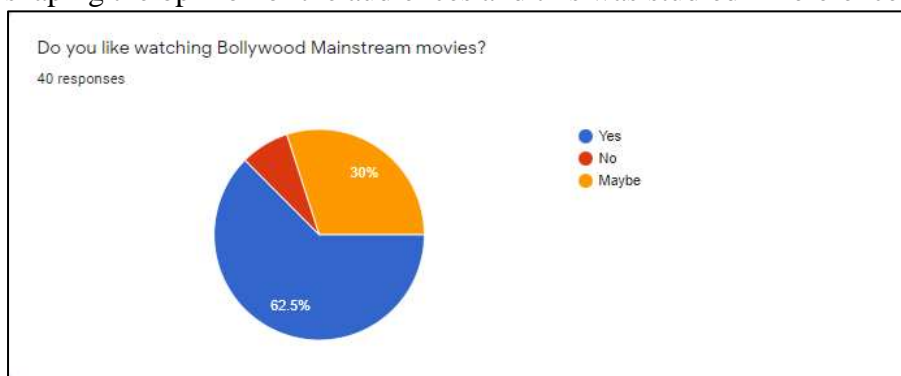
1. To understand the difference between the terms “cultural cringe” and “cringe culture”
2. To analyze the importance of film media in shaping the opinion of Youth
3. To understand the existence of cultural cringe among the youth of India with reference to Bollywood movies.

### Research Methodology

This research will highlight the term cultural cringe with reference to the taste of youth in Bollywood mainstream cinema. Mainstream cinema can be defined as the movies which are made and created for profit appealing to the mass rather than class. Quantitative research enables us to find patterns, generalize and make predictions of a wider population. Owing to this factor, the researcher chose to use cultural examples of Bollywood movies while taking the youth of age 18-29 years (Sample size 40) who form the larger audience base for the film media. The age group is defined according to the classification of adulthood in India.

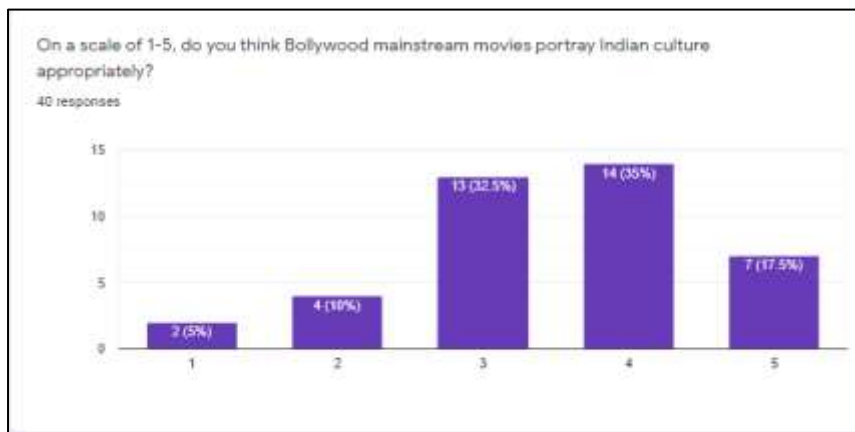
### Analysis: Youth and Bollywood Mainstream Movies

The reason to choose mainstream movies for the output was to understand how they affect the masses in comparison to the reach of art films. So in order to get a closer look the samples of youth from age 18-29 years was taken. As discussed earlier, cinema plays a major role in impacting and shaping the opinion of the audiences and this was studied in reference to the youth of India



(Image 1: Survey Qs.1)

The very first question touched on this research was the taste of youth in Bollywood cinema. Over 62 percent of the 40 samples said they enjoy watching Bollywood mainstream movies. This helps us in understanding that even though there is a surge in art cinema, watching mainstream or masala movies is still preferred. This can also be assumed owing to the fact that these mainstream movies outnumber the art movies by number and profit annually based on the literature review discussed earlier.

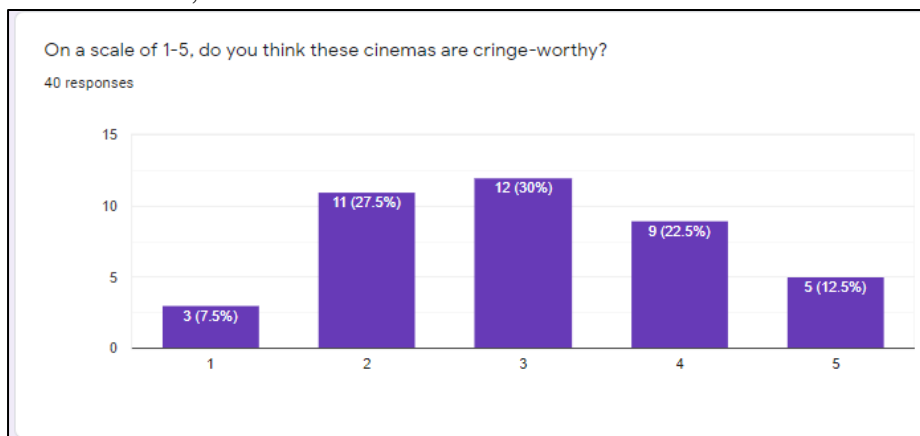


**(Image 2: Survey Qs. 2)**

The very nature of this study was to understand the adoption of culture in Bollywood movies and if it is accepted by the youth of India. When asked the same in the survey (Use of likert scale to measure the understanding of youth) 35 percent believed on a scale of 4 (5 being the highest) that the movies do not portray Indian culture appropriately. However compared to the other numbers, it can be well assumed that hardly one-fourth population of the sample agreed to this point, leaving others just neutral or disagreeable to the same.

Having looked at the various movies in the examples, it is a clear indication that Bollywood does use the same formula to maintain a specific audience. The formula being the depiction of specific culture nuances for relating with the generic audience. Be it the Indian festivals, the school traditions, or relationships, the general public can easily associate with the characters or the dialogues; sometimes even the songs in the movies.

The idea of culture among youth of India is quite different from what these movies have to offer. If this is the case, one must understand the reason behind this which is what this study focuses on.

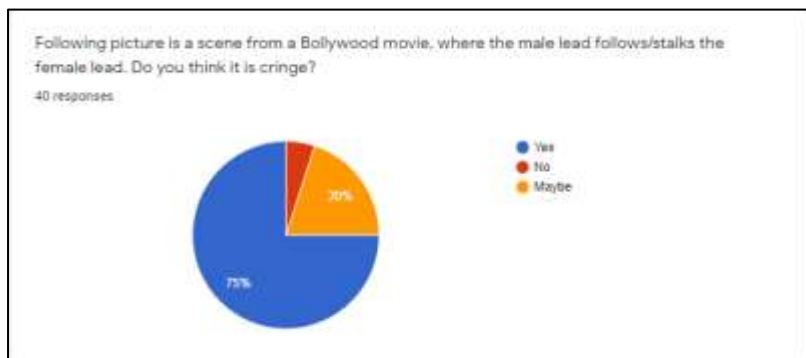


**(Image 3: Survey Qs. 3)**

The term “cringe” is popular among the youth as something which is a feeling of embarrassment, ashamed or apprehensive about something. The researcher tried to associate this feeling with the medium of mainstream movies of Bollywood by taking the samples’ answer based on Likert scale. Here, 11 out of 40 samples believed that these movies are cringe-worthy compared to the 12 out of 40 samples who maintained neutrality in their answer.

This goes on to say that even though the term “cringe” is familiar among the youth, it might not be always associated with cinema medium. Without a doubt, there still remains a question whether they enjoy these movies or find them cringe-worthy. It is also possible that they have mixed up the term in mind therefore rendering the research questionable. But the following examples in survey would bring a clearer picture in mind as to what exactly these samples have in their mind in regards to the mainstream movies.

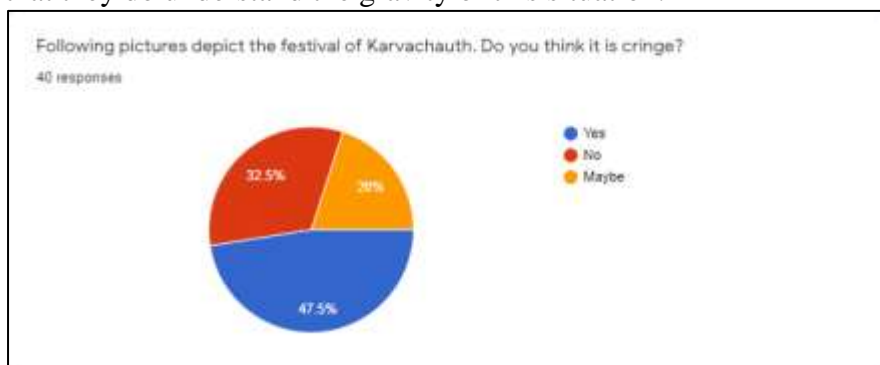
After getting a general picture of the samples’ understanding of the topic and its nature the survey went on further into depth where a series of scenes picked from movies was shown to the samples and understand their views on it.



**(Image 4: Survey Qs. 4)**

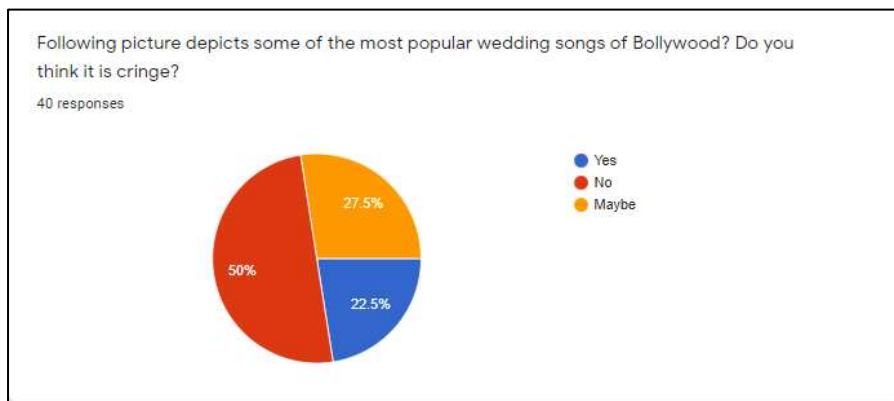
The first scene was from a popular movie “Ranjhanaa” and the scene which was shown to the samples was that of the male lead following his lady crush and stalking her everywhere. Bollywood has never shied away from expression of love; from romantic songs to romantic scenes between two lovers, the idea of love is portrayed differently in different films. But clearly, the idea of consenting love is somewhere hidden in all of the popular mainstream movies. Particularly in this film *Ranjhanaa* where the protagonist is ready to do anything for his lady love even when she is not interested. The justification of majority of samples agreeing to the fact that this is indeed cringe worthy says a lot about depiction of romance in the movies.

Our art forms come from a very vibrant and magnanimous history of Ramayana and Mahabharata, where our godly heroes have always been a step ahead for their love and doing wonders, making them the epics that we read or watch now. Even though it is strongly rooted in our cultural system, many mainstream movies fail to recognize that the idea of consent or mutual agreement in any kind of relationship, especially that of love is very important. The samples’ answers make it pretty clear that they do understand the gravity of this situation.



**(Image 5: Survey Qs. 5)**

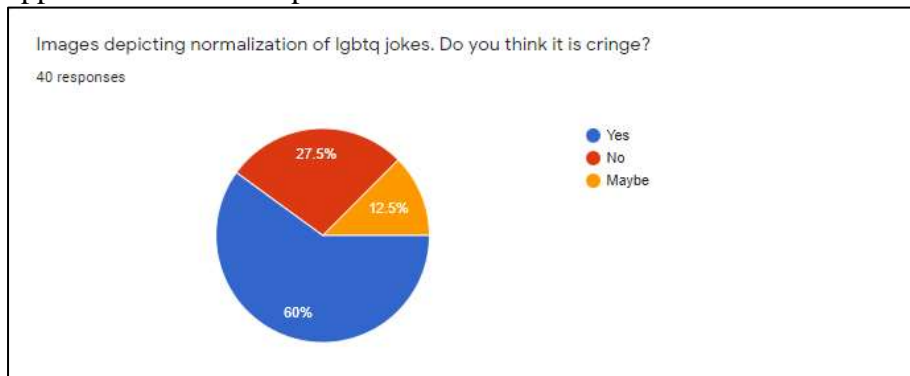
*Karvachauth* is a popular Hindu festival celebrated across northern and western regions of India by women for their husbands. It is celebrated for the onus of *wheat sowing* in some villages while others it is just an age-old tradition popularly celebrated in the month of October. In this festival, the women keep an all day fast in the belief of safety and longevity of their husbands. This festival has also gained popularity after many Bollywood movies depicting the romance and love in the scenes by depicting it; examples being *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, *Baghban*, *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham*, etc. The samples were shown these images from the movies and out of 40, 47.5 percent believed these scenes to be cringe-worthy while 32.5 percent said otherwise.



**(Image 6: Survey Qs. 6)**

If we talk about the grandeur of festivals in India, we can never talk enough about Indian weddings. Indian weddings are typically of more than three days with extensive decorations, colours, music, dances and food. They are no less than any festival celebrated in India. But one can possibly argue that most of the traditions and ideas behind the celebrations are inspired from the movies itself. For example, the tradition of stealing the groom’s footwear was not that common until it was played on the big screen in the famous “Hum Apke Hai Kaun”. Many such movies with their grand celebration of a wedding have made it a very big industry in India.

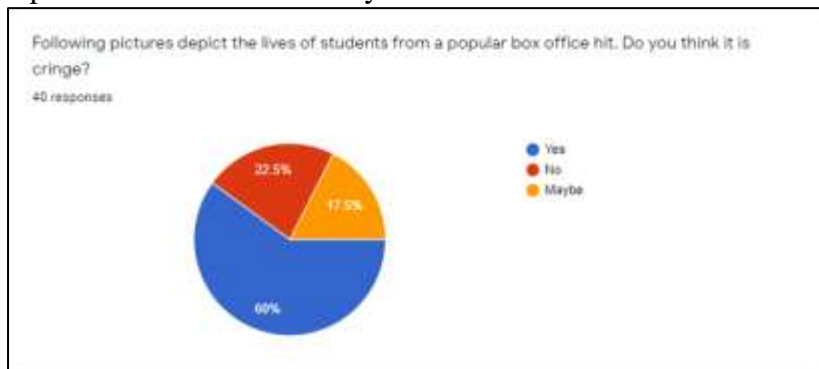
Similarly, the samples were shown the images of popular wedding songs from the most popular Bollywood movies. The rating for cringe in these was such that out of 40 samples 50 percent were in opposition while 27.5 percent were neutral about it.



**(Image 7: Survey Qs.7)**

In the long history of Bollywood movies (especially mainstream) LGBTQ characters have rarely played importance. Even in the rarest of characters where they were portrayed, it was through a comic element at the expense of others’ emotions; often the straight guys. Examples of such were the famous production hits like Dostana, Kal Ho Na Ho etc.

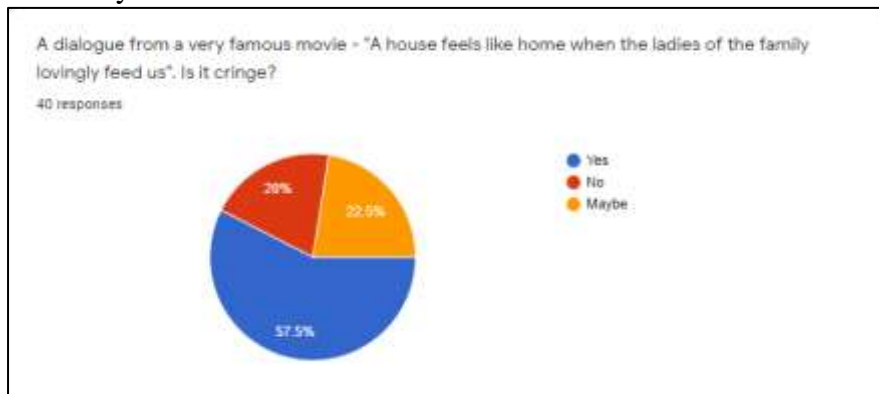
These examples were shown to the samples and out of 40, 60 percent said that these scenes are cringe-worthy which goes without saying that today’s youth is much more aware of gender representation and sensitivity.



**(Image 8: Survey Qs. 8)**

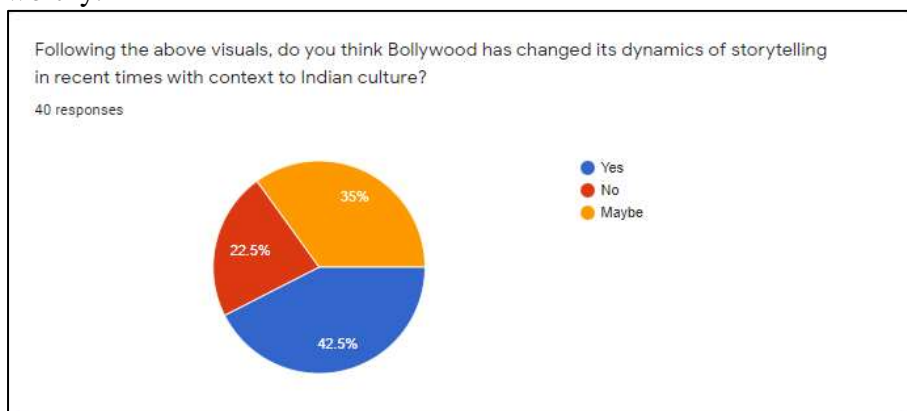
The youth of today mostly constitute the audiences completing their education. Education is a primal factor in their lives. Similarly, many movies also revolve around the daily student lives in their stories. The youth obviously can easily relate to this. But sometimes, Bollywood mainstream movies fail to understand the simple and straightforward lives these students live.

Barring that, there are several examples from mainstream movies, especially the Dharma Productions showing vicarious lives of students. The samples were shown one such example from a hit “Student of the Year” where the students are shown in a limelight of parties, driving expensive cars, dancing in parties and doing anything but studying. According to the survey majority of the samples obviously did not connect with this as this is not what we see in a normal school or college life.



(Image 9: Survey Qs. 9)

The above survey question showed a famous scene from the 2000s hit “Hum Saath Saath Hain”. To say that the dialogue is dripping off a lot of patriarchy will be an under-statement because the film depicts female characters who are college toppers and doctors and all they do is work in the kitchen and serve food to the men of the family. Naturally, majority of the samples assumed it to be cringe-worthy.



(Image 9: Survey Qs. 9)

Out of the 40 samples, only 42.5 percent believed that Bollywood is changing and the dynamics of storytelling are changing, to name a few, Swades, Rang De Basanti, 3 idiots were some of the examples that the samples provided where they believed in the changing dynamics of storytelling in the recent times.

### Conclusion: Existence of Cultural Cringe in India

The top definition for cringe culture on Urban Dictionary says "The culture started on the Internet of making fun of people and/or insulting them by calling them "cringy" or "cringe" for doing something which doesn't harm or somehow insult neither anyone nor anything." It can also be associated with bullying of children or childlike things. Those who think that cringe (in their definition) is not acceptable shame the others who are into it while others may just view it as an art.

But cultural cringe is something which is quite different, while cringe content is not acceptable for some; cultural cringe is something which makes the person hate his or her own culture. While this can be problematic, media has a large role to play in this matter. In this research, it is pretty clear that



films do influence and shape the opinions of the younger generations at large. The youth does believe that films have the power to change or bring about a change in the society. India being a nation of diverse cultures, it is necessary for the films to impart or portray them with responsibility. While looking at the different examples from mainstream movies, it was clear that there needs to be some kind of change in the content and the film creators need to make that. They need to understand the importance of reality and how it will shape the audience.

The art films like *Masaan*, *Aligarh*, *Shahid*, etc. have already paved their way in doing the best they can to portray realism, now it is time that Bollywood mainstream cinema also hold hands with this system and produces content accordingly. This in turn will avoid the very notion of cultural cringe in being and in the minds of the people.

### **Bibliography**

Allemand, L. (2015). *INDIA'S PARALLEL CINEMA How popular is the Indian alternative movement and how is urban poverty represented?*

Anonymous. (2019, January 2019). *People are calling out stereotypes in Bollywood movies on Twitter, and they're on point*. Retrieved January 2022, from The Indian Express: <https://indianexpress.com/article/trending/trending-in-india/tweeple-are-calling-out-stereotypes-in-movies-and-its-a-must-read-5528242/>

Asma Ayob & Marisa Keuris (2017) *Bollywood Cinema: A Transnational/Cultural Role*, Journal of Literary Studies, 33:2, 35-58, DOI: 10.1080/02564718.2017.1334863

Balabantaray, Subhra. (2020). *Impact of Indian cinema on culture and creation of world view among youth: A sociological analysis of Bollywood movies*. Journal of Public Affairs. 10.1002/pa.2405.

Chakrabarti, S. (2015, August 29). *Young India, new hunger for identity*. Retrieved January 2022, from The Hindu: <https://www.thehindu.com.cdn.ampproject.org/v/s/www.thehindu.com/features/magazine/young-india-new-hunger-for-identity-through-pop-culture/article7590672>.

Chakravarty, S. (1993) *National Identity in Indian popular cinema, 1947-1987*, University of Texas

Chaudhari, N. (2004, August 13). *CULTURAL CRINGE - Reducing colonialism to a single design is poor history*. Retrieved January 2022, from The Telegraph: <https://www.telegraphindia.com/opinion/cultural-cringe-reducing-colonialism-to-a-single-design-is-poor-history/cid/1020992>

Tilak, G., & Singh, D. (2019). *A Study of represent of transgender community in media industry*.

Mandeikar, A. (2009). *Impact of Bollywood on Indian Culture*. Retrieved January 2022, from Desi Blitz: <https://www.desiblitz.com/content/impact-bollywood-indian-culture>

Patston, M. (2021, May 11). *Happy Mag*. Retrieved January 2022, from <https://happymag.tv/cringe/>

Williams, A. (2021, April 16). Retrieved January 2022, from DT Next: <https://www.dtnext-in.cdn.ampproject.org/v/s/www.dtnext.in/amp/News/World/2021/04/16004835/1287907/Popular-Culture-The-cult-of-cringe-and-those-who-induce-.vpf>