

Gendered Experiences of the Urban Space in India as Portrayed by Hindi Cinema: A Quantitative Analysis

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Abstract : In India, cities represent intense battlefields where patriarchal norms are simultaneously defied and reinforced. While Indian metropolises have witnessed numerous initiatives where women boldly claimed their right to the city, urban spaces still remain disproportionately unfriendly to female city-dwellers. As a result, the presence of streets (women, in Hindi) in the streets remains a socially and politically potent phenomenon. This paper explores how, in India, women engage with the city as compared to men. Borrowing analytical tools from urban geography, it uses Hindi cinema as a medium to map the extent to which activities, attitudes and experiences in urban spaces are highly gendered. The sample consists of 30 movies, both mainstream and independent, which were released between 2010 and 2020, were set in an urban environment and comprised at least one pivotal female character. The paper adopts a quantitative approach, consisting of the scrutiny of close to 3,000 minutes of footage, the labeling and time count of every scene, and the computation of regressions to identify statistical relationships between characters and the way they navigate the city. According to the analysis, female characters spend half less time in the public space than their male counterparts. When they do step out, women do it mostly for utilitarian reasons; inversely, in private spaces or in pseudo-public commercial places - like malls - they indulge in fun activities. For male characters, the pattern is the exact opposite: fun takes place in public and serious work in private. The characters' attitudes in the streets are also greatly gendered: men spend a significant amount of time immobile, loitering, while women are usually on the move, displaying some sense of purpose. Likewise, body language and emotional expressiveness betray differentiated gender scripts: while women wander in the streets either smiling - in a charming role - or with a hostile face - in a defensive mode - men are more likely to adopt neutral facial expressions. These trends were observed across all movies, although some nuances were identified depending on the character's age group, social background, and city, highlighting that the urban experience is not the same for all women. The empirical pieces of evidence presented in this study are helpful to reflect on the meaning of public space in the context of contemporary Indian cities. The paper ends with a discussion on the link between universal access to public spaces and women's empowerment.

Keywords : cinema, Indian cities, public space, women empowerment

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