

Reel to Real: Representation of Social Movements in Indian Cinema

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Abstract

This research investigates the role of Indian cinema in reflecting and influencing socio-political change in various historical periods. Indian cinema has long been a cultural medium that reflects popular concerns and helps develop a collective understanding of topics such as caste prejudice, gender equality, political resistance, rural suffering, and democratic participation. The study employs a qualitative multiple-case study design and discusses ten major Indian films, selected through purposive sampling based on their historical importance, cultural significance, critical acclaim, and links to social movements. The approach combines thematic analysis with historical contextualisation, visual and narrative analysis and audience reception perspectives to explore how films reflect activism and social change. The results show that Indian cinema has shifted from stories focusing on nationalism and agrarian conflicts in the post-independence period to movies dealing with issues of constitutional rights, social justice, identity and modern political issues. The study also reveals that cinematic features such as symbolism, character development, dialogue, and visual storytelling are critical in moulding the audience's perception of social movements and in prompting increased public engagement with social concerns. Through Representation Theory,

Narrative Theory and Audience Reception Theory, the study suggests cinema is a cultural archive that entertains, preserves collective memory and provokes critical reflection on social reality. The study, through a comparative analysis of films created in diverse socio-political situations, helps in comprehending the portrayal of social movements in Indian cinema and their impact on public discourse in the broader domain of film and communication studies.

Keywords: Indian cinema, social movements, representation, thematic analysis, social justice, political communication.

Introduction

Cinema has long been recognised as one of the most influential forms of mass communication, capable of reflecting social realities while simultaneously shaping public opinion, cultural values, and political consciousness. Beyond entertainment, cinema has become an important cultural medium for documenting historical experiences, reflecting social realities, and encouraging discussion on issues of public importance (Hall, 1973; Monaco, 2009). In India, films have consistently explored themes such as social justice, political change, caste discrimination, gender equality, agrarian struggles, labour rights, and democratic participation. As a result, cinema offers valuable insights into the country's changing social and political environment (Dwyer, 2006; Rajadhyaksha & Willemen, 2014). Through narrative, symbolism, visual imagery, and character development, Indian films have shaped public understanding of social issues while preserving the collective memory of important historical events and struggles.

The relationship between Indian cinema and social movements has developed alongside the country's political, social, and cultural changes. In the years following Independence, many films reflected the ideals of nation-building, rural development, and collective responsibility. Films such as *Mother India* (1957) and *Manthan* (1976) highlighted the realities of agrarian life, community participation, and the challenges involved in rebuilding society and the economy. From the 1970s onwards, filmmakers increasingly turned their attention to issues such as caste discrimination, political corruption, communal conflict, women's rights, and constitutional justice, reflecting the changing concerns of Indian society (Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 2009). More recently, films including *Rang De Basanti* (2006), *Pink* (2016), *Newton* (2017), *Article 15* (2019), and *Jai Bhim*

(2021) have focused more directly on contemporary social issues and democratic values through realistic narratives and socially engaged storytelling (Athique, 2016; Viridi, 2017).

Researchers have also pointed out that films do more than simply reflect society; they influence the way people understand social reality through representation. (Hall et al., 2013) argues that media representations are shaped by cultural codes, language, and symbols that affect how audiences interpret people, institutions, and social events. Likewise, cinema can be understood as a cultural text in which narrative, visual composition, dialogue, and character development work together to shape public understanding of activism, identity, resistance, and justice (Bordwell, 2013; Chatman, 1990). In this way, films provide a space where historical events and social issues can be interpreted, debated, and viewed from different perspectives, encouraging audiences to engage with wider social and political discussions.

Previous research has examined Indian cinema from a range of perspectives, including nationalism, gender representation, caste politics, postcolonial identity, and parallel cinema (Dwyer, 2006; Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 2009; Viridi, 2003). Some studies have focused on the contribution of individual films or filmmakers in raising awareness of social issues, while others have explored cinema in relation to political communication. Despite these contributions, existing research has largely concentrated on particular films, genres, or social issues. Comparatively fewer studies have examined how different social movements have been represented across different historical periods of Indian cinema. In addition, limited research has brought together historical context, narrative analysis, visual representation, and audience interpretation within a single analytical framework. As a result, there is still scope for a broader understanding of how Indian cinema has responded to changing socio-political conditions and influenced public discussion on social movements.

To address this gap, the present study explores the representation of social movements through a qualitative multiple case study of ten influential Indian films produced over more than six decades. These films represent a broad range of social movements, including agrarian reform, caste equality, women's empowerment, youth activism, electoral democracy, constitutional justice, and national integration. Instead of viewing films only as artistic works, the study considers them as cultural texts that both reflect and influence the social, political, and historical contexts in which

they are made. Using thematic analysis together with historical contextualisation, visual and narrative analysis, and audience reception analysis, the study examines how films represent social movements and how these representations have changed across different periods.

The study draws on Representation Theory (Hall, 1973), Narrative Theory (Bordwell, 2013; Chatman, 1990), and Audience Reception Theory (Hall, 1973) . Together, these perspectives provide a useful framework for understanding how social movements are represented in cinema, how narratives communicate particular ideas and values, and how audiences interpret these representations within their own social and cultural settings. By bringing these theoretical perspectives together, the study offers a comparative understanding of the relationship between Indian cinema, historical realities, and social change. It also contributes to media and communication scholarship by strengthening discussions on cinema as a medium of cultural communication, historical representation, and democratic engagement.

Research Objectives:

1. To study the portrayal of social movements in Indian films.
2. To explore the narrative structure, historical representation, and cinematographic style of these films.
3. To understand the influence of these films on public discourse and policy.

Research Questions:

1. How have Indian films represented social movements across different periods?
2. What cinematic techniques are used to convey activism?
3. What has been the impact of these films on public awareness and policy changes?

Review of literature

Indian cinema has long been recognised as an important cultural medium that extends beyond entertainment. It reflects social, political, and cultural realities while also influencing the way people understand them. Researchers have observed that cinema provides a space where questions of identity, ideology, and collective memory are expressed and debated, making films valuable for understanding historical change and public discourse (Hall et al., 2013; Monaco, 2009). In India, films have consistently engaged with issues such as social inequality, political conflict, and movements for reform, while also shaping public opinion on these concerns. As a result, the

relationship between cinema and social movements has become an important area of study within media and communication research (Dwyer, 2006; Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 2009).

A substantial body of research has examined how Indian cinema portrays social and political movements. Studies show that filmmakers have repeatedly explored themes related to nationalism, land reform, labour movements, caste discrimination, and political resistance. Instead of presenting these movements simply as historical events, films interpret them through narrative, symbolism, and visual representation, allowing audiences to understand social change from different perspectives. Research on political cinema also suggests that films help preserve historical memory while encouraging audiences to reflect on issues of justice, democracy, and citizenship.

Another important area of research examines the relationship between Indian cinema, caste, and social justice. Earlier mainstream films have often been criticised for overlooking caste realities or portraying them largely from upper-caste viewpoints. In recent years, however, filmmakers have increasingly brought Dalit experiences, institutional discrimination, and constitutional rights to the forefront of cinematic narratives. Studies suggest that films such as *Article 15* and *Jai Bhim* mark an important shift in the way caste oppression, social exclusion, and access to justice are represented, reflecting broader social and political changes in contemporary India. These films also demonstrate how cinema has become an effective platform for encouraging discussion on equality, human rights, and social inclusion.

Gender representation is another widely discussed area within Indian film studies. Earlier research often criticised commercial cinema for reinforcing patriarchal values and confining women to domestic or symbolic roles. More recent studies, however, point to a gradual shift in which women increasingly occupy central roles in stories of resistance, agency, and social change. Films that address issues such as consent, education, reproductive health, and gender equality illustrate this changing portrayal, presenting women not merely as recipients of social change but as active participants in struggles for justice and empowerment (Mulvey, 1975).

Researchers have also examined how cinematic narratives and visual techniques communicate social realities. Elements such as narrative structure, dialogue, symbolism, cinematography, sound, and character development all contribute to the way audiences understand the social issues presented on screen. (Bordwell, 2013) argue that cinematic form itself shapes meaning, while (Chatman, 1990) explains that the organisation of a narrative influences how viewers interpret events and characters. In recent decades, many Indian filmmakers have adopted realist aesthetics,

documentary-inspired approaches, and historically grounded storytelling to make films on social movements more authentic and emotionally engaging. These developments highlight that cinema is more than a source of entertainment; it is also an important medium for cultural communication.

Another area of research has focused on audience reception and the wider social influence of cinema. Audience-based studies suggest that films can shape public opinion, encourage discussion, and increase civic awareness, although audience responses differ according to their social, political, and cultural backgrounds (Hall et al., 2013). Scholars also argue that films dealing with social issues encourage viewers to think critically about contemporary concerns rather than simply consume entertainment. This strengthens cinema's role as a medium for democratic discussion. At the same time, researchers caution that social change cannot be attributed to cinema alone. Instead, films are seen as one part of a broader network of influences that includes the media, education, civil society, and political institutions (Valicha, 1988).

Despite the valuable contributions of earlier studies, several gaps remain in the existing literature. Much of the research has focused on individual films, filmmakers, or specific themes such as caste, gender, nationalism, and political violence. Comparatively fewer studies have examined the representation of different social movements across multiple historical periods of Indian cinema. Similarly, limited research has combined historical contextualisation, thematic analysis, narrative analysis, visual representation, and audience reception within a single qualitative framework. As a result, there is still limited understanding of how Indian cinema has represented social movements over time while responding to changing political, social, and cultural contexts. The present study seeks to address this gap through a comparative qualitative analysis of ten influential Indian films produced over more than six decades. Drawing on thematic analysis together with historical contextualisation, visual and narrative analysis, and audience reception analysis, the study examines how Indian cinema has represented, interpreted, and influenced social movements across different phases of independent India.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative multiple case study design to examine how social movements are represented in Indian cinema. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the study aims to understand how films represent social movements through narrative, visual representation,

symbolism, and historical context rather than examining statistical relationships (Creswell et al., 2003). Ten Indian films were selected through purposive sampling, as they are recognised for their engagement with important social movements across different historical periods. The selection was guided by their relevance to the research objectives, historical significance, cultural impact, critical recognition, and their focus on issues such as agrarian struggles, caste discrimination, gender equality, political resistance, constitutional rights, and democratic participation. Each film is examined as an individual case and is also compared with the others to identify recurring themes and changes in the representation of social movements over time, following the principles of multiple case study research (Yin, 2017).

The selected films form the primary source of data for the study. Secondary sources include peer-reviewed journal articles, books, historical records, film criticism, and published interviews with filmmakers, which help to provide historical context and support the interpretation of the findings. The data were analysed using thematic analysis based on the framework developed by (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Each film was viewed several times to gain a thorough understanding of its narrative and visual content. Significant scenes, dialogues, symbols, and other cinematic elements were then coded systematically. Similar codes were organised into broader themes relating to social justice, collective resistance, identity, marginalisation, institutional power, and civic participation. To deepen the analysis, thematic findings were interpreted alongside historical contextualisation, narrative analysis, and visual analysis. Historical contextualisation made it possible to compare cinematic portrayals with documented historical events. Narrative and visual analysis focused on storytelling, character development, dialogue, symbolism, cinematography, sound, and *mise-en-scène* to understand how films represent social movements and communicate their social and political meanings (Bordwell, 2013; Chatman, 1990).

The trustworthiness of the study was established using the criteria proposed by (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was strengthened through repeated viewing of the selected films and by comparing the findings with scholarly literature and historical sources. Dependability and confirmability were maintained through systematic coding and careful interpretation supported by evidence from both primary and secondary sources. As the study is based entirely on publicly available films and published literature, it does not involve human participants. Therefore, formal ethical approval was not required. Overall, this methodological approach provides a systematic

framework for examining how Indian cinema has represented social movements, interpreted social realities, and contributed to public understanding across different historical and socio-political contexts.

Table 1 Selected Indian Films Included in the Study

Sl. No.	Film Title	Year	Theme
1	<i>Mother India</i>	1957	Agrarian struggles and women's empowerment
2	<i>Manthan</i>	1976	White Revolution and rural empowerment
3	<i>Rang De Basanti</i>	2006	Youth activism and political resistance
4	<i>Article 15</i>	2019	Caste discrimination and social justice
5	<i>Sardar</i>	1993	India's freedom movement and Sardar Patel's role
6	<i>Garm Hava</i>	1973	Partition and its socio-political impact
7	<i>Pink</i>	2016	Feminism and women's legal rights
8	<i>Newton</i>	2017	Electoral rights and democratic processes in tribal regions
9	<i>Pad Man</i>	2018	Menstrual hygiene awareness and breaking taboos
10	<i>Jai Bhim</i>	2021	Caste oppression and Dalit rights

Theoretical Framework

The study draws on Representation Theory (Hall, 1997), Narrative Theory (Chatman, 1978; Bordwell, 1985), and Audience Reception Theory (Hall, 1973). Together, these theories provide a suitable framework for examining how social movements are represented, communicated, and interpreted in Indian cinema.

Representation Theory forms the central theoretical foundation of the study. (Hall, 1973) argues that media do not simply reflect reality; they shape meaning through language, images, symbols, and cultural codes. This perspective is particularly relevant to Indian cinema, where films influence the way audiences understand issues such as caste discrimination, corruption, gender equality, environmental justice, and political resistance. Rather than presenting social realities in a neutral way, films offer particular perspectives that shape public interpretation of these issues.

Narrative Theory complements this perspective by explaining how stories are organised and communicated through cinematic form. According to (Chatman, 1990) and (Bordwell, 2013), elements such as narrative structure, character development, plot, dialogue, symbolism, and visual style influence the way audiences engage with a film. This theory helps explain how filmmakers

transform historical events and social struggles into compelling narratives while balancing historical realities with creative interpretation.

As films are created for public audiences, it is equally important to understand how viewers respond to these narratives. Audience Reception Theory, particularly (Hall, 1973) Encoding/Decoding model, argues that audiences actively interpret media texts rather than accepting their meanings without question. People's interpretations are influenced by their social, cultural, educational, and political backgrounds. As a result, the messages encoded by filmmakers may be accepted, negotiated, or rejected by different audiences. Examining audience reception therefore provides a deeper understanding of the wider social influence of films based on social movements.

Taken together, these three theories provide a coherent framework for analysing how Indian cinema represents social movements, how these representations are communicated through narrative and cinematic techniques, and how audiences interpret them in different social and cultural contexts. They also support an understanding of cinema not only as a form of entertainment but also as an important cultural medium that documents historical experiences, shapes collective memory, and contributes to public discussion on social issues in contemporary India.

Data and analysis

The thematic analysis of the selected films identified six major themes that explain how Indian cinema has portrayed social movements across different historical and socio-political contexts. Taken together, the films show that cinema is much more than a source of entertainment. It serves as a medium for cultural communication, records important historical experiences, and encourages public engagement with social and political issues. The findings indicate a clear shift from films centred on nation-building and collective sacrifice during the post-independence period to more recent narratives that focus on constitutional rights, social justice, identity, and institutional accountability. The analysis also shows that filmmakers use narrative structure, symbolism, visual imagery, and character development to shape audiences' understanding of social movements. These findings are consistent with the key ideas of Representation Theory and Narrative Theory, which emphasise the role of media and storytelling in shaping the interpretation of social reality (Bordwell, 2013; Chatman, 1990; Hall, 1973; Hall et al., 2013).

Theme 1: Cinema as a Historical Record of Social Movements

One of the key findings of this study is that Indian cinema has consistently captured important historical and social changes. Earlier films such as *Mother India*, *Garm Hava*, *Manthan*, and *Sardar* revisit events related to agrarian reform, the Partition, the cooperative movement, and national integration by blending historical realities with fictional narratives. Instead of presenting history as a documentary record, these films interpret historical events through carefully developed characters, conflicts, and narratives that highlight broader social values and collective aspirations. More recent films such as *Article 15* and *Jai Bhim* continue this approach by addressing caste discrimination and constitutional justice through stories inspired by real-life incidents. Together, these films show how cinema preserves collective memory while encouraging audiences to reflect on questions of justice, citizenship, and democratic values (Hall et al., 2013; Rajadhyaksha & Willemen, 2014).

Theme 2: Social Justice and Constitutional Rights

The thematic analysis shows that social justice has emerged as a central concern in contemporary Indian cinema. Films such as *Article 15* (2019), *Jai Bhim* (2021), and *Pink* (2016) present social justice not simply as a constitutional ideal but as a reality shaped by caste discrimination, gender inequality, and unequal access to the legal system. While earlier films often explored social inequality through symbolic narratives, these films adopt a more direct and realistic approach, encouraging audiences to reflect on questions of equality, dignity, and human rights. Their narratives place ordinary people at the centre of legal and social struggles, highlighting that justice depends not only on constitutional safeguards but also on institutional accountability and public awareness.

Article 15 and *Jai Bhim* draw attention to caste-based discrimination by showing how constitutional rights are often denied to marginalised communities despite existing legal protections. Through investigative narratives and courtroom sequences, the films highlight the gap between constitutional ideals and everyday lived experiences (Rashmi & Jain, 2024). Likewise, *Pink* explores gender justice by questioning patriarchal attitudes towards consent and women's autonomy within the legal system. Taken together, these films present social justice as an ongoing process rather than a goal that has already been achieved.

These findings are consistent with (Hall et al., 2013) Representation Theory, which argues that media do not simply reflect reality but shape the way it is understood through systems of representation. By depicting institutional discrimination, legal struggles, and acts of resistance, the selected films influence public understanding of justice, equality, and citizenship while encouraging critical reflection on contemporary social issues.

Theme 3: Collective Resistance and Civic Participation

Collective resistance emerged as another important theme in the analysis. *Manthan* (1976) and *Rang De Basanti* (2006) present different forms of collective action, reflecting the changing character of social movements across different periods. While *Manthan* focuses on rural communities working together through the cooperative movement to improve their economic conditions during the White Revolution, *Rang De Basanti* portrays urban youth coming together to challenge political corruption and demand greater accountability from those in power. Although the two films are set in different historical contexts, both highlight the idea that lasting social change is achieved through collective effort rather than individual action.

The analysis also shows that the portrayal of resistance changes from community-led development to democratic activism. *Manthan* emphasises cooperation, shared responsibility, and grassroots participation as the basis of rural empowerment. In contrast, *Rang De Basanti* highlights political awareness, civic participation, and public accountability as essential features of democratic citizenship. Through their narratives, symbolism, and visual storytelling, both films encourage audiences to reflect on the value of collective participation in responding to social and political challenges.

These findings can be understood through Narrative Theory, which suggests that the organisation of characters, conflict, and plot shapes the way audiences interpret social events (Bordwell, 1985; Chatman, 1990). The two films show how cinematic storytelling can reinterpret historical experiences in ways that encourage civic responsibility and collective action.

Table 2 Coding Framework Used for Thematic Analysis

Initial Code	Description	Example Film	Final Theme
Caste discrimination	Representation of caste-based exclusion and inequality	<i>Article 15, Jai Bhim</i>	Social Justice

Gender equality	Women's rights, consent, empowerment	<i>Pink, Pad Man</i>	Gender and Social Reform
Collective protest	Public resistance and mobilisation	<i>Rang De Basanti, Manthan</i>	Collective Resistance
Rural empowerment	Cooperative movements and agrarian struggles	<i>Mother India, Manthan</i>	Community Development
Constitutional rights	Legal justice and institutional accountability	<i>Article 15, Jai Bhim</i>	Democratic Governance
National identity	Freedom struggle and national integration	<i>Sardar, Garm Hava</i>	Nation Building

The coding framework was developed after viewing the selected films several times, following the thematic analysis process outlined by (Braun & Clarke, 2006). During the initial stage of analysis, descriptive codes were identified from recurring dialogues, characters, visual symbols, and key narrative events. Codes with similar meanings were then organised into broader analytical themes, which provided the foundation for the comparative analysis of the selected films.

Theme 4: Gender Justice and Social Reform

Gender justice emerged as another important theme in the selected films, particularly *Pink* (2016) and *Pad Man* (2018). Both films challenge conventional gender stereotypes by presenting women as active participants in bringing about social change rather than as passive recipients of it. *Pink* explores issues of consent, legal equality, and women's autonomy through a courtroom-based narrative, whereas *Pad Man* focuses on menstrual hygiene, public health, and the social stigma surrounding menstruation. Together, these films reflect the growing willingness of Indian cinema to address issues that were once considered sensitive or culturally taboo.

The analysis shows that both films rely on realistic storytelling, meaningful dialogue, and emotionally engaging narratives to question deeply rooted patriarchal attitudes. Instead of treating gender issues as isolated personal experiences, they connect them with wider concerns related to dignity, equality, and social reform. The portrayal of women as active agents of change, rather than symbolic or secondary characters, reflects broader changes in Indian society's understanding of gender roles and women's rights. This interpretation can be understood through Representation Theory, which suggests that media shape public understanding by constructing representations rather than simply reflecting reality (Hall et al., 2013). By presenting alternative perspectives on

gender and challenging established social norms, these films contribute to wider public discussions on gender justice and social inclusion.

Theme 5: Democratic Institutions and Governance

The thematic analysis also highlights the increasing focus on democratic institutions in contemporary Indian cinema. *Newton* (2017) and *Article 15* (2019) examine how public institutions function within challenging social and political contexts. *Newton* explores the difficulties of conducting free and fair elections in conflict-affected tribal areas, drawing attention to the gap between democratic ideals and the realities of governance. In contrast, *Article 15* examines the role of the police and the legal system in responding to caste discrimination and upholding constitutional rights. Although the films focus on different institutions, both show that democratic values are constantly tested while also being protected through institutional processes.

The analysis suggests that these films encourage audiences to reflect on the effectiveness of public institutions while reinforcing the importance of constitutional values. Rather than dismissing democratic institutions altogether, they emphasise the need for institutional reform, accountability, and ethical public service in promoting social justice. Through realistic storytelling and well-developed characters, the films present democracy as an ongoing process that depends on both public participation and responsible institutions. This interpretation can be understood through (Hall, 1973) Audience Reception Theory, which argues that audiences actively interpret media texts according to their own social, cultural, and political experiences. In this way, the films contribute to wider public discussions on governance, citizenship, and democratic participation.

Theme 6: Nation Building and Collective Identity

The final theme identified in the analysis relates to nation-building and collective identity. Earlier films such as *Mother India* (1957) and *Sardar* (1993) present national development through stories of sacrifice, leadership, and collective responsibility. *Mother India* highlights rural resilience and moral responsibility as important foundations of post-independence nation-building, while *Sardar* focuses on political leadership and the integration of princely states during the early years of independent India. In both films, individual sacrifices are presented as contributing to larger national goals, reinforcing ideas of unity, resilience, and a shared national identity.

The comparative analysis shows that the portrayal of nation-building in Indian cinema has changed over time in response to wider social and political developments. Earlier films placed greater emphasis on collective responsibility and national integration, whereas more recent films increasingly explore constitutional rights, cultural diversity, and democratic citizenship as part of the broader idea of nationhood. Although these priorities have changed, cinema has continued to preserve historical memory while encouraging reflection on national identity and social values. This interpretation aligns with Representation Theory, which argues that national identity is shaped through language, symbols, and representation rather than simply reflected in media (Hall et al., 2013). Viewed from this perspective, Indian cinema remains an important cultural medium that influences public understanding of the nation's history, democratic values, and aspirations for social unity.

Table 3 Major Themes Emerging from the Thematic Analysis

Theme	Films Represented	Key Finding
Historical Representation	Mother India, Sardar, Garm Hava	Cinema preserves collective historical memory.
Social Justice	Article 15, Jai Bhim	Constitutional rights and equality dominate contemporary narratives.
Collective Resistance	Rang De Basanti, Manthan	Collective action is presented as a catalyst for social change.
Gender and Social Reform	Pink, Pad Man	Women are portrayed as active agents of social transformation.
Democratic Institutions	Newton, Article 15	Institutions are shown as both sites of oppression and instruments of justice.
National Identity	Mother India, Sardar	Nation-building is represented through sacrifice and collective responsibility.

The thematic analysis identified six key themes that highlight how Indian cinema has portrayed social movements across different historical periods. Although each film focuses on a particular socio-political issue, common themes of social justice, collective resistance, democratic participation, and identity are evident throughout the selected films.

Table 4 Comparative Representation of Social Movements in Selected Indian Films

Film	Social Movement	Dominant Narrative	Representation Style	Audience Message
Mother India	Agrarian Reform	Sacrifice	Symbolic Realism	Collective responsibility
Garm Hava	Partition	Survival	Humanistic Realism	Religious harmony
Manthan	White Revolution	Community Participation	Realism	Cooperative action
Rang De Basanti	Youth Activism	Political Awakening	Contemporary Drama	Civic responsibility
Pink	Women's Rights	Legal Equality	Courtroom Drama	Consent and dignity
Newton	Electoral Democracy	Institutional Conflict	Satirical Realism	Democratic participation
Pad Man	Menstrual Awareness	Social Reform	Biographical Drama	Breaking taboos
Article 15	Anti-caste Movement	Constitutional Justice	Investigative Drama	Equality before law
Jai Bhim	Dalit Rights	Legal Resistance	Courtroom Realism	Human rights
Sardar	National Integration	Leadership	Historical Biopic	Unity and nation-building

The comparative analysis shows a noticeable change in the way social movements are portrayed in Indian cinema. Earlier films mainly focused on nation-building and rural development, whereas more recent films give greater attention to constitutional rights, institutional accountability, gender equality, and caste justice. This change mirrors wider social and political developments in India and reflects the changing role of cinema in shaping public discussion on important social issues.

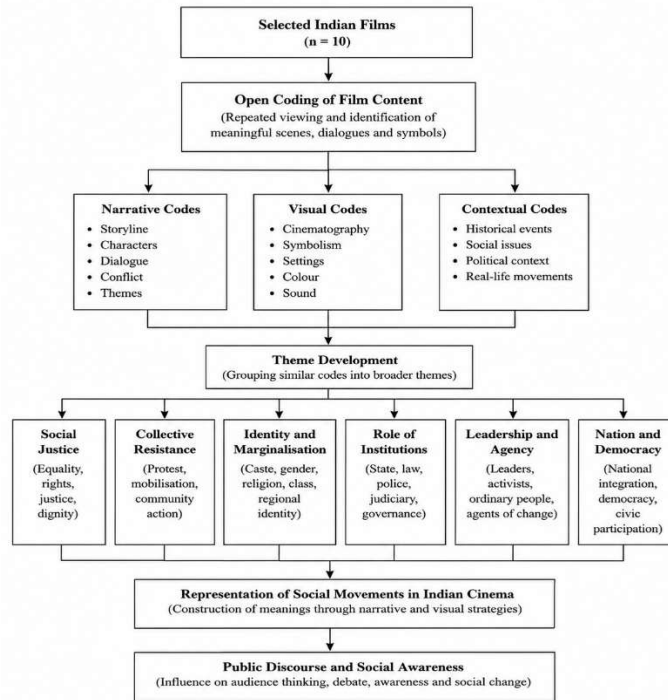


Figure 1 Thematic framework for analysing the representation of social movements in Indian cinema.

Source: Developed by the authors

Figure 1 presents the analytical framework used in this study to examine the representation of social movements in Indian cinema. The process began with the purposive selection of ten Indian films representing important social movements from different historical periods. Each film was viewed several times to gain a thorough understanding of its narrative and visual content. During the coding process, meaningful scenes, dialogues, visual symbols, characters, and historical references were identified and recorded.

The codes were organised into three broad categories: narrative, visual, and contextual. Narrative coding focused on the storyline, characters, dialogue, conflict, and central themes. Visual coding examined elements such as cinematography, symbolism, settings, colour, and sound, while contextual coding considered the historical background, socio-political issues, and the relationship between cinematic narratives and the social movements they depict.

Following the thematic analysis approach proposed by (Braun & Clarke, 2006), related codes were grouped into broader analytical themes. This process resulted in six key themes: social justice, collective resistance, identity and marginalisation, the role of institutions, leadership and agency, and nation and democracy. Together, these themes explain how Indian cinema portrays social movements through narrative and visual storytelling.

The framework also illustrates how these cinematic representations can contribute to wider public discussion by encouraging awareness, critical reflection, and dialogue on democracy, equality, and social change. Overall, the figure summarises the analytical process followed in the study and shows how observations from the selected films were interpreted and organised into meaningful themes.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The thematic analysis shows that Indian cinema has consistently played an important role in portraying social movements across different historical periods. Instead of simply recreating historical events, these films interpret social struggles through narrative, symbolism, visual storytelling, and character development, helping audiences make sense of complex social and political issues within familiar cultural settings. The way social movements are portrayed changes with the historical context in which each film was produced, reflecting shifts in public concerns as well as changing ideas about justice, citizenship, and democratic participation.

Earlier films such as *Mother India* (1957), *Garm Hava* (1973), and *Manthan* (1976) focus largely on nation-building, agrarian reform, rural empowerment, and the social consequences of Partition. These films highlight sacrifice, moral responsibility, and community solidarity, reflecting the priorities of post-independence India. By comparison, more recent films including *Rang De Basanti* (2006), *Pink* (2016), *Newton* (2017), *Article 15* (2019), and *Jai Bhim* (2021) give greater attention to constitutional rights, institutional accountability, caste discrimination, gender justice, and democratic participation. This comparison suggests that Indian cinema has gradually moved from narratives centred on national unity towards stories rooted in everyday experiences of inequality, discrimination, and social exclusion.

The study also shows that filmmakers rely on narrative structure and cinematic techniques to interpret social movements rather than presenting historical events as straightforward factual accounts. Dialogue, character development, symbolism, visual composition, and emotional storytelling help audiences reflect on questions of justice, identity, and resistance. For example, *Mother India* represents the moral strength of rural India through the character of Radha, while *Manthan* presents collective action as the driving force behind social transformation. Similarly, *Article 15* and *Jai Bhim* draw attention to structural discrimination by placing constitutional values

and legal institutions at the centre of their narratives, encouraging audiences to reflect on issues of equality and human rights.

These interpretations can be understood through (Hall et al., 2013) Representation Theory, which argues that media do not simply reflect reality but shape meaning through language, symbols, and systems of representation. Narrative Theory further explains how filmmakers organise historical events into meaningful stories through plot, character development, and conflict, influencing the way audiences understand social issues (Bordwell, 1985; Chatman, 1990). Although this study does not directly examine audience responses, (Hall, 1973) Audience Reception Theory provides a useful perspective for understanding how viewers may interpret these films differently according to their social, cultural, and political backgrounds.

Taken together, the findings suggest that Indian cinema is more than a source of entertainment. It also serves as an important cultural medium that preserves historical memory, encourages discussion on social and political issues, and contributes to public understanding of democracy, justice, and social change.

CONCLUSION

The present study explored the representation of social movements in Indian cinema through a qualitative multiple case study of ten influential films produced over more than six decades. The findings show that Indian cinema has consistently gone beyond entertainment by recording historical experiences, interpreting social and political change, and contributing to public discussion on issues of national importance. The comparative analysis highlights a clear shift in the way social movements are portrayed. Earlier films such as *Mother India*, *Garm Hava*, *Manthan*, and *Sardar* focused mainly on nation-building, agrarian reform, community participation, and collective responsibility, reflecting the priorities of post-independence India. More recent films, including *Pink*, *Newton*, *Pad Man*, *Article 15*, and *Jai Bhim*, place greater emphasis on constitutional rights, gender justice, caste equality, democratic participation, and institutional accountability. This change reflects the way Indian cinema has responded to changing social realities while continuing to engage with questions of justice, citizenship, and social change.

The study also shows that filmmakers use narrative structure, symbolism, character development, dialogue, and other cinematic techniques to interpret social movements instead of simply recreating historical events. These elements encourage audiences to reflect on issues of

identity, inequality, governance, and democratic values. The findings can be understood through Representation Theory, which explains how films shape meaning through culturally embedded systems of representation rather than simply reflecting reality. Narrative Theory further helps explain how storytelling, character development, and cinematic form influence the way audiences understand historical events and social issues. Although the study does not directly examine audience responses, Audience Reception Theory provides a useful perspective for understanding how viewers may interpret these films differently according to their social and cultural backgrounds.

An important contribution of this study is its comparative examination of different social movements represented across multiple historical periods in Indian cinema. Previous research has often concentrated on individual films, filmmakers, or specific social issues. In contrast, this study brings together historical contextualisation, thematic analysis, narrative interpretation, visual analysis, and audience reception theory within a single qualitative framework. This approach offers a broader understanding of how the portrayal of social movements has changed alongside India's political, social, and cultural developments. It also adds to research in film studies, media and communication, and cultural studies by highlighting the continuing importance of cinema as a cultural medium that preserves historical memory and encourages public discussion on democracy, equality, and social justice.

The study has certain limitations. It is based on a purposive sample of ten films and focuses on textual and thematic analysis rather than collecting empirical evidence from audiences. Therefore, the findings should not be interpreted as representative of all Indian films or all audience groups. Future research could examine a larger and more diverse sample of films from different Indian languages and regional film industries. Studies that include audience reception, digital streaming platforms, documentary cinema, or comparative international perspectives would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between cinema, public discourse, and social movements.

Overall, the study shows that Indian cinema has remained an influential medium of cultural communication throughout different phases of independent India. By recording historical experiences, questioning social inequalities, and encouraging reflection on democratic values, films continue to play an important role in shaping public discussion on social issues. Their ability to

connect historical memory with contemporary realities highlights the continuing significance of cinema in understanding social change and its place within India's democratic and cultural life.

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