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Bollywood Comedy Films as Catalysts for Body Positivity and Self-Acceptance

Abstract: In recent times, Bollywood comedies have evidenced a shift in their attitude and perspective towards body image. In earlier comedies, people of different physical appearances were stigmatized. That approach has changed of late and as a result, these movies now serve as powerful catalysts for positive change in society. This article offers an overview of the transformative role played by Bollywood comedy films in contributing to body positivity and promoting self-acceptance. Through an analysis of a selection of films such as *Bala* (2019), *Dum Laga Ke Haisha* (2015), and *Gippi* (2013), this study explores how these movies influence individuals' perceptions, destigmatize identity, challenge stereotypes, and advocate for self-acceptance. This study also emphasizes the role of humour as a central element to engage audiences in sensitive discussions surrounding body image. In a nutshell, this research highlights the profound impact of comedy films on individuals and how these films reshape societal perceptions from body shaming to body acceptance.

Keywords: *body positivity; self-acceptance; Bollywood; comedic satire; comedy films.*



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Comedy films have historically served as influential vehicles for conveying societal correctness, righteousness, and bringing morality into the social area because of their extensive reach among audiences and unparalleled impact on individuals. With a broader viewership in comparison to other forms of texts, comedy films play a significant role in advocating correctness in society and bringing social change. Throughout the history of Indian cinema, these comedic cinematic texts have functioned as significant components that have adapted to mirror social, political, economic, and cultural transformations in the nation. Films based on different socio-cultural issues have exerted a profound influence on individuals by providing guidance on acceptable behaviour, norms, and values. This article explores the often-overlooked role of comedy films, particularly in the context of fostering body positivity in India, with a focus on selected Bollywood films such as *Bala* (2019), *Dum Laga Ke Haisha* (2015), *Gippi* (2013) and other such narratives. These cinematic texts not only entertain, but also advocate for the destigmatization of body image issues and promote self-acceptance.

In India, films which are comic in nature possess an innate cultural relevance that differentiates them from other genres. Most of them incorporate humour, wit, and satire that resonate with the complex dynamics of Indian society. India's affluent social and cultural diversity, traditions, and customs furnish ample opportunities for comedians and filmmakers to direct and produce visual narratives that depict the lives and experiences of individuals from different places. For instance, *Chennai Express* (2013) and *Bhool Bhulaiyaa* (2007) incorporate regional humour and highlight the cultural and linguistic diversity within India. One of the significant contributions of Indian comedy films is their aptness and expertise in addressing burning social issues. Filmmakers and their narratives tackle complex issues, for instance, gender inequality, corruption, poverty, religious conservatism and other such subjects and showcase them in a light-hearted and humorous manner. This kind of approach seeks the attention of the audience by making them laugh while simultaneously making them ponder over these issues.

Bollywood has always been very vocal about social change. Apart from producing films for entertainment purposes, the industry has produced several movies which critique, question and comment on existing maladaptive practices and helped in removing them and bringing change in society. There is a list of movies that critique different aspects of society such as the education system, identity rights movement, issues of farmers and other such issues while using humour. These films employ humour as a powerful tool to initiate discussions and challenge deeply ingrained stereotypes and prejudices. By portraying societal issues in a comedic light, they encourage viewers to rethink their attitudes and beliefs and make it easier for people to engage with and internalize the message conveyed by the films.

Humour serves as the best tool for satirizing someone or making comments on some authority for two reasons. The first is humour's benign and non-injurious impact on one's ego, while the second is this genre's ability to simplify intricate concepts for broader comprehension, bridging intellectual disparities. Koestler (1994) writes about humour as an innovative device convenient in comprehending complex and contrasting social

realities. It is considered as a “weapon of the weak” (Hart 16) and “allows for normative conventions to be challenged, questioned, and momentarily suspended so that alternative modalities may be entertained” (Longo 117). Because of its high intensity and social relevance, several Indian comedy film directors and producers have applied it in their films in order to draw the attention of the audience. The journey of comedy movies in Bollywood, as Mishra writes, has a lineage dating back to the black-and-white era, marked by slapstick humour and witty wordplay. Legendary actors like Raj Kapoor, Johnny Walker, and Mehmood, known for their impeccable comic timing, laid the foundation for the genre with films such as *Chalti Ka Naam Gaadi* (1958) and *Padosan* (1968).

As stated above, Bollywood comedy films have always been one of the major catalysts of social change. In the last few decades of the twentieth century, Indian cinema witnessed a wave of comedy films that satirically critiqued the oppressive feudal system, offering a form of social commentary through humour. However, in the post-millennial era, marked by the emergence of identity and rights movements, the film industry also understood the sentiment and underwent substantial changes. Filmmakers began to produce movies that not only entertained but also advocated for the rights of marginalized groups and promoted inclusivity within society. One illustrative example is *Munna Bhai MBBS* directed by Rajkumar Hirani, released in the year 2003. This film, apart from an entertainment film, attempts to dismantle the procedure of medical practice. Munna, the protagonist of the film has no medical degree, but transforms people around him with his *Jadoo ki jhappi* (magical hug). He advocates for a more empathetic sense of treatment driven by common sense to cure patients at the hospital.

Another impactful film is *3 Idiots* (2009), also directed by Rajkumar Hirani. This film, while using humour and wit as tools of satire, left a huge impact on the education system in India. It is even suggested that the film played a role in the recent reorganization of the education system, emphasizing a more holistic and less rigid approach to learning. As Mecchi writes, the film “may have even played a role in the recent reorganization of the Indian education system, designed to reduce tedium and allow children to grow in multiple fields of study, rather than those that conform to a narrow idea of success”. The third in the row is *Khatta Mitha* (2010). The film, directed by Priyadarshan, is a political satire comedy film which also highlights and exposes the corrupt bureaucracy and social administration. Another one is the satirical black comedy film *Peeply Live* (2010), directed by Anusha Rizvi. Rajeev Masand, an Indian film critic and journalist, proclaims that this film is “a scathing satire on the country's apathy towards the rural class, and specifically towards farmers, *Peeply Live* employs a comic tone to tell a serious story”. Next in a row is again Rajkumar Hirani's directed film *PK* (2014). It is a science fiction satirical comedy film which condemns, disapproves and deprecates religious conservatism. Like *3 Idiots*, the film “observes the system, questions it, asks you to look at the many ludicrous things that inform it, and eventually brings about a minor revolution” (Fadnavis). Another prominent film in the queue is *Subh Mangal Jyada Saavdhan* (2020), a romantic comedy film directed by Hitesh Kewalya. The film “is an important film that talks about an important subject conveyed in the simplest manner” which depicts the conflict “between conservatism and

freedom, between tradition and modernity” and shakes the mindset of people regarding the gay community (Kukreja; Chatterjee). Similarly, *Badhai Do*, a 2022 Indian social comedy-drama film, also shows a mirror to society by highlighting the issues of the gay and lesbian community.

These are only a few comedy films from Bollywood that strive to foster an inclusive society; the list of such movies is very long. Thus, it can be substantiated that the Bollywood industry has been able to produce several social satires in the disguise of comedy films. And they serve as powerful social satires, using humour as a vehicle for commentary. However, in the context of body shaming, there has been a noticeable shift in the industry’s approach. Recent films have transitioned from mocking and ridiculing individuals with different physical appearances to promoting body positivity. Thus, this paper is an exploration of body positivity and destigmatization of people with different physical appearances in select Indian comedy films such as *Bala*, *Dum Laga Ke Haisha*, *Gippi* and other such narratives. It delves into these visual narratives to analyse their cultural relevance and ability to highlight social issues and courage to challenge taboos. The paper underscores how these films contribute to dismantling the hegemony of certain body types by promoting self-acceptance, inclusivity, and binding individuals.

Destigmatization of baldness and colour-shaming in *Bala*

Bala (2019), directed by Amar Kaushik, delves into the issue of premature balding, a condition which is often stigmatized in Indian society. Balmukund Shukla (Bala in the movie), portrayed by Ayushmann Khurrana, is suffering from premature hair loss. The film, using humour, navigates Bala’s journey from a stigmatized identity to self-acceptance. Apart from this, the film also underlines the issue of colour-shaming through the representation of Latika Trivedi (Bhumi Pednekar). Erving Goffman in his seminal book *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963) declares stigma a “discrediting attribute” which is not an essential quality of people rather; it is socially constructed and manufactured (3). For Goffman, “person with a stigma is not quite human. On this assumption we exercise varieties of discrimination, through which we effectively, if often unthinkingly, reduce his life chances” (5). In addition, Sayce defines stigma as “contrary to a norm of a social unit” where a “norm” is defined as a “shared belief that a person ought to behave in a certain way at a certain time” (341). Similarly, in the movie, Bala and Latika are considered as stigmatized individuals who do not conform to the set standard of beauty ideals. Bala’s baldness and Latika’s dark skin become discrediting attributes which affect both of them socially and psychologically. However, as the film progresses, Bala realizes his narrow notions of beauty and finally accepts himself.

He uses self-deprecating humour as a tool, several times in the movie by commenting on himself and his baldness and accepting his true self. Making self-deprecating humour normalizes the notion of laughing at your so-called imperfection by questioning the prevalent belief that baldness should be a source of shame. The contrast between the so-called beauty standards and Bala’s reality contributes to creating humour for the audience

and satire on society. The film also incorporates some comic sequences that parody the hair restoration industries, their treatment and products which promise to re-grow hair within a short period. These scenes use comedy to shed light on the various ways people undertake to combat baldness. For instance, in one of the scenes, Bala uses an ox's sperm and cow dung on his head to make his hair grow rapidly. Likewise, there are several witty dialogues and humorous one-liners that provide a constant source of laughter but at the same time, these scenes remind the audiences that humour can be a very powerful medium for dealing with sensitive issues like baldness. In a nutshell, Bala, while using self-deprecating humour, highlighting the absurdities of beauty ideals, parodying the hair industry, and incorporating wit and humour destigmatizes baldness and challenges the culturally constructed beauty ideals. He also emphasizes the necessity of self-acceptance and self-realization in society.

Similarly, Latika destigmatizes the issue of colour-shaming by applying humour, sarcasm, and wit in a very subtle yet effective way. She, while using humour and wit, interacts and responds to certain situations and individuals and challenges the notion of beauty standards and promotes the importance of self-acceptance. She often employs sarcasm and wit to riposte to situations and people when they make her feel ashamed of her skin colour. She also satirizes society's obsession with fair skin and comments on the absurdity of evaluating and assessing someone's worth based on skin colour. Latika's belief in herself and positive confidence along with her humorous remarks challenges the prevalent notion that one's skin colour is not a weakness. She neglects the comments directed towards her, does not take shaming seriously, and accepts her comfort in her own skin tone. Her engagements with people around her emphasize and underline the significance of self-acceptance and self-confidence. In the film, Latika homogenizes diversity and stands against the norms of ideal beauty prevalent in Indian cinema. In short, her witty and confident responses create an inclusive atmosphere where humour is employed to challenge societal norms and make the viewer aware to accept and embrace diversity and celebrate individuality irrespective of different physical appearances.

Challenging the stereotype related to fatness in *Dum Laga Ke Haisha* and *Gippi*

The film *Dum Laga Ke Haisha*, directed by Sharat Katariya, is about love, acceptance, and societal pressures, particularly in terms of fatness. Featuring Ayushmann Khurrana, Bhumi Pednekar and Sanjay Mishra, it investigates exceptions from conforming to a socially constructed body image by resorting to witty humour and genuine emotions. It depicts the story of Prem, an unwilling, unenthusiastic and reluctant groom who marries Sandhya, an overweight girl. Later, the story follows several misunderstandings between Prem and Sandhya that result in Sandhya's humiliation, ultimately finding love and acceptance. Her transformational journey from a prejudiced and socially marginalized identity to social acceptance, coupled with her satirical take on societal norms highlights the absurdity of criticising and evaluating people completely based on their external appearances. The mentally and psychologically strong portrayal of Sandhya's character dictates the importance of looking beyond the physical appearance and accepting the

distinctiveness, peculiarity and individuality of people.

The film employs humour and comedy to challenge stereotypes related to fatness in society. It uses humorous situations, complex characters, physical comedy, and self-deprecating humour to deconstruct the wrong notions about fatness. The wedding mishaps between Prem and Sandhya, several misunderstandings between the newlywed couple, the first few nights of their marriage, and Sandhya's interaction within Prem's family particularly with his overbearing aunt create humorous situations in the film apart from deconstructing the notions of marriage, gender, and body image. Similarly, the portrayal of characters, like Prem, Sandhya, Chandra Prakash Tiwari and most importantly, Prem's family members also contribute to creating laughter in the form of social satire. In addition, Sandhya's dance in the songs, her active participation in the *Dum Lagao* competition, and her help in winning that contest challenge the stereotype that fat individuals are not physically active or have any talent. Moreover, in one of the scenes, while interacting with Prem's aunt, she deconstructs and dismantles the binary between weight and health. The prevalent notion regarding weight and health is that *thinner is healthier* (emphasis mine) but affirms and proves that overweight individuals can also become healthy. In short, the narrative *Dum Laga Ke Haisha* breaks the beauty norm by reflecting on the significance of accepting diversity and valuing individuals irrespective of their body weight. Humour employed in the movie serves as a tool to subvert the stereotypical representation of fatness in India.

Moreover, the film *Gippi* employs comedy and humour as important tools in its depiction of social change. Directed by Sonam Nair, *Gippi* is a coming-of-age film that focuses on the life of a teenage girl Gippi, played by Riya Vij. She is an overweight girl who experiences problems because of her body weight and societal pressure. She faces trouble in her school, among her friends, and even in terms of relationships. The movie portrays Gippi in direct contrast with Shamira. On the one hand, Gippi is an overweight, playful, and cheerful girl; on the other, Shamira is seemingly very pretty, popular, and perfect in body image. However, using humour, the film emphasizes on self-discovery and celebrates self-acceptance, friendship and the transformational odyssey to explore one's identity during teenage years.

It critiques the stereotypical representation of overweight teenage girls in Indian cinema. The titular character, Gippi, instead of conforming to the culturally constructed notions of beauty, accepts herself by challenging those notions. She seems a relatable character who overcomes her imperfection as a teenager. Gippi's contest with body image and self-confidence is depicted with humour, making her struggle more relatable to the viewers who have experienced similar problems. Her participation in the school election, contesting with Shamira, and finally winning that election subverts the typical prejudices and notions about an overweight girl. Her participation also underlines gender equality. The film demonstrates the power of comedy in society while conveying messages of social change along with entertaining its viewers.

Apart from the above-discussed films, a plethora of Bollywood productions have contributed significantly to the discourse on body positivity in terms of different physical

appearances. The examples can be *Ujda Chaman* (2019), *Gone Kesh* (2019), *Raksha Bandha* (2022), *Rocky Aur Rani kii Prem Kahani* (2023), *Ardh* (2022), *Photograph* (2019), *Saroj ka Rishta* (2022), *Fanney Khan* (2018) and several others. *Ujda Chaman* and *Gone Kesh* delve into the destigmatization of baldness and the promotion of self-acceptance. These films challenge prevalent beauty norms by featuring protagonists who accept their baldness, thereby appealing to the audience to reconsider and re-evaluate the so-called standard beauty and embrace their individuality and uniqueness. *Rocky Aur Rani kii Prem Kahani*, *Saroj Ka Rishta*, and *Fanney Khan* embark on the deconstruction of stereotypical representations of overweight individuals in Indian cinema. Through humour and poignant storytelling, these cinematic narratives humanize characters who do not conform to the culturally constructed body image, challenging prevalent prejudices and fostering an all-inclusive society. *Photograph* deals with the notion of beauty through a unique lens, stressing the inner values of people beyond physical appearances. The film's message is to appreciate the intrinsic qualities and to transcend from the judgments or comments based on looks. Furthermore, *Ardh* satirizes the beauty norms of society that equate success with height. The film depicts the absurdity of such expectations and encourages viewers to reconsider the importance of physical appearances in determining one's worth. In addition, *Raksha Bandhan* simultaneously comments on colourism, fatness, and the dowry system in Indian society. Through its narrative and humour, the film presents a platform to examine deeply ingrained issues, encouraging the audience to confront and question societal prejudices. Most of these films strategically employ humour and social satire to subvert the conventional way of approaching and understanding people with different physical appearances. By employing relatable characters and compelling narratives, these films prompt viewers to redefine their perceptions, foster inclusivity, and cultivate self-confidence. These cinematic texts exemplify the transformative power of cinema in reshaping societal attitudes and prompting a more inclusive and diverse society.

Comedies promoting self-acceptance

Self-acceptance is a situation or condition in which individuals fully accept themselves regardless of their body form. It emerges from an objective assessment of individuals' strengths and weaknesses within a specific context. Ryff articulated that self-acceptance entails maintaining a positive self-perception and recognizing one's strengths and weaknesses without experiencing shame or guilt. Camp et al. and Crowne & Stephens argue that self-acceptance is the complete embrace of one's entire self, encompassing all facets of identity, without internal conflict or the need for external validation. Thus, it can be substantiated that self-acceptance encompasses the impartial assessment of one's strengths and weaknesses while wholeheartedly embracing both facets. This capacity empowers individuals to confront challenging circumstances with a rational perspective, rather than being impeded by unfavourable situations.

Characters from the films mentioned above promote self-acceptance in different ways. Bala, the titular character of the film *Bala* and the protagonist of the film, after

experiencing discrimination and societal pressure, realizes his self-worth and accepts himself wholeheartedly. He promotes body positivity and self-acceptance while uttering several powerful statements in the film. For instance:

“You cannot change this ideology, but you can change the colour of your skin. But why change it? Why change it? Why change ourselves? We won’t change” (*Bala* 00:16:07).

“Whether you accept me or not, but I have accepted the way I am (*Bala* 00:06:36).
“If you love yourself, the world will love you” (*Bala* 00:05:52).

Similarly, Sandhya from *Dum Laga Ke Haisha* never feels inferior, despite the others’ deprecatory attitude. Throughout the movie, people around her, her husband Prem, her mother, and her brother make fun of her, comment on her body size, and pressurize her to conform to the ideal beauty. As Adler writes,

Everyone (...) has a feeling of inferiority. But the feeling of inferiority is not a disease; it is rather a stimulant to healthy, normal striving and development. It becomes a pathological condition only when the sense of inadequacy overwhelms the individual and, far from stimulating them to useful activity, makes them depressed and incapable of development (96-97).

In the case of Sandhya, the feeling of inadequacy is imposed on her. She never accepts herself as inferior; rather it is the society that endeavours to make her inferior for not conforming to the established norms of beauty. However, she is portrayed as a courageous, confident, and strong character who does not hesitate to even slap her husband when he insults her in front of his friends. She angrily says, “[w]hy should I stay quiet? I slapped him hard. Now he’ll not dare to speak to a woman like that” (*Dum Laga Ke Haisha* 00:55:19-00:55:25).

Moreover, characters from other movies like, Gippi from *Gippi*, Chaman from *Ujda Chaman*, Gayatri from *Rocky Aur Rani kii Prem Kahani*, Enakshi from *Gone Kesh*, without experiencing shame or guilt or inferiority, promote body positivity and the need for self-acceptance. In the beginning, they all consider themselves inadequate, worthless, subservient and lesser in comparison to their counterparts. In the end, they all realize their self-worth and gain confidence. In short, these comedy films address body positivity and foster self-acceptance through portraying relatable characters, using humour as a tool of entertainment and social satire. They also help in dismantling stereotypes, celebrating imperfections, encouraging discussions and promoting inclusivity.

Conclusion

In recent times, comedy films in India have emerged as tools for promoting body positivity and self-acceptance by employing humour, humorous dialogues, relatable

characters, and compelling and powerful narratives. These cinematic narratives challenge body shaming, culturally constructed notions of ideal beauty, societal prejudices, and the hegemony of the so-called perfect body. Films like *Bala*, *Dum Laga Ke Haisha*, *Gippi* and other such cinematic works engage with viewers, make them aware, and provide an alternate positive viewpoint to look at people with different physical appearances. These narratives promote the notion that true beauty is not on the outside, rather it lies in qualities that make people unique and accepting of their selves. In a society where outer appearance is valued and glorified, these films become catalysts of change, inspiring individuals to love and accept themselves regardless of their body forms.

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