

Caught in the Crossfire: Children and Film Controversies

~ Sujata C

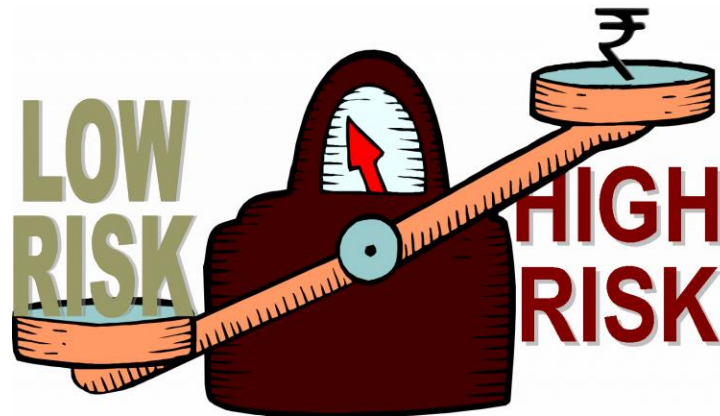


Disruptions are an integral part of urban existence. Our lives are regularly interrupted by chaos and commotion. The recent protests against the film *Padmavaat* which peaked with an attack on a school bus in Gurugram is an example. Safety of children gets easily traded for profit or public attention, and despite our efforts to shield children from public controversies, round-the-clock television channels does not make it an easy task. Social media adds fuel to the fire by way of misinformation about any ongoing controversy, and invariably, these issues become a part of classroom conversations.

Interestingly many children have seen the film *Padmavaat*, maybe because of the attention it generated. There was record attendance on the first day first show of the movie. The film has a U/A certification, which means it is cleared for unrestricted public viewing, but subject to parental guidance for children below twelve years of age. Many girls have also learnt the *ghoomar* dance which is trending in dance clubs, weddings and kitty parties. As for the dramatized depiction of the evil Khilji, children seem slightly indifferent as they are used to viewing blood and gore, thanks to their mind-numbing computer games.

Big budget business:

Filmmaking is a high profit, high risk business. While Hollywood rules the roost in the West, India is the film capital in this half of the globe. In terms of numbers, Indian films beat Hollywood hollow, as



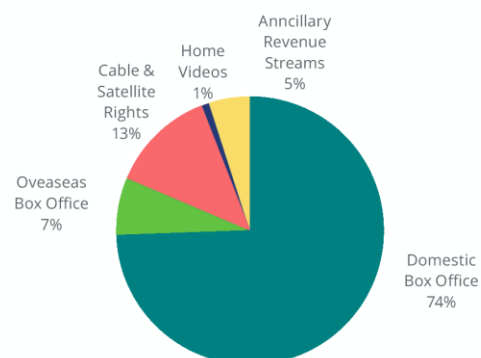
anywhere between 1500 to 2000 films are made in India every year in 20 different languages. Hollywood pales in comparison with merely 700–800 films per annum. In 2015, over 2.1 billion footfalls (theatre admissions) were recorded across theatres in India, but despite these impressive numbers the revenue collection is dismal due to low ticket price and rampant piracy. Bollywood contributes to 43% of the revenue and Telugu and Tamil industry generate net 36% of the total revenue.

Film industry revenues are growing at a healthy rate of 10.5% per annum. In 2017, the economic contribution of the Indian Motion Pictures and Television Industry stood at ₹173 billion, according to a Deloitte report. By 2020, it is projected to be at ₹238 billion. Domestic box office brings in 74% revenue and the overseas market contributes to 7%.

Figure 1: Film Industry Revenues (INR billion)



Figure 2: Category-wise Break-up of Revenue



It is important to be aware of the business aspect of the cinema industry and the high stakes involved for film producers and production houses. With so much of money being poured in, a ban or disruption to the smooth release and exhibition of a film means money down the drain, and no producer would be ready for

that. They will fight tooth and nail to get the film released, even if it hurts a few innocent lives or the sentiments of a section of the society.

Padmaavat is a period drama loosely based on the epic poem by Malik Muhammad Jayasi. According to industry followers, *Padmaavat*, with a production budget of ₹2.15 billion, is one of the most expensive Indian films ever made and was set to release on December 1, 2017. The film had already sparked controversies during its production when members of several caste organizations claimed that it portrays the Rajput queen in a bad light. The release of the trailer sparked large-scale protests and took a violent turn; a demand for a complete ban on the film was raised by various organizations. Given such a scenario it was difficult to say who triggered the violence, especially against school children. A blame game began. The organization claimed that the attack was engineered by Bhansali, even when the FIR clearly named the group's chief. Whoever the culprit was, the degree of moral degradation, where children are made soft targets, cannot be ignored. Whenever there is trouble brewing in society, whether political or communal or natural, it is the vulnerable – children, women, sick and elderly – who are the first ones to get affected.

Film violence desensitises children:



Picture courtesy:

<https://dam.oup.com/share/page/site/oxford-education/document-details?nodeRef=workspace://SpacesStore/dddc230d-e466-4f18-bb57-0a2d621fa3da>

Apart from the violence that a film triggers in a society, another issue stemming from controversial films is the impact of its content on children. There is enough research on the subject to show that young children are easily traumatised by violent content, leading to behavioural problems, bed wetting, unexplained fears and phobias. The more they are exposed to such graphic content, the less sensitive children become. They begin to take

violence as a norm and accept it as part of their lives. Filmmakers take the creative license to produce such content in the name of artistic freedom. They move mountains to get a U/A certification so that larger numbers can come

under the spectrum of audience. *Is it then a surprise that youngsters are now committing heinous crimes?*

It is high time producers and directors show some responsibility to society and make films that appeal to our finer sensibilities. They are free to create a film with explicit content, but at the same time they should be ready for an A certification.

Growing up too soon:

Indian films have been a ready source of information when it came to sex education for the unchartered Indian audience as most Indian middle class families find it too embarrassing to talk about it with their children.

Surprisingly, even today with society becoming more open and parents supposedly liberal, things are not too different as children turn to the Internet for information. Most young parents are aware that exposure to adult content on the Internet is changing the psyche of their children but there is hardly anything being done to monitor or put a check.

Our country is a bundle of contradictions. It is the land of Kamasutra but sex is a taboo in most Indian families and schools, even though anyone with a smartphone and an Internet connection has ready access to porn. Doctors have noted a trend that shows our children are maturing too soon. Girls are attaining puberty by 10–11 years and there is a remarkable rise in early puberty in the age group of 5–9 years. Children are attaining mental maturity ahead of times and the curiosity to experiment with sexual behaviours is strong. For these children, a lesson on how babies are made is bland. They know how, what they want are specifics about the act itself.

Cultural sensitivity:

According to a study published in the **Indian Journal of Psychiatry**, the idea of sex education in schools is still a cultural challenge in India. The current programme on sex education called *Family Life Education* is recommended by the National AIDS Prevention programme and the Ministry of Human Resources and Development. Its objective is to develop emotionally stable adolescents, equipped with sound knowledge, attitude and conduct, essential for

their own personal development and the good of society. But there are many who argue against sex education in schools. Many states like Maharashtra, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, and Karnataka have even banned its inclusion in the school curriculum.

Considering that a rape culture has emerged in many Indian cities, there is an urgent need to re-address the matter and evolve an action plan that increases awareness among youth, reduces risks of sexual abuse and spread of sexually transmitted diseases like HIV and AIDS, the study says.

Conclusion:

Choosing controversial subjects or titillating songs in films has become a marketing gimmick and a publicity ruse. The more recent example is that of a film on Rani Laxmibai, *Manikarnika*. Brahmin groups are protesting the objectionable content of the film which shows Laxmibai having an affair with an English man. The film has the usual suspects – big budget and big names. Kangana Ranaut plays the role of the warrior queen, scriptwriter of *Bahubali*, Vijendra Prasad has written the screenplay, and lyrics by Prasoon Joshi. We can expect a *Padmaavati*-like fiasco before its release.

Interestingly, the Akshay Kumar starrer *Pad Man* based on the real-life story of Arunachalam Muruganathan, popularly known as *India's Menstrual Man*, was supposed to release around the same time as *Padmaavat* but was postponed to avoid a clash. This is a socially relevant film, and as expected is only making modest earnings. The film got banned in Pakistan as the theme is against Islamic traditions and culture. Even in India, theatres are running shows exclusively for women. This takes away the whole purpose of the film which is trying to put across a social message and bring in awareness.

Someone has said there is nothing like bad publicity. Any attention is good for the film and box office as it will make the cash register ring. The box office collection of *Padmavaat* is ₹400 crores – well over the film's budget of ₹215 crores. The protesting organizations have mellowed down after seeing how the film glorifies the Rajput valour. The cases against its cast and crew have been quashed, and life is back to normal, until the next film controversy surfaces.

***Sujata C** is a writer and editor with a portfolio of diversified writing categories like web content, articles, short stories for children, technical editing, etc. She has been brand consultant and advisor for several companies and has worked with concerns like McCann Erickson, New Delhi; Foundations Advertising Services, New Delhi; Saatchi and Saatchi, Hyderabad; etc.*

Lesson Plan: Addressing Controversies in the Classroom

~ Sujata C

The controversy that grew from the fictionalisation of history in the film *Padmaavat*, took on an ugly turn when children were affected by it. *What's the best way to address controversies on contemporary issues?*

Children today have large exposure to information and will have a lot of questions. It

is best that teachers remain up to date, so that they can convert challenging situations into learning opportunities. The lesson to learn from the school bus attack incident is that no matter what kind of trouble, it is always wise to take additional precautions. Here are some of the ways to address this concern.



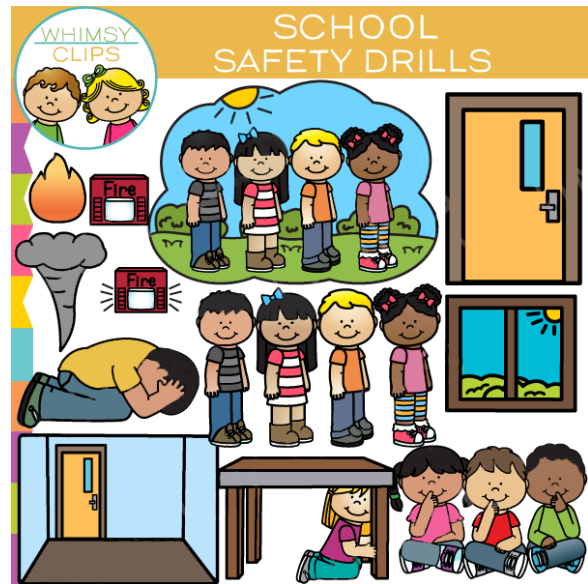
Coordinate with law enforcers: It is the responsibility of the management to ensure safety of the school children. The school coordinator and spokesperson must be up to date with the safety drill and communication plan. All channels of communication with parents must be operational. School coordinator can do the following things to make a suitable plan:

- Coordinate closely with the traffic police in the area
- Take regular traffic updates
- Plan routes to avoid protest marches or any traffic disruptions
- Check if any restraining orders are enforced

Safety drills: School management in coordination with teachers must conduct regular safety drills with children. The following could be included in the child safety plan:

- Staying safe within school premises when violence breaks out
- Maintaining safety while commuting in a school transport or by other means

- Empowering the children and teaching them ways to contact parents, teachers or any other law enforcing authority if caught alone and defenceless in a challenging situation
- Briefing children about online safety and behaviour while accessing social media for information
- Making children aware of the consequences of any act that crosses the line of societal standards, whether in real life or online



Sex education: In states where sex education is still not part of the curriculum, teachers can collaborate with the management to prepare a strategy to navigate the ban to include sex education in the curriculum. It is always advisable to seek the help of health professionals while implementing the plan.



Picture Courtesy: <https://dam.oup.com/share/page/site/asia-education/document-details?nodeRef=workspace://SpacesStore/2d6d724e-0e82-453e-bfac-1ff180813903>

History: Senior students can analyse the content of the film, *Padmaavat* by referring to its historical accuracy, which formed the crux of the controversy.

Debate this topic: *Should artistic freedom respect social norms and public sentiment?* Arrange a session of healthy debate on this topic and encourage various ideas and opinions to be brought to the table.



Discuss: *Can the logic of the various caste based organizations who demanded that the film be banned and orchestrated violent protests be justified?*

Dance: Help students learn the *ghoomar* dance. Encourage them to explore more about this dance form and prepare a report. Let it address questions like: *Which community is it associated with? How did the royalty adopt this dance? Were there any other kingdoms where the womenfolk danced publicly? How much cloth was needed to make the skirt used in the ghoomar dance? How much did it weigh?*

Make a presentation: Ask students to prepare a PPT on the traditional folk dances of India. They can include images as well as embed video links.

Sujata C is a writer and editor with a portfolio of diversified writing categories like web content, articles, short stories for children, technical editing, etc. She has been brand consultant and advisor for several companies and has worked with concerns like McCann Erickson, New Delhi; Foundations Advertising Services, New Delhi; Saatchi and Saatchi, Hyderabad; etc.



Tergiversate (verb)

Pronunciation: /'tə:dʒɪvə,seɪt/

Meaning: Make conflicting or evasive statements; equivocate

Origin and additional information: With some suggesting the first usage of the term around the year 1645, it originated roughly in the mid seventeenth century from the Latin word, *tergiversate* (meaning, with one's back turned). The verb *tergiversari* is a conglomeration of *tergum* (meaning, back) and *vertere* (meaning, to turn).

Word section: It is hard to not notice when a person is being evasive or trying to avoid giving a straight answer. The Romans had a word for this phenomenon; they called it *tergiversari*. The word may not have much currency today but it has never been as apt as the present times. The strong association of the word (to the meaning *to change repeatedly one's attitude or opinion with respect to a cause or subject*) with today's rapidly changing situation, makes it fitting of our times of political and economic upheaval. Jay Schwartz, head of content of the UK-based online portal, **MailOnline**, points out that it is easy to confuse the idea with the concept of 'flip-flopping' but it is important to remember that *tergiversate* "suggests a lack of intentionality – it's a change in state more out of necessity, as new events happen at great speed."

Usage:

- i. The more she *tergiversated*, the greater grew the ardency of the reporters for an interview.
(Source: <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/tergiversate>)
- ii. Such *tergiversation* in times of civil discord was nothing new.
The History of England from the Accession of James II by Thomas Babington Macaulay
- iii. Lincoln would not allow himself to be swerved from the main issue by any *tergiversation* or personal attacks.
Abraham Lincoln by George Haven Putnam