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Mundane Skills, Specialized Services: Youth, Entrepreneurialism and Bollywood

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Abstract

In showcasing entrepreneurialism, recent commercially successful Bollywood movies follow a different course of representing employment, youth, the State and the market. The five movies, discussed in this paper, stimulate entrepreneurial culture and bring social, economic and cultural recognition to skills that have often been considered 'mundane', uncelebrated and even denounced. As showcased in these movies, unlike the Bollywood-represented youth of earlier decades, the young protagonists– male as well as female– neither confront the State for employment nor utilize the State support or family capital or formal technological and managerial training. Rather they look for employment and business opportunities in the ever-growing service sector and achieve success by virtue of possession of 'mundane skills' which they combine with their aspirations, entrepreneurial qualities and ethics. These movies also suggest that even if one is a low achiever in formal education and deficient in terms of acquisition of skills as demanded in the new economic sector, success can be achieved. Highlighting contradictions of the job market and cultural values associated with or detached from entrepreneurialism, this paper explores representations of sites, ideas, agencies and discourses of employment through trials and tribulations of protagonists as shown in the movies; and the way they break norms, values and preferences of employment, especially of the middle-class families.

Keywords: Bollywood, Digital Platforms, Entrepreneurship, Non-elite Middle Class, Post-Reform India, Skill-based micro-enterprise.

Introduction

This paper is an ethnographic reading of commercially successful Bollywood movies, released between 2008-18, that foreground entrepreneurship, business acumen and success in the market-based economy. These are common themes in the five movies viz. *Rocket Singh: Salesman of the Year* (dir. Shimit Amin; 2009); *Band Baaja Baaraat* (Band, Horn, Revelry; dir. Maneesh Sharma; 2010); *Tumhari Sulu* (Yours' Sulu; dir. Suresh Triveni; 2017); *Mitron* (Friends; dir. Nitin Kakkar; 2018); and, *Sui Dhaaga: Made in India* (Needle & Thread; dir. Sharat Katariya; 2018). All the movies have dealt with some of the compelling aspects of youth employment in, what may be called, 'neo-liberal' India (Deuchar and Dyson, 2019; Gooptu, 2009; 2013; Jeffrey and Young, 2014; Nambiar, 2013). This also coincides with the "India Shining" (Kaur, 2016) campaign of one of India's national parties - The *Bhartiya Janta Party* (BJP). Kaur explains that the rise of an "investor-citizen" (2016:624) follows the typical neoliberal narrative of an autonomous, enterprising citizen, who could prove his worth "by taking charge of [his] own future" (Kaur, 2016:637). These movies not only suggest the formation of an entrepreneurial ecosystem and entrepreneurialism that correspond with the philosophy and ethics of freedom, liberty, success and self-responsibility but also bring in cultural, social and economic recognition to skills that have often been considered 'mundane', that mostly remained unrecognized, uncelebrated and even denounced. Skills such as voice modulation, cooking, stitching and embroidery, driving and salesmanship emerge as an option to entrepreneurship in real terms. In fact, the protagonists become real figures when one looks at the expansive content available on digital platforms, for example, YouTube, to the citizens at large.

The creative entrepreneurs in these movies depict the contemporary life in post-reform India, the main thrust of which moves around the mundane, banal, everyday life. Such a treatment and cultural construction of entrepreneurship only broaden the scope of the entrepreneurial ecosystem. This does not revolve only around success stories or struggles against or facilitation through State policies but is also indicative of a propitious ecosystem wherein mundane skills can be mixed with entrepreneurialism, customer satisfaction, and brand value catering to the demands generated in consumer market in a specialized way. How shall we read the multitude of meanings of social imaginary that are interlaced around vocation, freedom, liberty, self-employment, (un)employment, exploitation and informalization in the contemporary job market? Can we read these movies as *speculum* of political-economic and social transformation in post-reform India? What trajectories of youth employment emerges and how does it chart neo-liberal India (if we wish to call it so)? In addressing these questions, the paper explores

representations of sites, ideas, practices, agencies and discourses of entrepreneurship as well as conditions of employment and job market in contemporary India. Exploring through trials and tribulations of protagonists in pursuit of their vocation, the paper discusses the conditions in job market; how mundane skills find an entry into the market; how women break patriarchal and masculine values; and, how digital technologies, content-sharing platforms, consumer market and neoliberal political economy create a viable ecosystem. In all, the questions concentrate mainly on imaginations and representations of successful young entrepreneurs insinuating geographies of neoliberal economy where mundane skills, art and abilities can be transformed into specialized services and optimized in the market. The paper suggests that these developments in Bollywood movies may correspond with changing social realities and shall be seen not only in terms of the growth of informalization of labor but also how insecurities and precarities in the contemporary job market give a push to entrepreneurship in various forms. The growing risks, pressures, competitiveness, unfair practices, informalization, and casual appointment amidst lack of social securities and financial benefits also provide an aspirational drive to the youth to start-in their own venture, even if it is a micro-enterprise. The paper is not only interested in understanding the cultural project of the State with the neoliberal market as one of its components but tries to make sense of the changing technological and political economic milieu that creates an entrepreneurial ecosystem. Stam and Spigel (2017) define entrepreneurial ecosystem as "a set of interdependent actors and factors coordinated in such a way that they enable productive entrepreneurship within a particular territory" (2017: 407). In line with this definition, the new entrepreneurial ecosystem in the post-reform period offers new possibilities, spaces, and instruments to optimize and monetize personal, hitherto untested, skills in the consumer market and entertainment sector, nuancing the job market and choices of youth in contemporary India.

This particular study is based on ethnographic practices of movie analysis. Our engagement with movies takes in its stride the content and inner message of the movies that highlight how a large number of people utilize their mundane skills to enhance livelihood opportunities in the post- liberalization era. By analysing the movie's narrative, authors have remained engaged with the question of social imaginary that is interlaced around vocation, freedom, liberty, self-employment, (un)employment, exploitation and informalization in the contemporary job market. Based on the larger theme of mundane skills of unemployed youth, five movies that were released between 2008-18 were selected specifically for the purpose. These five movies broaden the scope of entrepreneurship with the message that even if one is an underachiever in formal education or lacks social capital, s/he can achieve success. The paper is divided into five

sections, starting with brief introduction. The second section of the paper explores representations of sites, ideas, practices, agencies and discourses of entrepreneurship as well as conditions of employment and job market in contemporary India. The third section highlights the trials and tribulations of protagonists in pursuit of their vocation. The fourth section discusses the rise in skill-based micro-entrepreneurship in recent years, which in many ways is linked to the changing market situation in post-reform India and the rise of entrepreneurial ecosystem. Further, it argues that the new entrepreneurial ecosystem offers new possibilities, spaces, and instruments to optimize and monetize personal skills in the consumer market and entertainment sector that nuances the job market and choices of youth in contemporary India. No doubt, these shifts speak volumes about the changing entrepreneurial landscape of post-liberalization India and these movies take our attention away at least for a while from our deep-seated understanding of neoliberalism in its recognized, accepted form.

Neoliberalism And Entrepreneurial Culture

Youth employment has been a favorite theme for Bollywood, often reflecting on the situation of job market, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, as projected by *Mere Apne* (dir. Gulzar; 1971); *Ankush* (dir. N. Chandra; 1986). These movies showed college graduates without having any job or any form of fruitful employment, suggesting thereby that the State had failed to fulfil its promises and, instead of creating enough jobs (Mehrotra & Parida, 2019:1), it created educated but frustrated unemployed youth. The lack of a decent employment created an 'anti-hero' who confronts the State, nepotism and corruption prevalent in the state machinery (Mazumdar, 2000). What the movies portray was tied around 'socialist' imaginations, in a situation where the Indian state could neither resist nor confront the *juggernaut* of globalization.

We assert that scholarship in the post-reform period in India has increasingly been talking about enterprise culture (Gooptu 2009; Mankekar 2013), wherein the focus group has been the consuming class working in the neoliberal economic system, whose lives are synchronized around global capitalist forces and their signifiers. Scholarship has inadequately addressed a larger segment that comprises the non-elite middle class (Derné, 2008) who takes resort to skill based micro-entrepreneurship to generate livelihood. A range of such activities are part of the economic system even though they may not be taxable or can generate revenues for the government. Even when it generates some form of livelihood for a large segment of the population, fascination about the skill based micro-entrepreneurship continues unabated. As a first step, the ways the State has made intervention through its various skill- based programs to provide employment opportunities come to the fore, which also involves the extent of State failure to provide

support. Ultimately, an expansive ecosystem develops, perhaps, with or without the support of the State and its various agencies and which includes a large proportion of non-qualifiers. They remain as a class of enterprising selves who have been forced to take care of themselves irrespective of State's presence or absence. These shifts have led to a complex situation in which on the one hand Liberalization, Privatization and Globalization (LPG) emerge as economic prerequisites, whereas on the other the unpreparedness of the State to deal with the repercussions of the economic, social and political overhaul comes to the limelight. In the post-reform period, employment, like many other 'Indic' themes (such as village, joint family), if not expunged, is likely to get a very different treatment. This is quite different from the one shown in *Maa Beta* (dir. Lekhraj Bhakhri; 1962), a movie that showed entrepreneurial skills, hard work and struggles of a married couple (played by Tarun Bose and Nirupa Roy), who, after being expelled by the family, established their company. However, such movies weave the storyline around family drama and may not reflect much about the social and political-economic milieu of entrepreneurship.

Social scientists often look at neoliberalism with obliqueness. They argue that the welfare state at one point of time discounts and shrugs-off its responsibilities and vacates the space for the expansion of global capitalism which has led to "an informalisation of labour" (Buckley, 2022). In fact, much of employment, throughout the post-independence period, has come mainly from the informal sector, wherein job crunch and inadequate employment have remained a constant source of worry. If this is the scenario, one wonders what actually marks the whole issue of youth employment in the post-reform period as different. Official policy discourse predominantly views youth unemployment as "a problem of 'skill gaps' or 'skill disconnect' which can be addressed by providing skills that align with market demands" (Mehta, 2024:2) and it is assumed that the remedy lies in providing programs and training that bridge the skill gap. However, these movies look at the alternate methods and practices through which the individuals navigate "the absence of the state's social infrastructure, grasping the logics of neoliberal politics and reinterpreting skills already at hand to survive urban precarity" (Mehta, 2024:2). Further, Mehta asserts that "youth at the margins of social hierarchy often bypass the state and private-sector infrastructure of skill development to find viable informal alternatives to cope with economic precarity" (Mehta, 2024:2). In their working paper, Mehrotra and Parida (2019) state that "the Indian economy is passing through an unprecedented phase in its employment history, in which total employment (Workforce) is declining, and open unemployed and disheartened Not-in-Labour Force-Education-Training" (NLET) youth (a reserve army) are rising massively" (Mehrotra & Parida 2019:3). Entrepreneurship in

this context needs to be understood as an individual act to create a viable method of livelihood for earning money.

In recent times, entrepreneurship has become one of the projects of the State and neoliberal markets that primarily aim to overcome the crisis of jobs and generate employment. The recent connotations of entrepreneurship– economic as well as cultural– not only challenge the idea of self-employment but also draw our attention towards dichotomies, multiple challenges and paradoxes of achieving full and decent employment. It has been given a centre stage not only in Bollywood movies but also in the policies of the government. Often, Bollywood and the government resonate, borrow content and feed into each other. For example, at the release of Economic Survey 2019-2020, the ex-Chief Economic Advisor (CEA) of India said, "Indians at district levels have ambitions similar to the one characterized by Shruti, the character played by Anushka Sharma, in the 2010 movie *Band Baaja Baaraat*". He added, "It looks like from the map that there are many-many Shrutis like that all over the districts in India". Referring to similar statements made by the Prime Minister and the Finance Minister of India, the CEA further said, "those who create wealth are indeed India's wealth [and]...wealth creators need to be respected because wealth cannot be distributed unless it is created" (Jayaswal, 2020). Bollywood is involved in cultural construction that not only normalizes inherent contradictions of capitalist formations but takes important leaps in making neoliberal capitalism relevant, necessary and socially acceptable. The youth are seen working in IT and ITeS companies (for example, *Life in a Metro* dir. Anurag Basu; 2007), the gig economy, and are geared to set-up their ventures. While doing so, they show their preference for working in flexible work environments, focus on innovation and excellence and wish to maximize opportunities in the market.

It may not be correct to suggest that encouragement to entrepreneurship or pulling oneself up by their bootstraps is entirely new to India. The self-employment schemes had been initiated since the early 1980s and schemes such as TRYSEM (Training Rural Youth for Self-Employment) or SGSY (*Swarnajayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana*) could be seen as harbingers of the present moment (Panda, 2008:37). However, these schemes largely focused on rural youth, especially youth belonging to the Scheduled Castes, the Scheduled Tribes and women. As a shift, the recent programs such as *Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana* (Prime Minister Skill Development Programme, PMKVY) stress the entrepreneurial ecosystem and promote skill development through short-term courses, free training and monetary support. Similarly, Start-up India Programme intends to create an ecosystem that helps in nurturing innovations through administrative, technological and legal support at the start of new

ventures. As Gooptu (2013) asserts, "the realisation of these [entrepreneurial] desires and dreams rests on mobilizing the power and energy of active subject agents: the do-ers, who are endowed with what might be called aspirational capital and imbued with 'passion', 'self-belief', and the 'conviction' that 'no dream is distant'" (Gooptu 2013:3).

These Bollywood movies approach the protagonists in unique ways of being creative entrepreneurs, especially the college graduates, who otherwise neither fit as wage earners nor can get into high-profile jobs in global conglomerates. The cultural construction of entrepreneurship also broadens the scope of the entrepreneurial ecosystem that does not revolve only around success stories and struggles with government policies but is also indicative of a favorable institutional structure in terms of market access, training and finance. The youth are driven by entrepreneurialism that corresponds with philosophy and ethics of freedom, liberty, success and self-responsibility as well as customer satisfaction and brand creation. As an approach, entrepreneurship presents itself as a remedy to the crisis and effects of austerity measures and policies (Fuller, 2018:565) in developing as well as developed economies. Entrepreneurship emerges as a highly prized social trait which "indicates how enterprise can be used as an ideological instrument aimed at neutralizing the political effects of social crisis" (Holborow, 2015:94). Interestingly, it ignores the fact that there is a huge informal sector that has been accommodating an ever-growing workforce. However, it lacks a decent work environment and hardly follows standard operating procedures in terms of social security, job security, defined work hours, health policy or retirement benefit plans. The expansion of the informal sector or what is called as "informalisation of the formal" (Buckley, 2022) has certainly created several challenges including precarity, risks and vulnerabilities in the job market.

Trials And Tribulations

Among the trials and tribulations and contestation with family and friends, the protagonists face various challenges in starting a business. The five films discussed here break away from the pre-liberalization, Nehruvian era, when the youth struggled for employment and were, often, at loggerheads with the State, factory owners, private mills and businessmen. In contrast, protagonists neither confront the State nor hold it responsible for unemployment. Rather they take the onus on themselves. Interestingly, these movies also represent the conditions and spaces of employment, workplace and methods of neoliberalism's stress on entrepreneurialism.

As has been said, the protagonists are underachievers in formal education. Be it Harpreet Singh Bedi (hereafter Harpreet) in *Rocket Singh,* who graduates with 39 percent marks; or Sulu in *Tumhari Sulu*, who is an senior secondary drop-out; or Jai in *Mitron,*

whose father forces him to pursue automobile engineering and ridicules his failure in academics; or Mauji in *Sui Dhaaga*, who works as a caretaker in a store; or Bittu Sharma in *Band Baaja Baaraat,* who is a fresh graduate but has no employment and his father wants him to work in their sugarcane fields, there is no difference in status among them.

All these characters belong to the non-elite middle class, ordinary Indian (Derné, 2008) families working at low-profile positions, but who value education for upward mobility. It clearly foregrounds differences in economic position, income, preferences and choices with that of the elite middle class. As has been argued, situated in a challenging and competitive environment, the middle class engages itself in several professions for upward mobility defining status, priorities, tastes and aspirations (Fernandes, 2000, 2006; Srivastava, 2014; Upadhya, 2011). The protagonists aspire to achieve their dreams but lack financial and social capital to be able to move in that direction. They do not possess preferred educational degrees required in the contemporary job market. However, they possess self-acquired specific skills such as tailoring, stitching, embroidery, voice-modulation, cooking, dancing, driving, and salesmanship. They utilize the same set of skills to build up their career, start in business by inserting themselves in an ever-expanding and diversifying service economy and consumer market. The recognition of these 'mundane' skills indicates changes in the political economy in post-liberalization India.

While the post-liberalization era has benefited the elite middle class (Brosius, 2014; Srivastava, 2014), the troubles and sufferings of the non-elite middle class working at lower rungs in various departments such as sales, production, marketing, or human resource division have received less attention (Gooptu, 2009). Undoubtedly, in post-liberalization India, youth can get some employment, but the benefits, salary and favorable working conditions are hard to achieve. Harpreet graduated with passing marks; still, manages to secure a job at AYS (At Your Service) Computers. While offering the job, Nitin, the interviewer, tells Harpreet, "Fifteen thousand salary, no medical, no gratuity, no provident fund, six-month training period, no commitment from our side". Similarly, Mauji and his wife Mamta are employed by Bedi Creations, a garment Company, at a monthly salary of Rupees Eight thousand.

Under neoliberal framings, the markets are full of competition where the big players try to subvert the smaller ones even by foul means. When Mauji and Mamta stitch a 'maxi' (a nightwear for women) for the ease of their hospitalized mother, it becomes an instant hit amongst the patients in the hospital ward. But the Manager at the hospital connives with the designer of Bedi Creation, who on the pretext of offering employment to Mauji and Mamta, copy their designs and sell maxi to the patients in the same

hospitals at a very high price. In *Mitron,* Jai's prospective father-in-law proposes to Avni a deal to sell the shares of her food truck start-up (which has become successful and is earning profits) who, in return would finance her MBA program in Australia. Similarly, when Harpreet's start-up– Rocket Sales– starts taking business away from AYS Computers, the owner, Sunil Puri, desperately wants to buy out Rocket Sales to have access to its client base. Alongside, the big businesses symbiotically support each other in their businesses. The scene in which Harpreet refuses to discuss commission with Mr. Chaudhary of National Chemicals Company (NCC), later comes to know that Sunil Puri and Mr. Chaudhary are in a team. Ashok, the husband of Sulu, had been working in a garment factory for the last twelve years and when his old employer's grandson takes over the Company, he does not value Ashok's loyalty; instead, he humiliates him by taking away his office space.

In these movies, the middle- class values such as, hard work leading to success, or the importance attached to public sector jobs, have come for contestation and challenge. When Harpreet's friend says, "*B.Com. mein 39% ki kya value hai"* (what is the value of 39 percent in B.Com.), it resonates with similar views. Sulu's banker sisters refuse to believe that someone can be paid for speaking (in this case being a Radio Jockey) '*bolne ke bhi paise milte hain!'* (One gets paid for speaking!). In a later scene from the movie, the innocence with which Sulu tells Maria (her employer) that she is a senior-secondary drop-out portrays the deep-seated obsessions with degrees and marks, which have been contested in these movies. When Harpreet tells his friend that degrees and marks do not matter, but common sense does, he in a way becomes the spokesperson of the entire entrepreneurial class. Here, the middle- class values, obsession with marks-based performance and conventional ways to achieve success are set aside almost at ease.

Raghavendra (2011), while discussing movies *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara* (dir. Zoya Akhtar; 2011) and *Delhi Belly* (dir. Abhinay Deo; 2011), argues that "communities can be created entirely through a sharing of lifestyles without the need for productive transactions— because they care about people who simply "hang out" together" (Raghvendra, 2011:28). It implies that not simply pursuing personal vocations and hanging together, people can share a similar lifestyle in a non-conventional way. In contrast to what Raghavendra (2011) asserts, these movies foreground the idea of partnership wherein people come together in productive transactions because of their situatedness in similar economic milieux. In *Rocket Singh*, Harpreet brings other colleagues (Chhoteylal, Koena, Girish and Nitin) to work together in similar line for the growth of their business. Chhoteylal, the office boy, is neither respected nor paid well; Koena, working as the receptionist, is denied promotion over others; they are persuaded

by Harpreet to work together. Interestingly, they agree to work together because they all have an equal share in the new Company. Similarly, Shruti (in *Band Baaja Baaraat*) partners with Bittu for their event management Company; Avni (in *Mitron*) and Jai come together and start their food supply business. These partnerships involve equal responsibility, equal share and similar work ethic and a vow to share risks equally. The transition from government to "governance" entails self-responsibility and hence needs creating one's networks. These networks are "rooted in reciprocity and trust and subject to rules negotiated by network participants" (Davies, 2008:199). It highlights that "the neoliberal common sense is inscribed in the rules of the partnership game" (Davies, 2008:204) which in turn entails taking up responsibility.

Further, usually when one thinks about these businesses or private offices, the image that almost automatically comes to mind is of palatial office spaces, amenities and predominated by men. But the sights of SEZs, MNC Parks, palatial office complexes are not the necessary images of these movies. Instead, the offices here represent a hybrid mix of personal as well as professional space or the organised informal spaces. The AYS office was a small space situated amidst many others. The office space was visibly professional, with reception areas and designated cubicles. The employees were formally dressed. However, the workspace environment was informal where people gossiped, quarreled and even bullied their colleagues. In *Tumhari Sulu*, the garment factory in which Ashok worked as a manager, feuds amongst fellow workers was a common affair. feuds amongst fellow workers a common affair. For Bittu and Shruti, their *Shaadi Mubarak* office in Janakpuri, Delhi was an office-cum-home. On the other side, the factory in which Mauji and Mamta worked was neatly divided into rows with hundreds of stitching machines and people working on set targets and deadlines. In *Tumhari Sulu,* the *Radio Wow* office is in BKC (Bandra-Kurla Complex), which is a commercial hub of Mumbai. The sprawling BKC symbolizes a site of neoliberal capitalism. However, inside the *Radio Wow* office an ongoing argument between the receptionist and the food vendor who supplies lunch in the office speaks of the importance of informal negotiations during transactions. When the vendor is reprimanded for supplying poor quality food, he says "*Yeah budget mein itna hi milega na*" (This is all you get in this budget!) In another scene, Sulu is seen shelling pea pods in her office while her show is on the air.

Academic renderings on neoliberal market and economy are saturated with literature talking at length about the fragility and risk created by neoliberal systems (O'malley, 2004; Sulkunen, 2009). It may be said that the protagonists of these films take advantage of the expanding forms of market grown in the neoliberal system to succeed in their personal endeavor. The reason behind the success of each of them is the growing

demand for a service economy, from computer assembly to wedding planners - a creation of neoliberal political economic systems and consumer markets. The growing trend of eating-out culture is attributable to various reasons: working couples, night shifts, singles, bachelors, students and families dining out; the food-van start-up is in great demand now. Gooptu (2009) asserts that the neoliberal work culture exerts a lot of importance on the concept of 'embodied performance' and commodification of the worker's body. This, in turn, has created an enormous demand in the apparel and garment industry. Mauji and Mamta utilize the same through applying their skills with thread and needle, winning a fashion show that would later fund their start-up. The neoliberal entrepreneurial traits of professionalism and /or honesty, customer satisfaction form the major trope in these five movies. The success of each of the protagonists could be attributed to the exceptional quality they embody— middle class values and morals. The protagonist's determination to uphold the middle class values even within an altered economic system solely guided by profit-maximization sets them apart. The protagonists emphasize upon middle class values of *izzat* (honour/ honesty) than profit- maximization. Avni almost terminates business partnership with Jai, who on the day they are going to supply the first order they have received, indulges in dishonest practice to get it from a restaurant and serve it as his own rather than cooking by himself. Shruti, when interning under Chanda, a high-class wedding planner in South Delhi, realizes how Chanda tricks her customers and earns profit. Shruti decides that her Company would never follow such shortcuts to success. On their first assignment, she stops the electrician from stealing the power connection from the *mohalla* (neighborhood) transformer. Harpreet remains loyal when he decides not to change the vendor who initially supplied him with graphic cards when he did not have the money to pay for them. He wins back the old customers of AYS Computers, who had severed ties due to bad services. Rocket Sales values services to customers and provides those services not only at half the cost at which AYS offers but also night services. When AYS takes over Rocket Sales, one of the clients tells the AYS owner that he could buy the Company (Rocket Sales) but not its art of service.

The female protagonists in these movies employ their personal skills, hidden talents in innovative ways to sail through adverse situations. Sulu gets an assignment to work as RJ in a late-night show at an FM radio station– 93.8 *Radio Wow.* She lives in Virar, a suburb in Mumbai, which adds to her problems. On her first day to office, Ashok, her husband, worries about Sulu's safety as she travels in the middle of the night. The notion of time with respect to women's safety in Indian cities assumes a critical point of consideration (Phadke, 2013; Soni, 2016). However, the cab driver, a female, assures Ashok of Sulu's security. She says, "I carry pepper spray with me". On the way to the office, the driver talks with Sulu and tells that her husband initially adjusted with her

night shift but abandoned her later. She says, "I am happy as I have a car and a respectable business". A female driving an Ola Cab late at night, is a signifier of the freedom and flexibility to work under neoliberal systems, a drastic and rather unimaginable shift for women in Indian situation. Women in these movies seem to be breaking the stereotypic boundaries**.** Sulu toils between her household responsibilities while pursuing her dream to be a working woman. Her late-night assignment creates friction with her husband, and she is forced by her sisters to leave the job. Sulu's family reinforces gender norms, which is commonplace in women's everyday lives, but not a matter of concern to the male protagonists in these movies. Unlike Sulu, Harpreet does not have to justify his passion for work or assure that his work will not cause disruptions in his family's everyday routine (household chores such as cooking, cleaning, and looking after children). Despite facing challenges and opposition, Sulu does not give up her work. Similarly, Shruti, soon after graduating from college is expected to get married; however, her male counterpart Bittu's family has no such expectation of him. In a stark shift from the male-centric Bollywood movies, these movies have women protagonists in Sulu, Avni, Shruti and Mamta. Not going for conventional portrayal, the movies not only show women taking up roles that have been associated with men as exemplified by Avni who starts her food truck, or Shruti who starts her wedding planning Company '*Shaadi Mubarak'* (Best wishes from us!!!). These women showcase courage to face challenges, an aspiration level to step into fields that have conventionally been out of the domain of women who come from humble middle class background.

Skill-based Microentrepreneurship

No doubt, the shrinking opportunities in formal wage employment in both rural and urban areas have pushed people to seek opportunities in the expanding market. The mention of Indians at the district level by the ex-CEA of India hints towards possibilities of expanding employment opportunities in small towns of India. According to a Report by India Chamber of Commerce, "As of December 2018, Government has recognised 14000 start-ups from across 484 districts of India. 1.30 Lakh jobs have been reportedly created by 11,727 start-ups at an average of 11 jobs per start-up. While 55% of the start-ups are located in Tier-1 cities, 27% are in Tier-2 cities and 18% in Tier-3 cities". Although it is evident that growth would have been higher in Tier-1 cities with easily accessible resources at hand, the rise in start-ups in Tier-2 and Tier-3 cities is significant. While the growth in Tier-2 and Tier-3 cities has been propagated as an achievement; it needs to be viewed in terms of the rise in informal employment, casual workforce wherein the individual is exposed to risks associated with the informal sector, providing scope for increase in entrepreneurial subjectivity. Kaur (2016) explains that the state's "failure to

provide opportunities and access to social goods to all its citizens– is presented as a positive force that enables innovative Indian citizens to retain their agency and be makers of their own destinies" (2016, 315-316). These numbers hint towards an India where the youth go for innovative ways to maintain upward mobility. The skills that one needs to acquire today should not necessarily have their foundations in formal education or public employment but in entrepreneurship, which is the ability to take the risk and utilize the credo '*jugaad'*– the ability to improvise a solution enabling one to manage with scarce resources (Mankekar, 2013:34). In doing so, as Kaur (2016) rightly says, "the neoliberal state turns the discourse of lacks, absences and adversity on its head…" (2016:12-13).

From using the *mohalla* lanes as wedding venues for clients, calling his friends to play music at weddings, and dancing themselves to entertain the guests help a great deal in cost-cutting for the Bittu-Shruti partnership. Similar is Avni's idea of using a food truck which is low on investment and maintenance than renting or purchasing a space with overhead expenses; or that of Jai making food videos at home and posting on YouTube incurring no production cost. These are innovative ideas used by the budding entrepreneurs to slash costs and increase profits. Mauji and Mamta stitch a 'maxi' for his hospitalized mother using old fabrics from the house which has panels for ECG (electrocardiogram), drips and injection. Persuasion as a trait to attract and manage entrepreneurial relations also appears in these movies as a form of *jugaad* to deal with difficult situations. When the DJ (disco jockey) wants to call it a day and go home at 2 AM, Harpreet says, "*persuasion ka naam suna hai'* (Have you heard of persuasion!) to his friends and goes and convinces the DJ to continue playing music. When Bittu and Shruti decide to take the leap from low-budget wedding planning to tapping rich clients, the clients at the beginning are unsure of the first- timers handling their big-budget wedding. Bittu reminds the client of his rise to the position of 'Tyre King' from being a novice a few years back. The protagonist's innovative skills resonate with the 'enterprising-self' that amounts to 'responsibilisation– the way of governance in neoliberalism' (Trnka & Trundle, 2017). In this regard, scholars have undertaken studies on workplaces to understand the mechanisms through which individuals are oriented towards becoming enterprising. Deuchar and Dyson (2019) assert that the new templates of work in the new economic enclaves accompanied by cutting edge competition to survive, the easy hiring and firing have created pressure on the youth. When Harpreet bags the job at AYS Computers and is offered an inadequate salary, it immediately raises the question— how could a job with less salary and no social security benefits satisfy anyone?

We attribute this trend to the neoliberal system and its stress on responsibilisation. Harpreet knows his educational abilities and is aware of the existing job market with its emphasis on a skilled workforce. For him, the best fit option is a sales job which requires common sense not mastery over game of numbers**.** With the mushrooming of expensive private institutions and dilapidating public institutions, professional courses have become unaffordable. But Avni wants to fund her higher studies in Australia after her successful start-up. In other scenes, youngsters take up jobs that do not require massive capital investment. Shruti, rather than enrolling in an event management course, interns with a wedding planner, thereby acquiring hands-on experience of managing events. Similarly, when Harpreet decides to be a salesman, he tells his friend that he cannot afford the CAT (Common Admission Test) taken by aspirants, for which it becomes necessary to get admission in business and management programs in elite business schools in India.

Further to possessing business traits along with risk-taking and internalization of self-responsibility, the availability of a business ecosystem is cardinal for the expansion of entrepreneurship. The wide variety of travel vlogs, cookery videos that are available on the digital platforms act as business enablers. It showcases how 'mundane' habits and activities such as cooking, singing and traveling have helped ordinary people not only garner fame but also act as a source of revenue for the *successful* content creators. In doing so, ordinary Indians have been able to convert their self-cultivated skills into a profitable business venture. For instance, Sunil Patil, famously known as Dolly *chaiwala,* runs a tea stall in Nagpur, a city in the central Indian State of Maharashtra. Sunil Patil is an internet sensation today with 2.03 million subscribers on YouTube and 5 million followers on Instagram. Recently, the internet was abuzz with pictures of Sunil Patil with Bill Gates, wherein the latter visited Dolly *chaiwala* for a cup of tea. His unique style of brewing tea involves theatrically pouring milk packet in the pot, preparing it with flair. Mr. Patil tells the Economic times:

> The drama and showmanship are designed to attract customers and enhance business. With so many tea stalls out there, I need to differentiate myself." He further notes, "My style is inspired by Captain Jack Sparrow (Johnny Depp's character from Pirates of the Caribbean). Although I've faced criticism and name-calling for my fashion choices, I've ignored the negativity. I constantly refine my look, and it's these unique traits that have made me popular.

Certainly, the role of the Internet and social media are important here that provides avenues to even ordinary Indians to exhibit their creations. Needless to say, there is also a

greater acceptability of such contents among the public that recognizes and appreciates these mundane skills. However, a few years back, it would have been unthinkable for anyone selling chai to have become so famous. What one witnesses today is the creation of an entrepreneurial ecosystem wherein these influencers are not only monetizing their content but also playing a vital role in setting new consumption patterns, new trends and fads, motivating/ influencing more people to join the digital spaces to earn income. Resultantly, the internet has several such internet stars and stories such as that of Puneet Superstar, *Vadapav* girl, which are an expression of the changing entrepreneurial landscape in post-reform India. These content creators have become famous because of their ability to amuse, entertain and engross the social media users through their antics which, though mundane, hold attention. In the growing attention economy, it is important that the content created by these creators is 'worthy of spending time at' because it is 'attention that is a scarce commodity not information' (Berkeley Economic Review, 2020). Attention has become a precious resource and 'access to attention' leads to success. In an entrepreneurial environment wherein, digital platforms are increasingly monetized, the unemployed youth engage its mundane skills and create content to earn livelihood. The utilization of mundane skills such as cooking to showcase one's skill is not new in India. However, the accentuation in utilization of one's mundane skills to earn livelihood in current times could be seen to have interlinkages with the shifting political economy: the privatization of services, skill gap/ mismatch, rising precarity and insecurity of work.

Interestingly, in the early 1990s television personalities such as Tarla Dalal, Sanjeev Kapoor were a few chefs who were made available on *Doordarshan* (the only national television channel in India) providing them with a platform to exhibit their culinary skills. This was the era in which some popular Hindi household magazines like *Sarita*, *Grihashobha* carried columns on recipes of several dishes. It was all before the expansion of the internet, websites, content sharing platforms and largely before globalization. Today, cooking videos of Bharat, Kavita, and many others are seen competing with videos of internationally recognized chefs such as Ranveer Brar, Sanjeev Kapoor and Vikas Khanna. A variety of opportunities are now available to people with different capabilities. For example, the chef-cum-entrepreneurs, Sanjeev Kapoor and Ranveer Brar have their own brand of kitchenware and cookware, named Wonderchef and RB respectively. These chefs have a chain of restaurants. For example, the Yellow Chillies is owned and franchised by Sanjeev Kapoor. However, as Michelin starred chef, Vikas Khanna in an interview asserted, "Without skills, education can't help you". Surely, the chefs (mentioned above) have undergone a formal training and are certified from reputed institutes in India. Interestingly, Nisha Madhulika and Sonia Barton, who

perhaps have not gone through any certification or formal training, are equally popular among people and have become household names in India. They offer cutting edge competition, at least on virtual platforms, to the established international chefs. Nisha Madhulika has 14.9 million subscribers on YouTube, while Kabita Singh enjoys 14.4 million subscribers. On the contrary, Ranveer Brar has 8.43 million, Sanjeev Kapoor 7.76 million and Vikas Khanna 49.6 thousand subscribers. These numbers of subscribers of YouTube channels of Nisha Madhulika or Kabita Singh foreground the extent to which entrepreneurship has seeped in contemporary India. Along with these established and popular household names, there are hundreds of 'untrained', 'unskilled' women and men from different parts of the country who host and prepare local cuisines for global viewers. Food content creators such as Bristi Gupta (Bristi Home kitchen YouTube channel) with 5.57 million subscribers is exemplary in this case. Bristi Gupta hails from small village Rajganj in Dhanbad district, Jharkhand where her father ran a flour mill, and her mother was a homemaker. In one of her speeches on a popular YouTube channel named Josh Talks (with over 1 million subscribers), a platform that invites role models or people with inspiring success stories, Bristi speaks about her initial journey in the small town of Dhanbad. In this video, Bristi Gupta mentions preparing for competitive government exams as a youngster and her inability to clear those exams. Despite repeated failures, she had a passion to succeed, inspired as she was by a friend who earned money creating content on YouTube. Years later, Bristi started her channel. She grew up in a family wherein both her parents enjoyed cooking and thus the skills at cooking came naturally to her. Encouraged by her spouse, she decides to create content on cooking food. Instances of the common citizens becoming successful content creators could be attributed to the opportunities available on digital platforms.

The digital platforms with easy access, user friendly interface have revolutionized, democratized and decentralized the domain of information dissemination. These platforms have scaled-down the hurdles that help in easy accessing, transmitting, storing and even retrieval of contents. As Manuel (1993:2) evocatively explained how revolution in technology that led to growth of cassette culture dramatically shifted "patterns of control, production, content and consumption" from the old forms of media (cinema, television, radio, vinyl records and so on). We assert that the digital platforms allow one to showcase one's talents and is also the outcome of a shift in the ways of transmission of information making it more interactive, less expensive for consumption by multiple users. Such developments in media technologies grossly vary from the entire corpus of mass media production and hegemonies and control as spoken by the Frankfurt School theorist, especially Adorno and Horkheimer (2002). For them, mass media and popular culture are tools through which modern capitalism operates and thereby

disengages citizens from the development of critical consciousness. On the contrary, we assert that the production of mass culture rather than getting engaged in the practice of disengagement from and exploitation of the citizens has emerged as a powerful space for social and economic mobility. This development is markedly different from the pre-liberalization era wherein the control to create content rested with the State. The digital platforms could also be seen as innovative ways through which individuals bypass regulatory frameworks to become less dependent on the State and its institutions for support. The "individuals can greatly benefit from this transformation because it empowers them to set up businesses, trade goods and exchange information online while circumventing corporate or state intermediaries" (van Djick et.al., 2018:1). Digital platforms with technological innovation are acting as mass equality-promoters. Through democratization of space, even if virtual, a space for subaltern women has also been created. Women, who might not have stepped outside the confines of their homes, let alone find employability, are now available with varied content to share on content-sharing platforms.

Alongside, these videos complicate the plethora of literature that has reduced 'enterprising' individuals to necessarily possessing certain bodily comportments, smartly dressed, crisp command over the English language 'suitable for office conduct' (Fernandes, 2000; Gooptu, 2009) and so on. However, the protagonists do not seem to care much about their looks, dress, or desire to enhance their language skills. In fact, Bittu pronounces business as 'biness', Mauji and Mamta label their designs, '*Sui Dhaaga*: Mad in India' ('Made in India'). It is evident that there remains a large section whose skills are not desired for employability, but they now have a platform to showcase their skills, be noticed and earn money too.

Conclusion

Based on the movies discussed in the article, the trajectory of starting with mundane skills and making an impact in the job market is processual and not a mere coincidence. The entrepreneurs have not achieved instant fame with viral videos and so on, rather have made a gradual progress Though initially, in some cases, their efforts may look a bit casual or unplanned, gradually the protagonists adapt, learn and grow. For instance, in *Band Baaja Baaraat*, Shruti plans her business meticulously, and so does Avni in *Mitron.* Though Bittu, Jai and Sulu may seem casual in their approach initially, they evolve and mature as entrepreneurs. Similarly, Harpreet in *Rocket Singh* starts his journey as a salesman, and ventures into entrepreneurship by chance/ accident, but his inherent skills and moral stances become the foundation of a value-oriented business model. As is the case with digital content creators discussed above, who in their videos/shorts often voice

their struggles of learning new skills (themselves) to upgrade and update their work (both in terms of content and digital quality), the characters depicted in the movies improvise, adapt to new ideas and trends and improve their art gradually without having any support from the State and its institutions. It is no coincidence that the State seems to remain perpetually absent in all these movies barring a few scenes. The protagonist's ambivalence towards the absence of State does not appear abnormal or out of place when we put it in the larger discourse of neoliberalism and the entrepreneurial subjects it creates. Bittu and Harpreet are fresh graduates in search of employment. So is the housewife Sulu, who is always brimming with start-up ideas but finds no support. Mauji is a tailor, and the absence of opportunities has forced him to run errands at the sewing machine outlet. Evidently, none of them could find any help from the State institutions for being provided with employment opportunities or skilled training. In this context, it is essential to understand the functioning and logic of the neoliberal market and the subsequent creation of responsible citizens. Burchell (1993:275) asserts that "generalisation of an enterprise form" to all forms of conduct becomes the fulcrum of the neoliberal systems. Individualized subjectivities become so routine that it is normal to take the burden of survival upon oneself. The only time we witness the State in these movies performing in a positive way is when it takes upon the role of maintaining law and order. It is shown when Puri files a case against Harpreet in Rocket Sales or when Sulu's son goes missing and the police find her son and bring him back to home. In a small scene from *Sui Dhaaga*, the State machinery is shown to perform the function of distributing sewing machines as part of its subsidy distribution program.

The paper helps establish the fact that a booming class of entrepreneurs have succeeded not by virtue of the State sponsored formal skill- based programs but by successfully grabbing opportunities available through the expanding forms of market. What's the secret of their success stories? The protagonists, who are considered underachievers and represent the rungs of the non-elite middle class, employ their otherwise considered 'mundane skills' to create a space for themselves and earn money too. They embody the essential traits and values of doing business: punctuality, time management, service quality, customer satisfaction, rapport building, persuasion, hard work and a propensity to take risks. Looking at the comprehensive market that has developed around 'mundane' skills, the nature as well as the logic of youth employment may be seen differently. The movies not only provide a value-based guideline to these inherent talents but also allow them recognition and capitalization in post-reform India. These shifts also speak volumes about shifts in the entrepreneurial landscape of post-liberalization India. Bollywood and the State might be involved in developing an

entrepreneurial culture; but these movies definitely ask us to revise the way we have been thinking about the effects of neoliberalism in India.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest in this study.

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