

Hindi Cinema's Changing Lens: A Sociological Study of Tier-2 and Tier-3 India

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Abstract

In recent years, Hindi films have increasingly focused on India's tier-2 and tier-3 cities. These narratives present new kinds of stories, centred on ordinary people, their families, ambitions, and daily struggles. Moving away from the glossy visuals of metro life, filmmakers now highlight voices shaped by cultural roots, social change, and personal ambition. Films such as *Laapataa Ladies*, *Bareilly Ki Barfi*, *Dum Laga Ke Haisha*, *Masaan*, *Sui Dhaaga*, *Shubh Mangal Saavdhan*, *Stree*, and *Luka Chuppi* explore issues like caste, gender roles, entrepreneurship, education, sexual health, patriarchy, modern relationships, and generational conflict. These portrayals reflect shifting social realities across tier-2 and tier-3 India. As more people in such cities gain access to education, digital media, and job opportunities, their lifestyles and beliefs are gradually changing. Hindi films reflect this change by portraying characters and settings that feel real and relatable. These stories highlight not just challenges but also moments of strength, growth, and everyday resilience. The aim is to understand how these films help tell the untold stories of India's tier-2 and tier-3 cities and why that matters for both cinema and society. This study closely examines these films to show how small-town stories make social change visible on screen and help connect cinema to everyday Indian life.

Keywords: Hindi cinema; tier-2 cities; middle class; gender roles; Indian society; social change

Introduction

For many years, mainstream Hindi films mostly focused on life in large metro cities like Mumbai or Delhi. The stories were often about wealthy families, dramatic love stories, or glamorous urban lifestyles that did not reflect the everyday life of most Indians. Cities beyond the metros were either shown as rural, underdeveloped, or only used briefly for humour or emotional scenes. This began to shift in the past decade. This study examines how films represent small-town India, and the analysis is interpretive rather than statistical; the aim is to understand cinematic portrayals, not to generalise about all tier-2 and tier-3 cities.

"More films are now telling stories set in tier-2 and tier-3 cities. They show a side of India that is less flashy but deeply relatable." These cities may be slower in pace but are full of real people facing real situations: pressure from family, caste barriers, lack of opportunities, and societal expectations. At the same time, they are also full of people who are hopeful, hard-working, and ready to adapt. The characters in these films speak local dialects, follow traditional customs, and face challenges while pursuing their dreams.

This change in storytelling is not just a creative shift. It also reflects the social changes happening across India. With better internet access, modern education, and growing job options, the people in these cities are changing. They live in homes with strong traditions, but their ideas and ambitions are evolving.

Films like *Laapataa Ladies*, *Masaan*, and *Shubh Mangal Saavdhan* focus on characters who feel close to reality. Whether it's a young woman trying to gain independence, a man breaking caste barrier, or someone dealing with stigma around sexual health, these characters represent the changing face of Indian society. By showing stories from tier-2 and tier-3 cities, Hindi cinema is becoming more grounded. It connects with a wider audience that was often left out of mainstream films.

Review of Literature

Scholars have long studied how Hindi cinema reflects Indian society. Earlier research mostly focused on larger-than-life portrayals: films set in big cities, showing wealth, romance, and family drama in exaggerated ways. But more recent studies highlight how cinema is shifting its gaze toward everyday realities, especially in tier-2 and tier-3 cities.

Dwyer (2014), in her book *Bollywood's India*, explains that Hindi films often shape and reflect national identity. She notes that films are not just entertainment but a cultural force that presents ideas of family, love, class, and values to wide audiences. Similarly, Prasad (1998) argues that the ideology of the Hindi film lies in its ability to mix fantasy with social messaging, often choosing symbols that the audience can emotionally connect with, as explored in his work *Ideology of the Hindi Film*.

Fernandes (2006), through *India's New Middle Class*, explains how rising aspirations and consumer culture influence both real life and media. As more middle-class families from smaller cities gain visibility, cinema begins to mirror their lives. Uberoi (2006), writing in *Freedom and Destiny*, offers insight into how Indian visual culture blends tradition and modernity, a pattern now visible in films set in tier-2 and tier-3 cities.

While scholars such as Dwyer, Uberoi, and Prasad did not specifically focus on regional or small-town settings, their work laid the groundwork for understanding how Hindi cinema mirrors larger social and cultural structures. Today's Hindi films build on these ideas by showing characters who live in cities like Bareilly, Varanasi, or Haridwar, not just as background, but as key parts of the story. These studies help explain why stories from tier-2 and tier-3 cities have become central to how filmmakers portray aspiration, mobility, and everyday life.

Similarly, recent work by scholars such as Sinha (2024) highlights how contemporary Hindi films increasingly foreground women navigating ambition, mobility, and domestic expectations—an important theme in films like *Bareilly Ki Barfi*, *Dum Laga Ke Haisha*, and *Laapataa Ladies*.

Studies on audience interpretation also suggest that recent Hindi films can shape attitudes toward caste, gender, and stereotypes (Kumari & Singh, 2024; Sharma, 2017), reinforcing the idea that evolving small-town narratives may influence how viewers understand everyday

social change. This growing trend in Hindi cinema offers a fresh space for showing how Indian society is evolving, especially in parts of the country that were rarely shown before.

Research Methodology

This research uses a qualitative textual analysis approach to study how Hindi films represent social change in India's tier-2 and tier-3 cities.

"The films selected – Laapataa Ladies, Bareilly Ki Barfi, Dum Laga Ke Haisha, Masaan, Sui Dhaaga, Shubh Mangal Saavdhan, Stree, and Luka Chuppi – were chosen because they focus on relatable characters, everyday settings, and important social issues such as caste, gender roles, education, sexual health, patriarchy, modern relationships, and generational conflict."

Each film was closely examined for its storyline, characters, dialogues, and setting. The aim was to understand how these films reflect changing values in Indian society, especially in regions that were earlier ignored in mainstream cinema. Scenes were interpreted using a sociological lens, taking inspiration from scholars like Rachel Dwyer, M. Madhava Prasad, Patricia Uberoi, and Leela Fernandes, whose works explore how Hindi cinema mirrors real-life social structures and identities. Although the focus is on Hindi films, the study also briefly refers to popular series like Panchayat and Gullak, which portray rural and semi-urban life.

Findings

Each film offers a unique window into the everyday struggles, values, and evolving identities of people in tier-2 and tier-3 cities.

Laapataa Ladies (2024, dir. Kiran Rao)

Setting: Rural/semi-urban India (fictional village Surajmukhi)

Story Summary and Setting

The story begins with Deepak, a kind and respectful young man, who brings home the wrong bride from a crowded train: Jaya, a girl who seizes the chance to escape her abusive marriage. Meanwhile, Deepak's real bride, Phool, gets stranded at a station and is helped by strangers. She begins a journey of self-discovery while working at a tea stall. Jaya pretends to be "Pushpa Rani" and stays with Deepak's unsuspecting family. She slowly builds trust with them and hides her identity from both the family and the corrupt police officer Shyam Manohar. Her past reveals a life of oppression: a forced marriage, denial of education, and threats of violence. On the other hand, Phool grows from a scared girl into a confident worker who experiences independence for the first time.

Social Themes and Analysis

Gender and Autonomy

Both Jaya and Phool represent two sides of the same struggle: the desire for control over one's own life. Jaya's rebellion is strategic; she fakes her identity, sells her jewellery, and uses the opportunity to fund her education. Phool, on the other hand, unintentionally discovers independence while working and living without her husband. The women's narrative is supported and expanded by Manju Mai, a fiercely independent tea-stall owner who has created

her own life after walking out of an abusive marriage. The film challenges the idea that a woman's worth is tied to her role as a wife.

Patriarchy and Escape

Jaya's husband is abusive and only interested in dowry. Her decision to stay silent and remain with Deepak's family is not cowardice but a quiet act of rebellion. Through her, the film shows how women often escape abusive situations not through dramatic revolts, but through clever resistance and community support.

Marriage as Social Currency

In this world, a woman's life revolves around marriage. Jaya is seen as a liability to be traded. Phool fears returning to her family because society will assume she's at fault. The film challenges this mindset that a woman is "lost" if she doesn't arrive with her husband.

Police Corruption and Masculine Power

Inspector Shyam Manohar at first seems to embody the worst of corrupt small-town cops: asking for bribes and playing both sides. But he undergoes a change, revealing an internal conflict. When he finally sides with Jaya and stops her husband, the film makes a case for using institutional power to protect women's rights.

Education and Aspiration

Jaya dreams of studying organic farming in Dehradun. Her desire for education becomes the strongest symbol of freedom in the film.

Connection to Tier-2/Tier-3 Society

The film deeply reflects the lifestyle, speech, and culture of tier-2 and tier-3 India. From the narrow lanes and train stations to family kitchens and police stations, the environment feels authentic and grounded. The character of Manju Mai, a woman who left an abusive marriage to live independently, acts as a reminder that women have been carving their own paths for a long time, often while facing immense pressure. The quiet transformation of both women, with Phool gaining confidence and Jaya reclaiming her freedom, mirrors the silent shifts happening in non-metro cities. *Laapataa Ladies* shows that even in the heartland, women are beginning to write their own stories. Rather than being loud or moralistic, the film uses gentle humour and simple visuals to comment on important social issues.

Bareilly Ki Barfi (2017, dir. Ashwiny Iyer Tiwari)

Setting: Bareilly, Uttar Pradesh (a tier-2 city)

Story Summary and Setting

Bareilly Ki Barfi is a romantic comedy that explores individuality and social expectations in a small-town setting. The story follows Bitti Mishra, a bold, free-spirited woman who enjoys breakdancing, smoking, and watching English films, traits that clash with her conservative upbringing. While the film shows Bitti smoking, it is not portrayed as a marker of modernity but rather as a personal choice that defies traditional gender expectations. The central idea is

that she refuses to change herself just to become the “ideal” woman her family and society want her to be. Pressured by her mother to marry and conform, Bitti one day finds a book whose female character seems just like her. She sets out to find the author, unknowingly walking into a love triangle involving Chirag Dubey, the actual author, and Pritam Vidrohi, a timid man forced to pretend he wrote the book. Set entirely in Bareilly, the film uses its narrow lanes, local dialect, and close-knit community to portray a tier-2 city where tradition and modernity constantly collide.

Social Themes and Analysis

Gender Expectations

Bitti refuses to act like the “ideal Indian girl” her mother wants her to be, challenging patriarchal norms simply by living on her own terms. Her father, Narottam Mishra, stands against societal pressure by not only accepting Bitti’s unusual ways but also encouraging her independence. He is a source of strength, enabling her to live authentically without shame. Her character reflects the evolving role of women in tier-2 cities who wish to live authentically without shame, with the film also highlighting how the support of an ally can make this journey easier.

Parental Pressure and Marriage Market

The conflict between Bitti’s parents highlights the generational and ideological clash around marriage. Her mother is focused on finding the right groom, reflecting how society pressures young women to fit in, while her father cares more about her happiness and independence. This also highlights how many young women feel pressured to hide their true selves to be accepted in the arranged marriage market.

Male Insecurity and Gender Roles

Chirag, though educated and modern on the surface, is insecure about Bitti’s confidence and independence. His manipulation of events to win her love reflects how men, even progressive ones, can feel threatened by strong women.

Friendship and Identity

Pritam Vidrohi is forced to pretend he’s someone he’s not, exposing how social expectations don’t just weigh on women. His transformation, from a meek salesman to a bold and expressive man, shows how men also perform roles to fit societal expectations, especially when trying to impress or please others.

Connection to Tier-2/Tier-3 Society

The film shows how the younger generation is pushing for individuality, freedom of choice, and emotional honesty. While light-hearted, Bareilly Ki Barfi uses humour and romance to tackle real issues of gender roles, identity, and social pressure in tier-2 India, making it both entertaining and thought-provoking.

Dum Laga Ke Haisha (2015, dir. Sharat Katariya)

Setting: Haridwar, Uttarakhand (a tier-2 city)

Story Summary and Setting

Dum Laga Ke Haisha is a heartfelt drama set in the temple town of Haridwar during the mid-1990s. It tells the story of Prem Prakash Tiwari, an underconfident, English-hating young man who runs a small cassette shop inherited from his father. Under family pressure, he reluctantly marries Sandhya, a well-educated and overweight woman training to become a teacher. Prem is embarrassed by her appearance, and the marriage begins on a rough note, with awkwardness, distance, and frustration between the couple.

The story unfolds within the narrow lanes, bustling ghats, and local homes of Haridwar. The film beautifully captures middle-class life in a tier-2 city, where traditional values and personal pride often clash with changing expectations. As Prem and Sandhya struggle to adjust, they eventually grow to understand and respect each other. Their relationship takes a turning point when they are forced to participate in a community wife-carrying race, a symbolic moment of emotional bonding.

Social Themes and Analysis

Body Image and Beauty Standards

Sandhya faces constant judgement for her weight from her husband, in-laws, and society. The film highlights how women in tier-2 cities are still expected to meet narrow beauty standards to be considered "marriage material". Sandhya challenges this by refusing to shrink herself, either physically or emotionally.

Education and Gender Dynamics

Sandhya is better educated than Prem, and this creates insecurity and resentment in him. The film exposes the fragile masculinity that emerges when a man feels "less than" his wife in terms of education or status. Sandhya's calm dignity becomes a contrast to Prem's emotional immaturity.

Family Pressure and Arranged Marriage

The marriage is not based on love but on family pressure: a common reality in many tier-2 cities. Prem's parents believe that finding a "sanskari" and qualified bride is a blessing, regardless of their son's willingness.

Patriarchy and Emotional Growth

Prem initially treats Sandhya with embarrassment and cruelty. But through conflict, separation, and reflection, he begins to confront his own shortcomings. The film doesn't paint him as a villain but as a product of his environment, a confused young man learning to become emotionally mature.

Social Reputation and Masculinity

Prem's lack of English-speaking skills and low self-esteem affect his social image. His journey reflects how men in small towns often feel trapped between traditional masculinity and modern expectations.

Connection to Tier-2/Tier-3 Society

Dum Laga Ke Haisha is rooted deeply in the textures of tier-2 India. From cassette shops and video parlours to community races and gossiping neighbours, every detail feels authentic. The film portrays how love and respect can evolve slowly, even in the most arranged and imperfect settings. It also captures the emotional realities of middle-class families, where image, status, and duty often outweigh personal desires.

Masaan (2015, dir. Neeraj Ghaywan)

Setting: Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh (a tier-2 city)

Story Summary and Setting

Masaan tells two parallel stories set in the city of Varanasi. One story follows Devi Pathak, a young woman whose life is shattered after she is caught in a hotel room with her partner, who dies by suicide following a police raid. Even though the two were involved in a consensual physical relationship, Devi alone bore the burden of society's shame, as if expressing her desires was a moral failing. She faces intense public shaming and is seen as a disgrace by her community. Her widowed father, Vidyadhar Pathak, tries to support her but is also weighed down by societal judgement and police harassment.

The second story revolves around Deepak Kumar, a boy from the Dom caste who works at the cremation ghats. Despite his caste-based occupation, Deepak dreams of a better life and studies engineering. He falls in love with Shaalu Gupta, a girl from an upper-caste family, but their love story ends in tragedy when Shaalu dies in a bus accident. Deepak is later forced to cremate her body, a painful moment that captures the emotional violence of caste barriers. Set in the alleys, ghats, and riverbanks of Varanasi, the film uses realistic visuals and non-glamorous storytelling to reflect the conflict between tradition and change in small-town India.

Social Themes and Analysis

Gender, Shame, and Moral Policing

Devi is not punished by the law but by society. The shame attached to her sexual autonomy becomes a form of invisible violence. The film highlights how women in tier-2 cities are judged for their personal choices, especially around sexuality, and how patriarchal norms continue to dominate public and private spaces.

Caste and Social Mobility

Deepak's story shows how caste still decides the limits of ambition. Even though he is educated and capable, his background follows him everywhere. His love story with Shaalu symbolises hope, but her sudden death becomes a harsh reminder that social boundaries remain powerful.

Parental Pressure and Generational Guilt

Vidyadhar, Devi's father, represents the older generation who feel helpless watching their children suffer. His character reflects how deeply ingrained shame and honour are in small-town families. His internal struggle, between protecting his daughter and maintaining social respectability, mirrors that of many tier-2 households.

Urban vs. Traditional Conflict

Masaan shows how people in tier-2 cities are caught between their aspirations and the weight of old traditions. From Devi's fight to find a job despite public stigma to Deepak trying to escape his caste identity, the film reflects real challenges faced by youth in transitioning societies.

Emotional Resilience and Survival

Despite tragedy, both Devi and Deepak eventually find quiet strength. The film ends on a hopeful note, with the two characters meeting at the Ganga riverbank, not romantically, but as individuals who have survived social cruelty. Their journeys reflect the strength of small-town youth in India who refuse to be crushed by societal norms.

Connection to Tier-2/Tier-3 Society

Masaan is deeply rooted in the sights, sounds, and social structures of Varanasi. The use of local language, cremation rituals, temple sounds, and community gossip paints an authentic picture of life in a tier-2 city. The film captures how the holy city is a place where people search for spiritual freedom, yet still judge others harshly.

Shubh Mangal Saavdhan (2017, dir. R.S. Prasanna)

Setting: Delhi and Haridwar (tier-1 and tier-2 city overlap)

Story Summary and Setting

Shubh Mangal Saavdhan is a romantic comedy that boldly addresses a rarely discussed topic in Indian cinema: male sexual health, through a socially grounded lens. The story revolves around Mudit Sharma and Sugandha, an engaged couple from middle-class families preparing for their arranged marriage. Mudit is a kind, well-mannered man, while Sugandha is an independent yet family-orientated woman. As their wedding approaches, Mudit confesses to Sugandha that he suffers from erectile dysfunction, triggering a series of awkward and comedic situations involving both their families. The film moves between Delhi and Haridwar, but much of the social commentary and family dynamics stem from Haridwar's small-town setting. The storyline reflects how personal matters like sexuality are rarely discussed openly, especially in traditional households. Even though the problem is medical, it becomes a source of shame, gossip, and emotional distress.

Social Themes and Analysis

Sexual Taboos and Masculinity

Mudit's condition becomes a symbol of how male sexual health is tied to social expectations of masculinity. Instead of treating it like a medical issue, everyone views it as a sign of weakness. The film critiques how Indian society links masculinity to physical performance and how any deviation from that norm becomes a source of embarrassment.

Premarital Relationships and Social Pressure

Sugandha's attempts to understand and support Mudit are met with resistance and shame from

both of their conservative families. While the mothers express discomfort, the most resistance and dismissive attitudes come from the fathers, who mock Mudit's "manhood". The couple is constantly reminded that marriage should not be spoilt by talking about sex. Through its social satire, the film humorously questions why such important topics are kept hidden until after marriage and how a lack of communication leads to larger problems.

Gender Sensitivity and Emotional Support

While the film is focused on Mudit's problem, Sugandha's emotional labour becomes central. She questions why only women are expected to adjust or hide things for the sake of marriage. Her character adds depth to the gender conversation, showing the emotional burden women carry even in supposedly "modern" relationships.

Connection to Tier-2/Tier-3 Society

The Haridwar setting and the traditional family setup amplify the story's sociological relevance. The gossiping neighbours, overinvolved relatives, and the stigma around sexual health are all drawn from real middle-class experiences in non-metro cities. The story shows how social satire and sensitivity can be powerful tools to talk about difficult issues without making the audience feel uncomfortable or disconnected.

Stree (2018, dir. Amar Kaushik)

Setting: Chanderi, Madhya Pradesh (a tier-2 town)

Story Summary and Setting

Stree is a horror-comedy that cleverly blends supernatural elements with a sharp social message. Set in the small town of Chanderi, the story follows Vicky, a young and skilled tailor, who becomes involved in a mysterious case of a female spirit, known as "Stree", who abducts men during a local festival. The twist is that the ghost only takes men who are alone at night, leaving behind only their clothes. While the town is gripped with fear, Vicky falls in love with a mysterious woman who may or may not be connected to the spirit. With the help of his friends and a local bookshop owner, he tries to uncover the truth behind the legend of Stree and stop the spirit's terror.

Social Themes and Analysis

Gender Reversal and Patriarchy

The most striking feature of Stree is its reversal of gender roles. In a town where women usually fear being out at night, it is now the men who are warned to stay indoors. The film uses this inversion to highlight everyday gender-based fears and harassment faced by women. Men write "O Stree, kal aana" (O Woman, come tomorrow) on their walls as a plea for safety, mirroring how women often live with constant caution.

Misogyny and Myth

The backstory of Stree, once a woman who was wronged by society, points to how myths often arise from women's trauma and how society demonises powerful or independent women. The spirit's revenge becomes a metaphor for suppressed female anger in a patriarchal setup.

Her act of taking away the men's clothes and leaving them behind also serves as a powerful symbol of stripping away their masculinity and control, a symbolic act of revenge against the patriarchal order.

Identity and Agency

The mysterious female character, played by Shraddha Kapoor, challenges stereotypes. She is smart and independent and challenges the roles assigned to women in such settings. Her unclear identity keeps the audience guessing and adds a layer of complexity to the representation of women in cinema.

Connection to Tier-2/Tier-3 Society

Chanderi is portrayed with rich local flavour: narrow lanes, buzzing markets, traditional homes, and strong community ties. The town's superstitions and local customs are not mocked but presented with empathy, making the horror feel rooted in cultural reality rather than fantasy. The film also reflects the gradual shift in small-town India, where younger characters like Vicky are more open-minded and willing to challenge old norms.

Sui Dhaaga (2018, dir. Sharat Katariya)

Setting: A small town in Uttar Pradesh

Story Summary and Setting

Sui Dhaaga follows the journey of Mauji Sharma, a cheerful and humble man working a low-level job at a sewing machine store where he is constantly humiliated. His wife, Mamta, though soft-spoken, encourages him to dream bigger and reclaim his dignity. Inspired by her quiet strength, Mauji quits his job and begins sewing independently, reigniting his family's once-respected tailoring legacy.

The film's setting – narrow market lanes, modest homes, public hospitals, and local tailoring shops – paints a realistic picture of a middle-class life in India's tier-2 and tier-3 cities. It captures the everyday hustle of small towns where ambition must often fight societal judgement and financial pressure.

Social Themes and Analysis

Dignity of Labour

Mauji's transformation begins with the simple desire to be respected. His journey shows that entrepreneurship in small towns often stems not from ambition alone, but from the need for self-respect. The film celebrates small-scale work: stitching, embroidery, and handicrafts with pride.

Gender Dynamics and Partnership

Mamta plays a key role in shaping Mauji's confidence. She doesn't shout or rebel, but her silent support and moral clarity drive the story forward. The couple's relationship subverts typical Bollywood gender roles: it's rooted in mutual respect, teamwork, and shared struggle.

Rural Entrepreneurship and 'Make in India'

The film subtly reflects the Make in India initiative, portraying how traditional crafts and local skills can become sources of economic independence. Mauji and Mamta build their brand from scratch, fighting exploitation from middlemen and biased competition.

Family and Societal Pressure

Mauji's family initially discourages his plans, fearing failure and shame. This reflects the fear of risk-taking in many Indian households, especially in small towns. Eventually, their change of heart mirrors the slow acceptance of unconventional paths in middle-class families.

Connection to Tier-2/Tier-3 Society

Sui Dhaaga captures the dreams and struggles of middle-class life in small-town India. The setting, a small town in Uttar Pradesh, is not specified by name, but it feels real through the local language, simple homes, and family dynamics. It reflects how people in such towns live in joint families, work hard to survive, and balance old traditions with modern aspirations.

It also highlights a silent revolution, where women like Mamta are not protesting on streets but are shaping change from within their homes.

Luka Chuppi (2019, dir. Laxman Utekar)

Setting: Mathura, Uttar Pradesh (a tier-2 city)

Story Summary and Setting

Luka Chuppi is a romantic comedy that explores the tension between modern relationships and traditional values in small-town India. The story follows Guddu Shukla, a local TV reporter, and Rashmi Trivedi, an outspoken woman raised in a conservative political family. When the couple decides to live together to test their compatibility, they face a series of comical complications, especially when their families mistake them for being secretly married. Set in Mathura and Gwalior, the film shows a world where everyone knows each other and people's private lives are always watched by others. Narrow roads, joint families, nosy neighbours, and political rallies shape the world in which personal freedom becomes a social debate.

Social Themes and Analysis

Live-In Relationships and Moral Policing:

The central conflict arises from Guddu and Rashmi's decision to live together, a concept that is still taboo in many tier-2 cities. Through humour and chaos, the film highlights how society equates live-in relationships with immorality, forcing couples to hide their choices or lie about marriage.

Political Hypocrisy and Cultural Policing:

Rashmi's father is a leader of a 'Sanskriti Raksha Manch', a group that campaigns for traditional values while ignoring the real struggles of youth. The film highlights the selective outrage of such cultural watchdogs who focus on romantic relationships but stay silent on larger social issues like gender inequality.

Individual Choice vs. Family Honour:

Both Guddu and Rashmi struggle between following their hearts and maintaining their family's reputation. The film reflects how middle-class youth in small towns are constantly balancing personal dreams with collective expectations.

Gender and Double Standards:

While Guddu is seen as a “confused but good boy”, Rashmi is judged more harshly for the same actions. The film subtly addresses how women are still held to higher moral standards when it comes to love and relationships in tier-2 societies.

Connection to Tier-2/Tier-3 Society

By placing a live-in relationship at the heart of a small-town narrative, Luka Chuppi brings urban debates into semi-urban spaces. It captures how young Indians in cities like Mathura are aware of modern ideas through media but still live within tight-knit, conservative communities.

The local language, media influence, and cultural norms in the film reflect an India that is changing, but not without resistance. It shows how love and partnership are becoming more about personal compatibility than arranged convenience, even in towns where marriage is seen as the only “respectable” path.

Discussion

This study set out to examine how Hindi films are reshaping the portrayal of India's tier-2 and tier-3 cities, especially in relation to evolving gender roles, class aspirations, and social norms. The selected films, ranging from romantic comedies to social dramas, offer a compelling mix of realism and imagination. While each story is rooted in a different town and tone, collectively they reveal important patterns that reflect deeper changes in Indian society.

Cinema as a Mirror of Middle India

One of the most striking findings across the films is how they challenge the outdated binary of rural vs. urban. Earlier Hindi cinema often ignored small-town India or treated it as backward and underdeveloped. Today, filmmakers are showing these towns as dynamic spaces of conflict and change. Whether it's Varanasi in *Masaan*, Bareilly in *Bareilly Ki Barfi*, or Chanderi in *Stree*, the city is not just a backdrop; it's an active force shaping characters' lives and decisions.

These places are no longer painted with a single brush. Instead of exaggerating poverty or tradition, the films highlight complexity: there is a growing digital presence (*Luka Chuppi*), access to education (*Laapataa Ladies*), and even local startup culture (*Sui Dhaaga*). Such portrayals help dismantle the idea that real modernity only exists in metros like Mumbai or Delhi.

Changing Gender Norms

Another central thread running through all the films is the shift in gender roles. Women characters are no longer just love interests or victims. They are flawed, curious, bold, and willing to question the system, even when it comes at a cost. Jaya in *Laapataa Ladies*, Sandhya in *Dum Laga Ke Haisha*, Devi in *Masaan*, and Sugandha in *Shubh Mangal Saavdhan* all

represent different forms of resistance. They show their power to make choices in a society that often expects them to stay quiet. This aligns with recent analyses showing that contemporary Hindi cinema increasingly foregrounds women's aspirations and agency within everyday domestic and social settings (Sinha, 2024).

This shift reflects real-world changes as well. As education rates among women rise and more families move toward dual incomes, traditional power structures are being challenged. While patriarchy still exists in every film, it's often presented as outdated and uncomfortable, rather than natural or unquestioned.

Importantly, male characters are also changing. Instead of dominating or rescuing, they are often confused, supportive, or even transformed by the women in their lives. Deepak in *Laapataa Ladies*, Mauji in *Sui Dhaaga*, and Chirag in *Bareilly Ki Barfi* all evolve in response to the women around them. These shifts reflect how masculinity itself is being redefined in smaller cities.

Class, Aspiration, and Local Identity

Economic aspiration is another recurring theme. Characters in these films often belong to the lower-middle or working class, and their ambitions are deeply rooted in local realities. Unlike earlier films where success meant escaping to a metro or foreign land, today's protagonists want to thrive where they are. Mauji and Mamta want to build a business in their hometown (*Sui Dhaaga*). Jaya dreams of studying organic farming (*Laapataa Ladies*).

At the same time, these aspirations come with challenges: social stigma, limited resources, and the burden of respectability. The tension between tradition and ambition is visible in every storyline, especially when personal goals clash with what the community expects. Audience-based studies also suggest that grounded portrayals of class and aspiration can shift how viewers understand gender, mobility, and everyday constraints (Kumari & Singh, 2024; Sharma, 2017).

Luka Chuppi captures this through the lens of cohabitation, while *Shubh Mangal Saavdhan* explores the pressure to marry even when intimacy is a challenge. Such stories reflect the contradictions of India's new middle class, desiring progress but still attached to cultural norms. Fernandes (2006) discusses this as the "negotiated modernity" of India's middle class, where mobility is always shaped by morality, caste, and gender.

Caste and Silence

Masaan directly engages with caste through Deepak's identity and his relationship with Shaalu, an upper-caste girl. It reflects how caste continues to shape access to freedom and respect, especially in smaller towns. However, most films stop short of directly confronting caste-based violence or politics. This silence may be strategic; filmmakers often choose subtle storytelling to avoid censorship or backlash. Still, the quiet presence of caste in these narratives speaks volumes.

The Role of Humour and Local Language

Another shared characteristic is the use of local dialects, accents, and humour. From Bundeli

in Laapataa Ladies to the UP slang in Bareilly Ki Barfi, language plays a key role in authenticity. The humour is not slapstick but situational, rooted in everyday struggles, family quarrels, and workplace banter.

This adds to the relatability of the characters. These are not superheroes or urban elites; they are cousins, neighbours, and shopkeepers. By focusing on ordinary people and their choices, the films invite viewers to empathise, not just observe.

OTT and the Wider Media Shift

While this study focuses on theatrical films, it is important to note the growing role of OTT platforms in amplifying such narratives. Web series like Panchayat and Gullak have embraced similar storytelling styles: gentle, character-driven, and focused on small-town India. These series have proven that audiences are eager for relatable stories with emotional depth. OTT platforms also allow more experimentation. Without the pressure of box office collections, creators can explore taboo topics, unconventional endings, and diverse characters. This has helped blur the lines between cinema and series, leading to a richer, more inclusive storytelling culture.

Bridging Sociology and Cinema

From a sociological lens, these films act as both reflections and agents of change. They reflect the shifting ground realities of India's tier-2 and tier-3 cities, where old hierarchies still exist but are being challenged every day. They also help shape new norms by showing characters who are unafraid to want more, speak up, or walk away. Scholars like Dwyer (2014) and Prasad (1998) have emphasised that cinema functions not merely as entertainment but as a significant cultural and ideological force in shaping public consciousness. By choosing to focus on tier-2 and tier-3 India, these films expand what is seen as “worthy” of being on screen. They give voice to people and places that were once invisible in mainstream narratives.

Conclusion

This study explored how recent Hindi films set in tier-2 and tier-3 cities reflect the evolving realities of Indian society. Moving away from the urban glamour of Mumbai or Delhi, these films focus on smaller towns and everyday people, their struggles, hopes, and social contexts. Stories from Laapataa Ladies, Bareilly Ki Barfi, Dum Laga Ke Haisha, Masaan, Shubh Mangal Saavdhan, Sui Dhaaga, Stree and Luka Chuppi show that Indian cinema is slowly becoming more inclusive, portraying voices and settings that were earlier overlooked.

Each film examined here highlights a key social issue, be it gender roles, body image, caste identity, sexual health, or freedom of choice, within a localised setting. The characters are no longer aspirational urban elites but relatable individuals navigating family pressure, limited resources, and societal expectations. What makes these stories powerful is their emotional honesty and everyday realism. Whether it's a man supporting his overweight wife, a woman fighting to continue her education, or a couple navigating live-in relationships in a conservative town, the narratives are rooted in situations many Indians face today.

This shift in cinematic focus reflects the broader social change happening across India's non-metro regions. With better internet access, rising literacy, and exposure to digital media, people

in smaller cities are reshaping how they see themselves and the world. Hindi cinema, in turn, is evolving to mirror this transformation, offering stories that are entertaining, culturally rich, and socially relevant. These conclusions are interpretive and based on cinematic narratives, not on empirical generalisations about all tier-2 and tier-3 cities. The aim is to understand how films symbolically frame social change, rather than make demographic claims about Indian society. By portraying tier-2 and tier-3 India with empathy and sensitivity, these films do more than just entertain; they reflect real lives and shifting values.

This growing trend of honest small-town storytelling is not limited to films alone. OTT platforms, too, have started telling similar stories, with series like *Panchayat* and *Gullak* portraying the everyday life and quiet struggles of small-town India. For both cinema and society, this is a promising step forward.

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