Stories of the nation, in films and life

Mains Syllabus: GS I - Indian Heritage and Culture, History and Society ; Salient aspects of Art Forms, literature and Architecture from ancient to modern times; Salient features of Indian Society, Diversity of India; Modern Indian history from about the middle of the eighteenth century until the present- significant events, personalities, issues.

Why in the News?

Recently , a new biopic on Jyotiba Phule, the 19th century leader of the oppressed castes in Maharashtra was released and there was transformation in the representation of national issues in movies.

What were the socio-political themes of cinema during early periods?

Cinema is a powerful tool for reflecting and engaging with national issues, acting as a mirror of societal values & concerns and it can explore complex themes, challenge existing beliefs, and shape public discourse on critical topics like politics, social inequalities, and cultural identity.

- **India** - An idea of India and its diverse character was popular in the early decades of the Republic.
- **Nationalism and Patriotism** - Many films subtly or allegorically encouraged pride in Indian identity and resistance to colonial rule.
- Due to British censorship, direct calls for rebellion were rare, so filmmakers used mythological and historical allegories — stories about gods, kings, and ancient heroes — to inspire nationalist sentiment.
- Lagaan used cricket to symbolise resistance against colonial rule.
- **Communal amity** – It was a recurring theme, and conflicts were depicted in the broader frame of city versus village and east vs west.
- As Hindu-Muslim tensions grew leading up to Partition, there were conscious efforts in cinema to promote messages of Hindu-Muslim unity.
- **Socio-economic issues** - India’s social and development challenges were portrayed within the national frame of poverty and distress.
- Issues like untouchability, caste oppression, women's rights, and poverty were central.
- Filmmakers like V. Shantaram and others made socially conscious films advocating for progressive changes, often aligning with Gandhian ideals of social upliftment.
- **Economic Struggles and Class Issues** - There was growing attention to the plight of

peasants, workers, and the urban poor which influenced cinema and the emergence of parallel cinema.

- **Swadesi** - Early nationalist films portrayed the West and Western values as antithetical to Bharatiyata (Indianness).
- Dadasaheb Phalke is often called the "father of Indian cinema" because he consciously used cinema to promote swadeshi (indigenous) values.

What are the recent changes in the themes of the movies reflecting the current national issues?

Indian cinema, especially in the last decade, has undergone a noticeable thematic shift , reflecting the complexities and transforming character of contemporary India.

- **Decline in antagonising west** – There has been decline in Indian films that portrays the West as antogonists.
- The anti-colonialism of the national movement was targeted at British imperialism, giving strength to nationalist arguments of self-governance and unity in diversity, among other values.
- With the passage of time and generations, British imperialism has become a distant memory, and Western culture is now mainstream in India.
- **Assertive nationalism** - There's been a noticeable rise in patriotic narratives, national pride and military heroism.
- Films like Uri: The Surgical Strike, Shershaah, Kesari, and The Kashmir Files reflect a militarized, assertive nationalism, often aligned with the current political climate.
- These films often highlight India's stance on terrorism, border security, and historical trauma, resonating with current political discourse.
- **Increasing shade of religion** – There has been a rise in the direct or subtle references of religion, communalism and religious stereotyping.
- Hindutva, which was a sideline movement during the struggle for independence, has now become the dominant strand of nationalism in India, and often mirrored in movies.
- **Rising caste discussion** - Relatively bolder approach in discussing caste is notable in recent films.
- Article 15, Jai Bhim, Sairat, and Pariyerum Perumal tackle caste discrimination, police brutality, and systemic oppression.
- These films reflect growing public dialogue on Dalit rights and intersectional justice.
- **Women's Empowerment and Gender Issues** – There's a growing number of films reflecting 3rd and 4th waves of feminism challenging patriarchal norms, gender roles, and toxic masculinity.
- Thappad, Pink, The Great Indian Kitchen , Chhapaak reflect ongoing national conversations around feminism, consent, domestic violence, and representation of women in public life.
- **Impact of Technology and Media** - Films now portray digital culture, misinformation, social media obsession, and privacy concerns.
- Movies like Jamtara, Choked, Mumbai Mafia reflect the blurred lines between online

and offline lives.

What lies ahead?

- Indian cinema has always been a mirror to its times — from the mythical heroes of early films to today’s conflicted, questioning protagonists.
- The medium has shifted from symbolic rebellion to direct confrontation, reflecting India's journey from a colonial subject to a complex modern democracy.

Reference

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