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Pedagogical Usage of Films in Teaching Vedanta

Radha Mehta,

Ph.D. Scholar at BKNMU, Junagadh

Contact: radhamehta1998@gmail.com

9574631214

Ph.D. guide: Dr. Jesing Vanza

Abstract:

Vedanta is a rich school of Indian Philosophy with deep and complex philosophical ideas. It holds the true essence of Indianness. However, its complexity makes it a hard to grasp topic. In the era of multimedia, using films to teach Vedanta can not only be helpful but also be an effective step towards making a curriculum holistic and multidisciplinary. In this paper, I have argued that providing visuals too philosophical ideas can make the learning process more interesting. Students can understand the real-life application of theoretical philosophies and taste the deeply profound philosophical aesthetics of Indian philosophy. Seeing Indian roots in highly acclaimed films of the world can strengthen students' respects towards its heritage, roots and culture. I have also attempted to provide a few examples of films that can be used in teaching Vedanta along with a pedagogical model. This paper keeps NEP 2020 in focus while analyzing the implications of teaching Vedanta through films.



Introduction:

Sanskrit and Indian Philosophy hold the essence of Indianness. NEP 2020 has made it very clear that one needs to go back to the roots in order to grow.³⁰ However in today's times, it has been a handful task to bring the interest of young generation in these topics. Usage of multimedia in classroom teaching has been an effective tool. Therefore, utilizing popular or critically acclaimed films in order to teach philosophical ideas can be a helpful tool.

Vedanta is a philosophical tradition in Hinduism that explores the nature of reality and the self. It elaborates a wide range of abstract philosophical ideas such as Brahman, Atman, Maya, Avidya and many more. These ideas can be absorbed easily if they are explained with the help of films as films are a popular interest in the age of content and media.

In this paper, I intend to closely observe a few films as case studies in order to derive the ideas, concepts and symbols of Vedanta. I shall deconstruct films in terms of narrations, storytelling, character development as well as symbolism and cinematography. Hence this is analytical research with a few case studies.

Film and Philosophy:

Thoroughly intertwined, film and philosophy have a complex relationship between thoughts and perception, time and memory as well as social, political, and aesthetic experiences. Felicity Colman notes that, Philosophy has underpinned the creation of cinema while cinema in turn, has redefined philosophical categories, rethought sex, gender, time and space, and created new concepts that illuminate phenomenology, metaphysics, and epistemology.³¹ However in this paper, I shall confine my area of study to Vedantic ideas in films and its pedagogical implications.

A Few Cases:

While films can offer valuable insights into philosophical concepts, it may be challenging to find films that directly teach Vedanta. But some of the very popular Hollywood and Indian

³⁰ NEP 2020 aims to promote Indian arts, languages and culture at all levels by introducing even STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) curriculums to arts and humanities.

³¹ Preface, Colman, Felicity. Film, Theory and Philosophy: The Key Thinkers. Published by Routledge, 1st edition, 2009.



films demonstrate Vedantic thoughts through its story, plot, characters and dialogues. Here are a few films along with the ideas explored in them.

Groundhog Day (1993) - This comedy-drama follows a weatherman who relives the same day over and over again. The film highlights the concept of Karma, which suggests that our actions have consequences that can affect our future

The Matrix (1999) - This science-fiction film explores the concept of Maya or illusion, which is a fundamental idea in Vedanta. The film's protagonist, Neo, discovers that the world he thought was real is an illusion created by a computer program. This film is a classic one for understanding Advaita Vedanta.

Inception (2010) - This Sci-Fi revolves around a team that can extract and incept ideas into the mind of people through shared dreams. It is a great watch in order to understand Gaudapada's dream philosophy.

The Tree of Life (2011) - This poetic and visually stunning film explores the interconnectedness of all things, a central idea in Vedanta. The film follows a family in Texas in the 1950s and their search for meaning and purpose in life.

Samsara (2011) - This non-narrative documentary explores the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. The film captures the beauty and diversity of the natural world and different cultures, illustrating the Vedantic idea of oneness.

Soul (2020) - This animated film that exhibits a lot of Vedantic ideas in a child friendly manner. A pianist dies and his soul is destined to be a part of an unborn soul's quest of finding the true meaning of life.

Visualization and Picturization of Complex Philosophical Ideas:

Most of the concepts and ideas of Vedanta are abstract. It makes them difficult to imagine in compare to concrete or representational ideas. The Gita also says that Greater is their trouble whose minds are set on the unmanifested; for the goal; the unmanifested, is very hard for the embodied to reach.³²

³² क्लेशोऽधिकतरस्तेषामव्यक्तासक्तचेतसाम्।अव्यक्ता हि गतिर्दुःखं देहवद्विरवाप्यते॥12.5॥

Swami Chimayanand, The Holy Geeta. Published by Chinmay Prakashan. 1st edition, December, 2000.



Some universities have already been using films to teach philosophy and this method has been running successfully. It is time to bring some change in formal education in India. NEP 2020 attempts to modify teaching and learning methods in order to match steps with the world.

Pedagogical Model:

Vedanta can be taught through the films in two ways. Students who are already exposed to Vedanta can be shown a film and they will automatically grasp Vedanta in it. Then it can be further discussed. Teacher or mentor can provide deeper Vedantic perspectives which can lead to a question-answer session. Students can debate about the ideas of Vedanta, perspective of portraying them and its application in life.³³

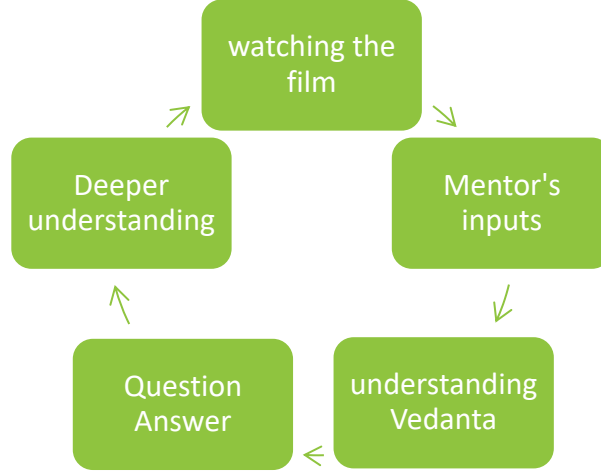
Students who do not have any prevailing knowledge of Vedanta can simply enjoy the film. Then a teacher or mentor can take up a session to demonstrate the Vedantic ideas in it. Their interest in story or characters of the film can be directed to Indian Philosophy.

First method is more suitable to Indian students or majors of Indian Philosophy, Vedanta to be particular whereas second method is more suitable for global audience. Often students of literature, mass-media or western philosophy are interested in exploring Vedanta and Indian philosophy. Second method is a great option for these students.

³³ Ancient Indian literary works such as Banabhatta's Kadambari described a good education as knowledge of the 64 Kalaas or arts; and among these 64 'arts' were not only subjects, such as singing and painting, but also 'scientific' fields, such as chemistry and mathematics, 'vocational' fields such as carpentry and clothes-making, 'professional' fields, such as medicine and engineering, as well as 'soft skills' such as communication, discussion, and debate.

p. 36, 11.1, NEP 2020 available on

https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/NEP_Final_English_0.pdf



Dr. Shakuntala Gawde conducted a classroom project where she used Matrix as a case study and showcased it to a class of students. It was an extremely successful initiative.³⁴

Pedagogical goals:

When a philosophy is seen through the lens of films; or when a film is seen through philosophical perspectives, following goals of pedagogy can be achieved:

1. Learning the concepts clearly

It is a fact that students can learn effectively with the help of multimedia especially in higher education. Stories stay with the audience. Deeper interest in philosophy through films can lead to clear understanding of philosophical ideas.

2. Illustrative Methods

Philosophical texts usually do not create pictures in reader's mind. Films help them build images and pictures in their minds that can have long lasting impressions. Films can expand the horizons of students' imaginations.

3. Applied Vedanta and philosophy

Usually philosophies are very theoretical. But films provide them wrapped in stories and narratives. Characters live the philosophy and one learns the implications. Films can provide life-skills related aspects of a philosophy.

4. Cultural take of philosophy

³⁴ "Understanding Vedanta through Films (A Pedagogical Model) A case study of 'Matrix'" is an article by Dr. Shakuntala Gawde published in New Frontiers in Sanskrit and Indic Knowledge.



Every country has a different perspective and regard for different philosophies. Films reflect cultural takes on those philosophies. Therefore, one can have fresher perspective of looking at their own heritage and philosophy when they see it through the lens of a foreign film.

5. Reinforcement of NEP 2020

5.1 NEP 2020 intends to encourage interdisciplinary studies and researches. Seeking philosophy through films can develop a positive approach towards interdisciplinary studies.³⁵

5.2 NEP 2020 aims towards more Holistic education. Science and Humanities should not be two distinctly different fields of education.³⁶ They should grow under one roof. Students of STEM can also be attracted to Indian roots and philosophy through Sci-Fi films.

5.3 Imaginative and flexible curriculum with unconfined boundaries is one of the major objectives of NEP 2020.³⁷ Inclusion of films in formal education will nurture the objective as teachers can select films as per the interest of their students and need of the topic.

³⁵ Assessments of educational approaches in undergraduate education that integrate the humanities and arts with Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) have consistently showed positive learning outcomes, including increased creativity and innovation, critical thinking and higher-order thinking capacities, problem-solving abilities, teamwork, communication skills, more in-depth learning and mastery of curricula across fields, increases in social and moral awareness, etc., besides general engagement and enjoyment of learning. Research is also improved and enhanced through a holistic and multidisciplinary education approach.

p. 36, 11.2, NEP 2020 available on

https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/NEP_Final_English_0.pdf

³⁶ A holistic and multidisciplinary education, as described so beautifully in India's past, is indeed what is needed for the education of India to lead the country into the 21st century and the fourth industrial revolution. Even engineering institutions, such as IITs, will move towards more holistic and multidisciplinary education with more arts and humanities. Students of arts and humanities will aim to learn more science and all will make an effort to incorporate more vocational subjects and soft skills.

p. 37, 11.4, NEP 2020 available on

https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/NEP_Final_English_0.pdf

³⁷ Imaginative and flexible curricular structure will enable creative combinations for study.

p. 37, 11.5, NEP 2020 available on

https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/NEP_Final_English_0.pdf



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Conclusion:

Story and characters can make films relatable to students. Sometimes added Supernatural phenomena, special effects, background score can capture the attention of the audience completely and they drown in the philosophy through the rabbit hole. In a way, certain films are superimposition of story on the philosophical ideas of Vedanta.

Such practice will not only create liking for Indian Philosophy and Vedanta in formal education, but will also result in understanding of complex ideas. It can create awareness that Indian Philosophy is embraced across the world. Films are an effective tool of learning even for informal learning as films build popular narratives. It will encourage the objective of NEP 2020 of providing a holistic and multidisciplinary education that would aim to develop all capacities of human beings -intellectual, aesthetic, social, physical, emotional, and moral in an integrated manner. Such an education will help develop well-rounded individuals that possess critical 21st century capacities in fields across the arts, humanities, languages, sciences, social sciences, and professional, technical, and vocational fields.



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