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REEL JUSTICE VS. REAL JUSTICE

Simrah Haindaday

The black robe of an advocate is not just a piece of their uniform; it's a symbol. Since time immemorial, it has stood as a representation for knowledge, integrity, and a solemn dedication towards the pursuit of justice. Within the hallowed halls of the court lies a sacred realm where logic and law are paramount. However, within the four corners of the cinema hall or your streaming device, this sacred realm transforms into something else altogether. It no longer carries an aura of prestige but rather carries the high drama of a stage, with moral showdowns and heroic performances.

This can be seen through years of Indian filmmaking. Consider the chiaroscuro lighting in Raj Kapoor's courtroom in his 1951 film *Awaara*. What happens when a judge must preside over a case of robbery where the accused is none other than his own son? Throw away the rules of bias and bring into the courtroom family drama full of heartfelt confessions. Raghunath, played by Prithviraj Kapoor, must preside over a trial, not of his son's transgressions, but his own shortcomings as a father. For many years, in movies like *Kanoon*, *Damini*, *Insaaf ka Taraazu* and *Aakrosh*, the law gave a framework for universally felt emotions to be integrated into deeply personal morality plays.

Soon after, with the foundation of such portrayals of morality in law, came the "hero-lawyer" archetype. Amitabh Bachchan's role in the movie *Pink*, standing in front of a hostile court in the pursuit of justice can be considered as a prime example. His heavy voice doesn't just argue legal points but also thunders with societal rage. He isn't merely defending the rights of three women; he is transforming a legal defence into a powerful social manifesto by teaching a nation the meaning of consent. The courtroom becomes a pulpit, and the lawyer becomes an advocate for a more just world.

Like the law itself, popular culture also has the capacity to enable self-reflection. Enter the chaotic and satirical universe of *Jolly LLB*. In these movies, there are no shiny marble halls of justice only cramped, dusty, dilapidated chambers of struggling lawyers. Both Arshad Warsi and Akshay Kumar represent everyday lawyers, looking for every opportunity to make quick cash in a highly competitive field. The films find humour in ridiculous bureaucratic delays, strange witnesses, and the dark comedy of how fundamentally flawed individuals are often the ones seeking justice. It's an essential antidote to seeing lawyers as heroes, revealing the system's grimy underbelly in a humorous and entertaining way,

However, the satirical portrayals are not without criticism. Recently, a Public Interest Litigation was filed in Bombay High Court against the newly released *Jolly LLB 3*, arguing that the film and its predecessors created "a mockery of justice" by portraying judges and the legal profession in a "negative and derogatory" light. According to this petition, and several other similar petitions filed in various High Courts of other states, the depictions negatively affect the public's trust in the judiciary. Chief Justice Devendra Kumar Chandrashekhkar swiftly dismissed the plea on grounds of freedom of expression and the judiciary's ability to be unaffected by mockery.

However, is such quiet deliberation of the judiciary reflected in popular narratives? It's more often a stage than a courtroom, with triumphant speeches bringing everyone to tears, heated exchanged between the righteous prosecutor and brilliant defence lawyer, and the dramatic bang of the gavel delivering swift and poetic justice.

The reality, however, is substantially different, and every legal professional can attest to that. Cases are mere stacks of paper, staying unresolved for years and the process of seeking justice is grinding, slow, and cumbersome. Success comes less from stunning revelations and more from meticulous drafting, strategic filings, and patient perseverance. And the gavel? Indian courtrooms don't even have one.

But if the true scenes of courtrooms were shown in popular culture, would anyone even watch them? What is the purpose of building narratives around the legal field and what makes them appealing to audiences at large? The new wave of legal shows with the boom of OTT platforms provides a space for retrospection. With shows like *Illegal*, *Criminal Justice*, and *Guilty Minds*, we are able to understand the intersection of law, ambition, and politics, and the ethical and

moral dilemmas present in the field. They add layers of nuance, revealing the grimy parts of the field, but with theatrical punches.

We all know the scripts by heart, being able to perfectly narrate Sunny Deol's famous "tareekh pe tareekh" monologue from *Damini*. Why are we able to do that? Is it because the intricate machinery of justice is condensed into an exciting two-hour show, or is it because their words serve as an expression of common man's frustration with delayed justice?

There are two sides to this gap between representation and reality. The most popular opinion is that it creates a problematic illusion and distorts the public's expectations of how justice is served.

However, to dismiss these portrayals as mere entertainment would be ignoring their significant value. For a layman, the Indian Legal System as well as the Code can be intimidating and unintelligible. With such portrayals, the law becomes comprehensible and accessible through gripping and relatable struggles of seeking justice. A kind of mass legal literacy is cultivated through these stories. They start conversation about judicial accountability, consent and legal rights between peers. By humanising the law, they are able to make it a topic for discussion at every dinner table rather than seeing it as a distant, intimidating institution.

Ultimately, what we must keep in mind is that the courtrooms of popular culture are not courtrooms of record, They're courtrooms of human conscience, more dramatised, emotionally charged and simplified. While it is imperative to mind the gap between the reel and real, it is equally imperative to recognise their power. They serve as a platform for society to express its deepest concerns about justice, and in doing so, possibly gain a better understanding of it.