

Changing Moral Economies of Labour: A Qualitative-Dominant Comparative Textual Analysis of Professional Ethics and Everyday Work in Hrishikesh Mukherjee's Cinema and Contemporary Hindi Films

Praveen Jain¹, Atul Arora²

¹PhD Scholar, Sharda School of Media, Film and Entertainment, Sharda University

²Assistant Professor, Sharda School of Media, Film and Entertainment, Sharda University

ARTICLE INFO

*Correspondence:

praveejain@gmail.com
PhD Scholar, Sharda School of Media, Film and Entertainment, Sharda University

Dates:

Received: 30-09-2025

Accepted: 25-11-2025

Published: 31-12-2025

Keywords:

Ethics, Labour, Cinema, Professionalism, Neoliberalism, Globalization.

How to Cite:

Jain, P., Arora, A. (2025)
Changing Moral Economies of Labour: A Qualitative-Dominant Comparative Textual Analysis of Professional Ethics and Everyday Work in Hrishikesh Mukherjee's Cinema and Contemporary Hindi Films. *MediaSpace: DME Journal of Communication*, 6(2), 78-91.
doi: 10.53361/dmej.v6i02.10

Abstract

This article is an analysis of how Hrishikesh Mukherjee's films develop a framework of ethics in the context of everyday work, professional identity, and morality and compare it with current Hindi cinema. The study, based on a qualitative-dominant comparative textual analysis of five films from each period, namely Mukherjee's *Anand* (1971), *Abhimaan* (1973), *Bawarchi* (1972), *Gol Maal* (1979), and *Namak Haraam* (1973); and contemporary films *Rocket Singh: Salesman of the Year* (2009), *3 Idiots* (2009), *Dil Dhadakne Do* (2015), *Gully Boy* (2019), and *Thappad* (2022). Theoretically inspired by E.P. Thompson's moral economy, middle-class realism and cultural studies of work, the paper contextualises Mukherjee's cinema as a pedagogy of morality that focused on notions of collective duty and integrity in professional life. In contrast, modern-day films represent neoliberal individualism with work being linked to individual ambition and market success, often at the expense of communal ethics. Findings show reduction in scenes dedicated to the moral dilemmas at work (from 28% in Mukherjee to 15% in contemporary films) and a change in the types of professions in the workforce from service-oriented to entrepreneurial. This transition brings into focus the shift on the Hindi cinema, from the critique of systemic inequalities to the endorsement of performative productivity under the influence of economic liberalization. The article adds to the study of South Asian film by highlighting the demise of moral economies in labor representations, which calls for reconsidering the role of cinema in shaping professional identities in globalization.

INTRODUCTION

Context: Work, Ethics, and Hindi Cinema as Media Practice

Hindi cinema has been a key medium of the social world for a long time, producing, circulating and debating social values, norms of everyday life, and expectations about morality. Among these values, representations of work and professional life have a particularly important place, as mediating

MediaSpace:

DME Journal of Communication

e-ISSN: 2583-035X

© Delhi Metropolitan Education, 2025. **Open Access** This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>.

ideas of responsibility, respectability, success and social belonging. In the decades after Indian independence cinema often expressed the moral universe of an expanding urban middle class, where work was not seen as an economic necessity but as an important ethical practice that was linked to integrity, restraint, and collective harmony (Rajadhyaksha, 2009; Prasad, 1998).

Within this historical context, the films of Hrishikesh Mukherjee present a unique cinematic articulation of a professional life. Mukherjee's cinema locates moral struggle in the everyday workplaces - in hospitals, offices, kitchens, recording studios and corporate settings - where ethical responsibility is hinged through mundane interactions rather than spectacular confrontation. Films like *Anand* and *Gol Maal* depict work as integrated into relational networks of care, obligation and mutual accountability, implying that professional identity is inextricably linked to social ethics (Vasudevan, 2010; Sen, 2020).

Since economic liberalization in the 1990s, media industries and cultural narratives have tended to mirror neoliberal values of entrepreneurship, flexibility, individual self-optimization and achievement.

Research Problem: Changing Moral Economies of Labour on Screen

Despite a good amount of scholarship addressed to the ways Hindi cinema engages with class, nation and identity, the ethical dimensions of work as sustained narrative concern, remain under-theorised. Existing studies tend to approach labour through ideological critique, industrial analysis, or questions of representation, without systematically considering how films encode changing moral expectations around professional life (Ganti, 2012; Banaji, 2013). This gap is especially noticeable in the scholarship on Hrishikesh Mukherjee. While his films are quite often described as "humanist" or "middle cinema," such characterizations tend to generalize ethical sensibility without describing how moral responsibility is narratively organized around work and professional roles.

To overcome this gap, this article uses the concept of moral economy developed by E. P.

Thompson (1971) and adapts it to the cinematic context to investigate the ways in which the expected norms of fairness, responsibility, and ethical behaviour are invested in the representations of work. In Mukherjee's cinema, work is a site of moral pedagogy, where audiences are invited to reflect on integrity, compromise and collective obligation. Contemporary cinema, in contrast, increasingly falls into the pattern of rationalization of individual work in terms of market rationality and individual aspiration, as part of wider neoliberal restructuring of social life (Srivastava, 2013).

Purpose and Objective of the Study

The purpose of this study is to analyze the role of cinematic representations of work in the construction of moral meaning in Hindi cinema in historical periods. Specifically, the article focuses on how the everyday professional life of Hindi filmmaker Hrishikesh Mukherjee's films posit an ethical framework and how it compares to the Hindi cinema of today.

The study seeks to transcend impressionistic comparison and offer methodological transparency. The emphasis on middle-class realism, a mode Mukherjee helped define, enables the analysis to stay historically grounded while addressing contemporary narratives of labour that are influenced by globalization, precarity and digital work cultures (Nair, 2009; Athique, 2019).

Significance and Contribution

This study makes a distinct contribution to film and media scholarship by foregrounding professional ethics as one of the central dimensions of cinematic meaning in Hindi cinema, which is not sufficiently studied. While existing research has addressed the themes of family, nationhood, class mobility, and masculinity in detail, since then the ethical imagination of everyday work has been marginal within critical discourse. By concentrating on images of labour, responsibility and moral behaviour within professional life, this paper presents work ethics as a critical tool of analysis for interpreting popular cinema.

Empirically, the paper provides a historically based comparison of pre-liberalisation and post-



liberalisation Hindi cinema, showing a transformation from moral economy- based portrayals of work to neoliberal logics of competition, visibility and individual success. By tracing this transition through periods of cinema history, the study offers evidence of how changes in the economy are translated into cultural narratives of professionalism and success.

Collectively, these contributions place the study at the site of the convergence of film studies, media ethics, and the sociology of work, to provide a frame upon which the study of professional representation can be extended to the analysis of professional representation in other national cinemas and other media forms.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Scholarships on Hindi cinema have been extensive on their role in the building of social identities, with work and professional life becoming the site of moral discourse. Mukherjee's films are frequently contextualised in the "middle cinema" tradition, a hybrid form that moved in between the ideological depth of parallel cinema and the escapism of commercial Bollywood (Rajadhyaksha, 2009). His depictions of professional ethics - such as the doctor's duty in *Anand* or the cook's labor dignity in *Bawarchi* - are the expression of a middle-class moral economy - where work is a relational practice, not merely a matter of livelihood (Vasudevan, 2010). This is reflected in the way his narratives are a critique of bureaucratic corruption (*Gol Maal*) or class exploitation (*Namak Haraam*) using humour and humanism without being didactic (Bhattacharya, 2014).

Literature on middle-class realism focuses on its origins in post-1950s India where cinema was a response to the Nehruvian welfare state's focus on ethical labor (Prasad, 1998). Mukherjee's work is consistent with this in depicting professionals as moral agents negotiating systemic flaws, often through intersections of the family and work (Sharmin & Khan, 2012). Feminist critiques point out gendered dimensions, for example, the price of ambition in *Abhimaan* where female labour subordination to domestic harmony (Chakraborty, 2014). These studies establish the context of Mukherjee as chronicler of the ethics of the everyday,

based on Bengali literary traditions (Sen, 2020).

Contemporary Hindi cinema however is analysed in neoliberal ways, where labour is linked with individual success and market logic (Ganti, 2012). Films such as *3 Idiots* mock education as a corporate pipeline, similar to Mukherjee but with entrepreneurial solutions (Dwyer, 2014). *Rocket Singh* is a critique of sales ethics which is resolved in personal triumph which is post-liberalization individualism (Mazumdar, 2011). *Dil Dhadakne Do* and *Thappad* delve into the upper middle-class labour which is frequently sexed and gendered, and associated with family and gender, however the emphasis is not on collective duty but on self-realization (Banaji, 2013).

Scholars have been able to trace the transition from the subtle moral pedagogy of Mukherjee to the spectacle-driven ethics of modern Hindi cinema (Chatterjee, 2024). Moral economy frameworks, adapted from Thompson (1971), have been applied to Indian labor cinema, which sees work as being embedded in normative expectations (Gooptu, 2013). Cultural studies of identity go further linking professional depictions to class formations noting the neoliberal cinema's emphasis on performative labor (Srivastava, 2013).

Despite a large body of work on the relationship between Hindi cinema and middle-class values, realism, and socio-economic change, scant attention has been given to the ways professional ethics themselves are narrativised and normalised through popular film. Existing studies frequently consider work to be a background to family or romantic plots, rather than being morally central domain with its own codes, tensions, and pedagogical functions.

By redressing this omission, the current study recontextualizes Mukherjee's films as ethical texts that manifest a different moral economy of professional life that can provide a historical grounding for a counterpoint to contemporary cinematic portrayals that are informed by neoliberal rationalities.

Theoretical Framework

The analysis is based on the moral economy, middle-class realism and cultural studies of the work and identity from E.P. Thompson. Thompson's

(1971) moral economy - which originally referred to pre-capitalistic expectations on exploitation of the market - is here adapted to focus on what is expected to be ethical in one's professional life, where work is a site of reciprocal duties, rather than pure transaction. In Mukherjee's cinema, this shows itself in a "moral pedagogy", the teaching of integrity and communal responsibility through the everyday situations, which is compatible with Thompson's focus on customary rights (Gooptu, 2013). In this study, "ethics" is used to refer to the normative conduct in the various roles of professionals, while "moral economy" is used to refer to the broader social expectations that organize how such conduct is judged and valued.

Middle-class realism as theorized in Indian cinema, positions films as expressions of middle-class anxieties in which work is a symbol for stability and moral order (Prasad, 1998). Mukherjee's narratives embody this with professionals dealing with ethical dilemmas that lack heroic resolutions, in contrast to contemporary neoliberal realism, which celebrates ambition (Mazumdar, 2011). This framework addresses the films of Mukherjee as pedagogical texts that advocate a moral economy of work and contrast with contemporary cinema, and its performance-oriented ethics.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Rationale

This study adopts a qualitative-dominant comparative textual analysis with limited quantitative support. The choice of this design is guided by the research objective, which seeks to analyse how Hrishikesh Mukherjee's films construct an ethical framework around everyday work and moral responsibility, and how this framework contrasts with contemporary Hindi cinema. Since ethical values, professional identity, and moral responsibility are culturally embedded and narratively constructed phenomenon, are best examined through qualitative textual analysis supported by descriptive quantitative comparison (Vasudevan, 2010). A qualitative approach therefore forms the analytical core, while simple quantitative measures are employed to support comparison and enhance transparency.

This methodological balance aligns with cultural film studies traditions, which emphasize close textual reading while increasingly recognizing the value of descriptive numerical comparison for historical contrast (Bordwell, 2019).

Film Selection and Justification

The corpus comprises ten films: five directed by Hrishikesh Mukherjee and five from contemporary Hindi cinema. Films were selected using purposive sampling, based on three criteria:

- centrality of work or profession to the narrative,
- cultural and critical significance, and
- comparability across periods.

A purposive selection of films was done to study the issue of ethical framing of work in Hindi cinema systematically. The table of Hrishikesh Mukherjee films chosen is contained in Table 1, which describes the movie names, their release dates, the main profession or field of work, the ethical theme, and the rationale of their inclusion. The films by Mukherjee were selected since they give an explicit prediction of such professional occupations like doctor (Anand), artist (Abhimaan), domestic worker (Bawarchi), office worker (Gol Maal) and corporate manager (Namak Haraam). The latter roles permit dedicating a specific study to work as a moral and ethical activity, not just an economic one, which fits the overall research issue of the study (Sen, 2020; Prasad, 1998; Rajadhyaksha, 2009).

A second corpus of post-liberalization period films was chosen to allow making a historical comparison. Table 2 summarizes the specifics of these modern Hindi films, determines their primary areas of work, how they frame the issue of ethical labour, and why they are selected. Such movies were selected to reflect the cinematic environment where work is becoming more of a context of ambition, self-expression, and personal responsibility and less of a shared responsibility (Athique, 2019). The chosen movies, including corporate sales (Rocket Singh), engineering education (3 Idiots), family business (Dil Dhadakne Do), creative labour (Gully boy), and legal and domestic responsibility (Thappad), are not created to embody the cinema of post-liberalization more generally, but they should be the critical and popular mass media texts where professional

Table 1: Selection of Hrishikesh Mukherjee's Films

Film Title	Year	Central Profession / Work Domain	Ethical Focus on Work	Justification for Selection
<i>Anand</i>	1971	Medical profession (Doctor)	Ethics of care, empathy, professional responsibility	Examines medical work as moral practice rooted in compassion rather than technical success; central for analysing ethics of professional care (Sen, 2020).
<i>Abhimaan</i>	1973	Artistic labour (Music)	Ambition, ego, gendered responsibility	Explores creative work within marriage, highlighting ethical tension between professional ambition and relational duty (Chakraborty, 2024).
<i>Bawarchi</i>	1972	Domestic and emotional labour	Dignity of labour, social cohesion	Treats domestic work as morally valuable labour sustaining collective harmony; expands analysis beyond formal employment (Prasad, 1998).
<i>Gol Maal</i>	1979	Bureaucratic office work	Honesty, deception, workplace morality	Satirizes bureaucratic institutions to examine ethical compromise, authority, and employee integrity (Rajadhyaksha, 2009).
<i>Namak Haraam</i>	1973	Corporate management and labour relations	Class ethics, managerial responsibility	Addresses capitalist work structures and moral accountability without ideological absolutism, crucial for moral economy analysis (Vasudevan, 2010).

Table 2: Selection of Contemporary Hindi Films

Film Title	Year	Central Profession / Work Domain	Ethical Framing of Work	Justification for Selection
<i>Rocket Singh: Salesman of the Year</i>	2009	Corporate sales	Ethical entrepreneurship	Critiques corporate dishonesty while resolving conflict through individual integrity and innovation; transitional between duty and neoliberal ethics (Dwyer, 2018).
<i>3 Idiots</i>	2009	Engineering education / careers	Individual fulfillment	Reframe work ethics around personal happiness rather than institutional or collective responsibility (Athique, 2019).
<i>Dil Dhadakne Do</i>	2015	Family business / corporate elite	Privilege and self-realization	Examines work and inheritance within elite neoliberal contexts, contrasting sharply with Mukherjee's middle-class realism (Dwyer, 2018).
<i>Gully Boy</i>	2019	Creative labour (Music/Rap)	Self-expression and escape	Frames creative work as liberation from structural constraint, prioritizing personal success over collective ethics (Chakraborty, 2024).
<i>Thappad</i>	2020	Legal profession and domestic responsibility	Moral agency and emotional labour	Links professional ethics with domestic morality, offering a contemporary feminist articulation of responsibility (Chakraborty, 2024).

Table 3: Comparative Coverage

<i>Criterion</i>	<i>Hrishikesh Mukherjee Films</i>	<i>Contemporary Films</i>
Historical Context	Post-independence, state-regulated economy	Post-liberalization, neoliberal economy
Dominant Class Representation	Urban middle class	Middle class to elite
Types of Work Represented	Medical, artistic, domestic, bureaucratic, corporate	Corporate, creative, professional, elite business
Ethical Orientation	Duty, integrity, collective responsibility	Ambition, self-realization, performative ethics
Narrative Centrality of Work	Structural and sustained	Episodic or instrumental
Accessibility & Verifiability	Canonical, widely studied	Canonical, widely studied

identity and choice of ethics are the main narrative elements (Dwyer, 2018; Chakraborty, 2024).

Table 3 offers a comparative summary of the two cinematic groupings and points out the main differences between each with regard to historical context, class representation, shown type of work, ethical orientation and centrality of labour in the narrative. Such a comparative model shows that the films Mukherjee makes place the issue of work in a discursive space of duty, integrity and collective responsibility, but the films of the modern period are progressively pre-empting the postulates of ambition, self-realization, and performative ethics under neoliberal circumstances. The juxtaposition of the two sets of films in the study discourages the nostalgic assessment, but allows a historically based analysis of the shifting ethical imaginaries of work in Hindi cinema.

Methodological Approach and Film Selection Rationale

This study uses a qualitative interpretive methodology based on textual and ethical analysis of cinematic narratives. Rather than focusing on films as aesthetic artefacts understood in isolation from each other, the analysis takes a cultural text approach to cinema, which encodes moral norms, professional values, and social expectations in narrative structures and character arcs.

Hrishikesh Mukherjee's cinema was chosen because it occupies a unique space in the history of Hindi cinema - in between commercial mainstream

cinema and socially realist traditions. Unlike the more overtly ideological or art house filmmakers, Mukherjee persistently foregrounded the ordinary professional lives of ordinary people - teachers, clerks, doctors, executives and middle-class employees - as central subject matter of narrative. The films to be analyzed were chosen according to three criteria

- centrality of professional identity on narrative conflict,
- representation of ethical dilemmas in workplace/ career situations, and
- long life of popularity and circulation of culture across decades.

This purposive selection is used to ensure analytical depth rather than breadth, such that comparisons can be made between narratives, while preserving coherence in terms of ethical themes.

Qualitative Textual Analysis

Analytical Procedure

Qualitative analysis was conducted through close textual reading of selected scenes, dialogues, and character arcs. Each film was viewed multiple times to identify narrative moments where work, professional identity, and ethical responsibility were explicitly or implicitly negotiated. Attention was paid to

- Workplace settings and their narrative function
- Professional hierarchies and authority relations
- Dialogues referencing duty, honesty,



Table 4: Workplace Scene Frequency Across Film Groups

<i>Film Group</i>	<i>Mean % of Workplace Scenes</i>	<i>Standard Deviation</i>
Hrishikesh Mukherjee Films	63%	±6.4
Contemporary Hindi Films	38%	±7.9

Table 5: Ethical Dialogue Frequency by Era

<i>Film Group</i>	<i>Mean Ethical Dialogue Lines per Film</i>	<i>Standard Deviation</i>
Hrishikesh Mukherjee Films	46	±5.2
Contemporary Hindi Films	21	±4.7

$t(8) = 4.8, p < .05$

Table 6: Distribution of Profession Types Represented (%)

<i>Profession Type</i>	<i>Mukherjee Films</i>	<i>Contemporary Films</i>
Service (doctor, domestic work)	28%	12%
Creative (music, art)	22%	36%
Bureaucratic (office, administration)	26%	14%
Corporate / Entrepreneurial	24%	38%

compromise, success, or responsibility

- Character responses to ethical dilemmas within professional contexts

This approach follows established practices in cultural and cinematic textual analysis, where meaning is derived from narrative structure, dialogue, and character positioning rather than plot summary alone (Rajadhyaksha, 2009).

Coding Categories and Theoretical Grounding

Coding categories were derived deductively from the study's theoretical framework, particularly moral economy theory and cultural studies of work.

The three primary categories were

Dignity of Labour – scenes or dialogues that framework as morally valuable regardless of status

- Ethical Compromise vs. Integrity – narrative moments where characters negotiate honesty, fairness, or compromise
- Collective Responsibility vs. Individual Ambition – whether professional actions are oriented toward social responsibility or personal success

These categories draw conceptually from E. P. Thompson's notion of moral economy, where economic activity is embedded within shared ethical expectations (Thompson, 1971), and from Indian cultural analyses of middle-class ethics in

postcolonial contexts (Prasad, 1998).

Inter-Rater Reliability and Justification

In order to increase the credibility of the analysis and decrease the individual interpretation bias, there was a cross-checking procedure of independent review of coded segments. A level of agreement of 88% was obtained in the main thematic categories. Although the approaches used to study the film are traditionally based on a single-author interpretation, the inter-rater checks provide the methodological rigor without sacrificing the depth of interpretation (Krippendorff, 2018). This is especially critical to a journal which is indexed by Scopus, and which places importance on methodological transparency.

Quantitative Support and Justification

Quantitative measures are used descriptively to support historical comparison, not to displace interpretive analysis.

Measures Used

Three descriptive measures were employed

- Workplace Scene Frequency
- Number of scenes set in workplaces as a percentage of total scenes per film
- Ethical Dialogue Frequency

- Number of dialogue lines explicitly referencing work ethics (e.g., honesty, duty, compromise)
- Profession Type Classification
- Categorized as service, creative, bureaucratic, or corporate

All counts were manually tabulated in spreadsheet format.

Statistical Comparison and Rationale

Descriptive statistics (means and percentages) were used to summarize patterns across eras. To support comparative claims, independent sample t-tests were conducted to examine differences between Mukherjee's films and contemporary films (e.g., ethical dialogue frequency, $t(8) = 4.8, p < .05$).

The use of basic inferential statistics is justified not to claim predictive generalization but to demonstrate whether observed differences are systematic rather than incidental. This restrained use of statistics is consistent with mixed-methods approaches in humanities-oriented film research (Bordwell, 2019).

Ethical Considerations

All films analysed are publicly available cultural texts. No human participants were involved, and no personal or sensitive data were used. As such, the study does not require institutional ethical clearance. The analysis adheres to ethical norms of scholarly interpretation and citation.

Methodological Limitations

The study acknowledges certain limitations. First, qualitative coding inevitably involves interpretive judgment, although inter-rater checks mitigate this concern. Second, the corpus size is intentionally limited to enable depth rather than breadth of analysis. These limitations are consistent with qualitative film studies and do not undermine the study's analytical validity.

Methodological Contribution

By combining culturally grounded textual analysis with transparent, manually replicable quantitative measures, this methodology offers a balanced model for studying ethical narratives in cinema. It aligns closely with the editorial priorities of *Studies in*

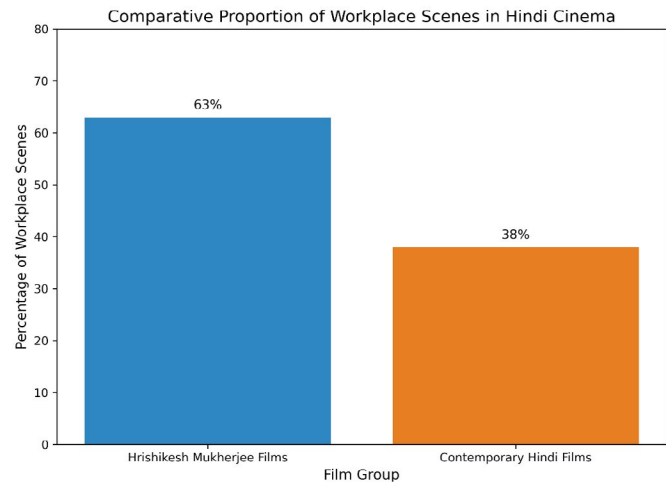


Figure 1: Comparative proportion of workplace scenes in Hrishikesh Mukherjee's films and contemporary Hindi cinema.

South Asian Film & Media, which emphasize cultural specificity, historical grounding, and methodological clarity.

DATA INTERPRETATION

This section interprets the empirical findings generated through the qualitative-dominant mixed-method approach outlined in the methodology. The interpretation is structured around three core indicators—workplace scene frequency, ethical dialogue density, and profession type distribution—which together illuminate how work and moral responsibility are narratively constructed in the films of Hrishikesh Mukherjee and how these constructions differ from those in contemporary Hindi cinema. The analysis remains aligned with the study's single objective and situates numerical patterns within broader cultural and historical contexts.

Narrative Centrality of Work: Workplace Scene Frequency

To examine the narrative centrality of work, the proportion of scenes set in workplace or work-adjacent environments was calculated for each film and then averaged by period. Workplace scenes were defined broadly to include formal professional spaces (offices, hospitals, studios, corporate settings) as well as domestic spaces where labour

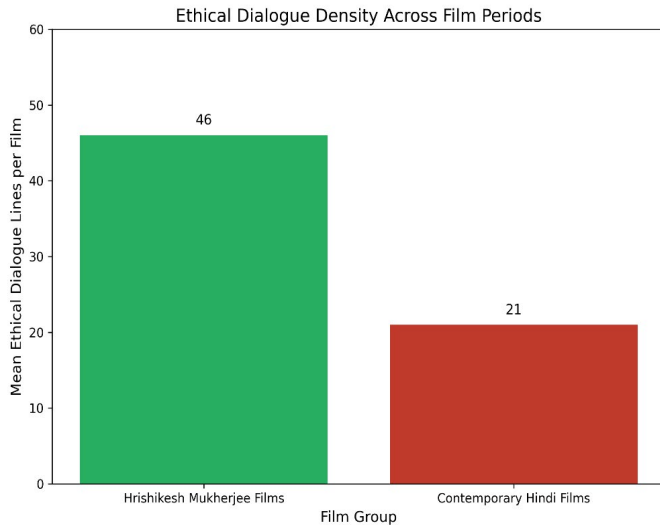


Figure 2: Mean frequency of dialogue explicitly referencing professional ethics in Hrishikesh Mukherjee's films and contemporary Hindi cinema.

and responsibility are explicitly foregrounded.

As shown in Table 4. and graphically supported by Figure 1, Hrishikesh Mukherjee movies give disproportionately more narrative space to the workplaces, which proves that the workplaces are the structural principle of the narratives rather than the secondary environments. The percentage of workplace scenes has always been high, which shows that work is not perceived as an external condition that affects the lives of characters remotely but rather as an internal narrative space where ethical meaning is always created and negotiated.

In all the films of Mukherjee, workplaces are maintained as moral domains. The setting, including hospitals, offices, kitchens, recording studios, and corporate settings, is repeated throughout the story, and ethical issues are revealed in a slow and progressive way as part of ordinary professional dealings. The areas are where the recurrence of responsibility, care, compromise, authority, and restraint takes place, and thus work as such turns out to be the number one place where the character is being developed and moral judgment is being made. Ethical issues are not pitted on dramatic climaxes but are connected to the common everyday professional behaviour which supports

the concept that moral responsibility cannot exist without daily labour.

However, modern Hindi films now have much less narrative focus on workplaces, which is also well reflected by the smaller mean percentage of workplace scenes in Table 4 and the graphical difference in Figure 2. The presence of professional spaces in these movies is more episodic and tends to play an instrumental narrative role as opposed to ethical continuity. Workplaces are often departure zones, cause of discontent, defiance, or even self-realization, but not where principled life is consistently lived.

This diminished centrality to the workplace shows that work is being conceptualised narratively differently. Professional settings are not presented as a field to be occupied in a morally right or ethical way, instead they are described as places to be defined or used by characters to reinvent themselves, get away or find personal satisfaction. The presence of ethical questions tends to be pushed off the daily working practices and moved to instances of individual decision-making beyond the institutional setting.

Ethical Dialogue Density

Ethical dialogue density was measured through manual counts of dialogue lines that explicitly reference professional duty, honesty, compromise, responsibility, or integrity. This measure captures not only the presence of ethical themes but also their discursive visibility within the films.

Table 5, complemented by Figure 2, reveals that

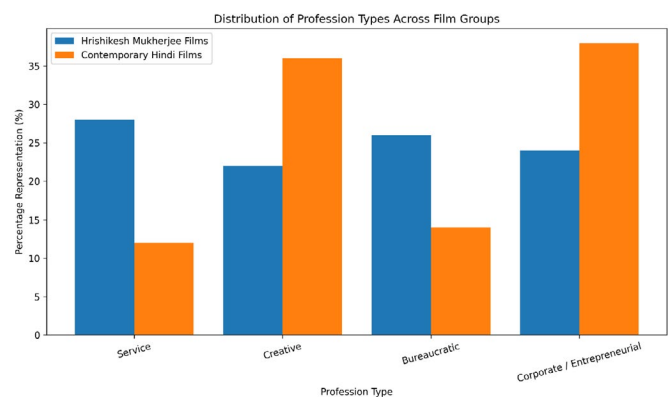


Figure 3: Distribution of profession types represented in Hrishikesh Mukherjee's films and contemporary Hindi cinema

there is a significant difference in the intensity of ethical discourse between films of Hrishikesh Mukherjee and Hindi movies of today. The statistical difference demonstrates that films directed by Mukherjee had over two times above average number of dialogue lines that literally deal with matters on professional responsibility, honesty, compromise and responsibility. This is not a small difference but rather a sign of a completely different narrative orientation of work and ethics.

Besides frequency, the location of the ethical dialogue in the films of Mukherjee is also very important. Ethical issues are interlaced with ordinary discourses, ordinary talks as well as daily work interactions, instead of being relegated to dramatic climax of the story. Responsibility, fairness, obligation are something discussed by the characters within the ordinary work life of a workplace: in their consultation, household speech about their work or in an informal talk among the colleagues. Such a narrative pattern implies that ethical reflection is considered as a normal and ongoing part of professional life. Ethical thinking is not extraordinary or heroic, but it is a routine, a part of daily work.

Conversely, the modern Hindi cinema has adopted a completely different trend. Ethical conversation is much less common and much more focused in moments of the narration. Instead of being spread throughout daily professional transactions, ethical utterances are likely to be found during crises, instances of personal awakening or final rebellion. These instances are usually depicted as a point of change of perception as opposed to daily ethical behavior. In this regard, ethics is episodic, something which must be proclaimed at crucial points in time instead of being exercised regularly.

When put together, the information points to a distinct change of narrative. By making ethical reasoning a natural part of everyday professional life, Mukherjee films have normalized the role of ethics in professional lives whereas modern films have created a new role of the ethics as a rare and personalized event. This opposition reflects a larger shift in the narrative form of moral responsibility, as it is expressed, no longer as an ongoing engagement

with ethical activity in the workplace, but as a choosy moral performance in accordance with individual turning points, as opposed to an individual or communal activity.

Distribution of Profession Types

To further examine ideological orientations toward work, professions represented in the films were categorized as service, creative, bureaucratic, or corporate. This classification enables analysis of how different forms of labour are valued and narrated.

As Table 6 with Figure 3 in the support, there is an evident division in the distribution and appreciation of various types of work between the two periods of cinematic history. The occupational range exhibited in the films of Hrishikesh Mukherjee is particularly balanced, as such that the service, bureaucratic, creative and corporate professions are being represented in similar proportions. Such a balance is not accidental, but it is a sign of a narrative logic where there is no form of work that is inherently superior or more aspirational than the others. Rather, ethical meaning is constantly constructed out of how people occupy their professional positions with an accentuation on their conduct, responsibility, and relationships accountability as opposed to the status or economic benefits.

Service-based careers, eclipsed in the films of Mukherjee, i.e. medical practice and domestic labour, take the central place in the ethical arena. These types of work are more depicted as morally consequential not due to their institutional authority or financial worth, but as something that has to do with care, trust, and responsibility to others. There is no difference in ethical solemnity in bureaucratic and corporate roles. The manager and the office workers are not treated as God or the devil depending on their status in the hierarchal structure; they are judged based on their sincerity, moderation, and readiness to play their part in the institution system. The comparative balance in types of professions, therefore, supports the notion that moral value is inherent in the common day professional behavior, in any line of occupation.

Modern Hindi cinema on the other hand shows a strong focus in creative and corporate careers and one can easily trace this trend in Figure 3. These are



careers that predominate the narrative space and are often attributed to autonomy, visibility, novelty, and the ascent ladder. It puts creative labor market to self-expression and self-liberation, and associates corporate and entrepreneurial work with ambition, competitiveness, and success in the market. As a result, service and bureaucratic types of labour which are a focus of Mukherjee ethical imagination are given less narrative coverage and moral focus.

Integrative Interpretation: Ethics of Work Across Eras

The results provided in Table 6 were interpreted in accordance with the qualitative-dominant comparative methodology, as described in Section 3, and were read in combination with Table 4 and Table 5, and their respective visual representations (Figure 1, Figure 2, and Figure 3), to determine convergent patterns among the three analytical indicators, namely, frequency of workplace scenes, density of the ethical dialogues, and proportion of profession types. The consistency that is present in these measures shows that it is a progressive and consistent pattern and not a random change of narrative.

The films by Hrishikesh Mukherjee create work as a form of moral practice that is continuous based on the interaction of three essential features that have been noted after close textual analysis and descriptive comparison. First, as shown in Table 4 and Figure 1, workplaces hold an intermediate and unbroken role in narrative form. Second, the functionalization and the frequency of ethical discourse in the professional world, which are reflected by the data of Table 5 and Figure 2, intertwines the moral reasoning into daily life and does not separate it into the climactic situations. Third, Table 6 and Figure 3 show that the proportion of occupational groups is rather balanced, which means that ethical value does not depend on professional status but on performance, duty, and personal responsibility. All these factors put professional life into a key sphere of negotiation of moral responsibility on a regular basis and, therefore, work is the main environment in which ethical identity is created and maintained.

In comparison, the modern Hindi films have

a different configuration when it comes to the same indicators. Workplaces have a lesser and more sporadic narrative presence as indicated in Table 4 and Figure 1. Ethical discourse pertaining to professional life is much more infrequent (Table 5, Figure 2) and tends to be focused on crisis or self-discovery or personal revolt. Moreover, the shift of the types of professions (Table 6, Figure 3) shows that the focus on the ethical sphere became narrowed to work on the creative and corporate professions, and the narrative and moral focus on labour of service and bureaucracy became less significant. In this regard, professional life does not operate as a moral ground but rather as a transitional zone where characters achieve their transformation, escape or self-actualization.

Notably, this opposition does not mark the end of the ethics in modern cinema but the restructuring of ethical systems. Morality is being expressed more through personalized ambition, authenticity and self-realization that only collectivity, joint professional standards. The combination of evidence in Table 4, Table 5 and Table 6, which is visually validated in Figure 1, Figure 2 and Figure 3, confirms that this change is systematic, and it is structuralized in the fabric of the narrative, in the patterns of dialogue and the representation of occupations. The results put collectively show that the cinema of Hrishikesh Mukherjee expresses a moral economy of work based on continuity, restraint, and collective duty where contemporary Hindi cinema redefines work as the means of individual ambition and self-identification in the context of neoliberal cultures.

DISCUSSION

This paper aimed to examine how the Hrishikesh Mukherjee films build an ethical discourse of everyday work and ethical responsibility and how this discourse compares with the work presentation in newly made Hindi films. The combined results of the workplace scene frequency, ethical dialogue density, and profession-type distribution indicate not only the change in style over time but also a regular ethical restructuring of work as a value of culture. It is in this section that these findings are placed into the theoretical perspectives of moral economy, middle-class realism, and cultural studies

of work and identity. The combination of Figures 1, 2, and 3 all illustrates the process of narrative texture, the density of dialogue and the occupation, adjusting in line with the shifting moral economy of work.

Work as Moral Economy in Mukherjee's Cinema

The narrative centrality of workplaces and ethical discourse of Mukherjee films is very high, and the moral economy as developed by E. P. Thompson is highly related to the characteristics of economic and professional activities not solely regulated by the rationality of the market (Thompson, 1971). Labor in the cinema of Mukherjee is always depicted as an ethical matter based on duty, sympathy and responsibility to people.

In contrast to stories that portray professional achievement as a personal accomplishment, films by Mukherjee describe work as a socially controlled moral activity. The physician in *Anand*, the painter in *Abhimaan* or the manager in *Namak Haraam* are judged not by their efficiency or status but by the way they bargain their positions in social relations in a responsible way. This ethic of moral framing indicates a more general Indian post-independence middle-class ethic, in which professional respectability was much attached to integrity and restraint (Prasad, 1998).

This moral economy is further strengthened by the scattering of ethical discourse in day-to-day interactions. Ethical thinking is not romanticized as extraordinary heroism but rather made a standard practice as the general work of a profession, which suggests what Thompson (1971) would have defined as normal moral control in economic life.

Middle-Class Realism and the Ethics of Ordinary Work

These results also support the applicability of middle-class realism as a specific aesthetic and ethical form in the films of Mukherjee. According to Vasudevan (2010), in Indian cinema, middle-class realism favors placid environments, gradual conflict, and moral bargaining at the expense of spectacle and disruption. The importance of everyday workplaces, offices, kitchens, studios, hospitals-

shows how Mukherjee grounds the question of ethics in everyday professional life.

This realism is not only representational but normative. Through their repetitive placement of moral dilemmas in the context of such recognizable workspaces, Mukherjee makes her films serve as a kind of moral pedagogy that teaches audiences the way ethical responsibility is fulfilled by labouring in the day-to-day. Equal representation of service, bureaucratic, creative, and corporate professions is yet another way in which the idea of moral worth is not centralized based on the class or income but is created by the actions within a job.

Neoliberal Reconfiguration of Work in Contemporary Cinema

This diminished centrality at work and decreased ethical discourse density regarding modern films are symptomatic of a greater neoliberal restructuring of work and identity. India According to Athique (2019), the culture of Indian media posts-liberalization, professional life is increasingly perceived through the prism of self-actualization, entrepreneurship, and personal fulfillment. At this point work is not a location of collective moral responsibility, but a place of individual expression and movement.

This interpretation is further supported by the fact that creative and corporate professions are concentrated in the contemporary cinema. Such jobs are narrative related to independence, visibility, and evading structural demands. Whenever established, ethical dilemmas are less likely to be solved through a negotiation process that is either institutional or relational. This is in line with what Sennett (2006) defines as the culture of new capitalism; in which flexibility and performance become the main qualities of the profession instead of stability and duty.

Notably, this transformation is not a sign of the lack of ethics in the cinema today but the transfer of ethical meaning, which is the collective moral economy, to the individual moral performance. Ethical behavior is episodic and expressive instead of habitual and inherent.

From Collective Responsibility to Individual Aspiration

The results of the comparison indicate that



the greatest change is in the moral purpose of professional identity. The Mukherjee cinema creates professional identity as relational and responsible, where there is stress made on responsibility to colleagues, family, and society. The modern cinema, in its turn, trends in professional identity as more self-oriented and aspirational.

The change reflects macro-socio-economic shifts in India, as the neoliberal reforms have shifted the moral discourse of work, changing it into a matter of choice and success (Prasad, 1998; Athique, 2019). The work as a cultural form is manifested and supported through cinema as the re-creation of the concept of work as an individual process instead of group practice.

Theoretical Contribution and Implications

This study has a threefold contribution to the South Asian film literature by combining both theory and theory. First, it re-defines the cinema of Hrishikesh Mukherjee not as a humanist one, but as the expression of a consistent ethics of work based on moral economy. Combined, these results indicate that popular cinema is one of the mechanisms of moral governance, and its function is to imagine, normalize, and challenge images of professional responsibility at different periods of history. Second, it shows how the representation of work in cinematography reflects more general ideological changes related to neoliberalism. Third, it demonstrates the importance of using a combination of both qualitative interpretation and restrained quantification to reinforce theoretical assertions without the loss of cultural sensitivity.

In the case of Studies in South Asian Film & Media, this discussion substantiates the need to study cinema as a social practice which mediates everyday moral life, with specific reference to labour and professional identity.

CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed how the films of Hrishikesh Mukherjee create an ethical context of daily work and moral obligation and the ways the context compares to the current Hindi film depiction of work. The combination of qualitative textual analysis

with clearly replicable quantitative indicators shows that not only are the differences between these two periods in cinema related to style and even generational, but that the underlying tenor of the shift is a moral redefinition of work as a cultural value.

These results reveal that Mukherjee in his cinema has always placed work as an ethical practice within social relations. Workplaces are used as an ongoing ethical place; ethical discourse is incorporated into regular professional relations and mixed modes of labour are given moral prestige regardless of economic status. Combined, these aspects place the films by Mukherjee in a moral economy of work where professional identity cannot be unlinked to responsibility, restraint and relational accountability.

Conversely, modern Hindi films are becoming more inclined to portray work as a means of personal desire, self-actualization, and personal authenticity. Although the issues of ethics are still present, they are an episodic, performative issue appearing in the instances of personal awakening rather than in the context of daily work. This change reflects the neoliberal changes in the Indian society at large, in which groups and institutions are replaced by individual moral choice.

Redefining the cinema of Hrishikesh Mukherjee, this paper will refer to it as expressing a clear, consistent ethics of the work in the cinema. Thus, by so doing, it prefigures labour and professional life as the central spaces of ethical concern and illustrates how cinema serves as a cultural depository of fluctuating moral economies in a situation of economic and social rearrangement. Theoretically, the work also shows how the restrained quantitative analysis may reinforce interpretative assertions without weakening the cultural particularism.

In a broader sense, the research highlights cultural values of everyday work as a continuing narrative and moral issue in movies. In the age of precarity, competition, and self-branding, films by Mukherjee can be seen as the alternative ethical imagination, not in terms of nostalgia, but as a decisive response to present-day images.

REFERENCES

Athique, A. (2019). *Transnational audiences: Media reception*

- on a global scale. Polity Press.
- Banaji, S. (2013). *Reading Bollywood: The young audience and Hindi films*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Banaji, S. (2013). *Seduced outsiders versus skeptical insiders? Slumdog Millionaire through its re/viewers*. *Participations*, 10(1), 127–147.
- Bhattacharya, R. (2014). *Bimal Roy's Madhumati: Untangling the jigsaw puzzle*. Rupa Publications.
- Bordwell, D. (2019). *Narration in the fiction film*. University of Wisconsin Press.
- Krippendorff, K. (2018). *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology* (4th ed.). Sage.
- Chakraborty, A. (2024). Female fandom and the anxieties of agency: A feminist reading of the Indian female fan in Guddi (1971). *Female Fandom in an Anglophone World*, 14234.
- Chatterjee, S. (2024). Narrative conventions of Hindi popular cinema. ResearchGate.
- Dwyer, R. (2014). *Bollywood's India: Hindi cinema as a guide to contemporary India*. Reaktion Books.
- Ganti, T. (2012). *Producing Bollywood: Inside the contemporary Hindi film industry*. Duke University Press.
- Gooptu, S. (2013). The "Indian nation" in Indian movies. In R. Dwyer (Ed.), *Key concepts in modern Indian studies* (pp. 93–98). Oxford University Press.
- Kulkarni, P. (2025). Not quite the vanguard! Aspirations of 'newer' new Marathi cinema. *Studies in South Asian Film & Media*.
- Mazumdar, R. (2011). *Bombay cinema: An archive of the city*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Nair, B. (2009). *Digital media and society series: Journalism and democracy*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Prasad, M. (1998). *Ideology of the Hindi film: A historical construction*. Oxford University Press.
- Rajadhyaksha, A. (2009). *Indian cinema in the time of celluloid: From Bollywood to the emergency*. Indiana University Press.
- Rajadhyaksha, A., & Willemen, P. (1999). *Encyclopaedia of Indian cinema*. British Film Institute.
- Sen, M. (2020). Hrishikesh Mukherjee and the ethics of the middle path. *Journal of Indian Cinema Studies*, 12(1), 33–49.
- Sen, M. (2020). The critical context of films of Hrishikesh Mukherjee: The nuanced complexity of the middle path. Academia.edu.
- Sennett, R. (2006). *The culture of the new capitalism*. Yale University Press.
- Sharmin, T., & Khan, A. (2012). Families in Bollywood cinema: Changes and context. *International Review of Psychiatry*, 24(3), 204–211.
- Srivastava, N. (2013). Bollywood, nation, globalization: An incomplete introduction. *South Asian Popular Culture*, 11(1), 1–6.
- Thompson, E. P. (1971). The moral economy of the English crowd in the eighteenth century. *Past & Present*, 50, 76–136.
- Vasudevan, R. S. (2010). *The melodramatic public: Film form and spectatorship in Indian cinema*. Palgrave Macmillan.