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# DEPICTION OF CHILD SEX ABUSE IN BOLLYWOOD CINEMA

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## ABSTRACT

The article would begin by defining Child Sex Abuse (CSA) and how such a violation suffered by children at an age when their thought process and value systems are still growing leaves an indelible mark on their psychological and physical health, impacts their education and career, alters their relationship with their family and society, and impedes their future relationships.

However, CSA is a taboo topic in Indian society, barely acknowledged and rarely addressed. In this scenario, analyzing its depiction in Bollywood movies can be cathartic as cinema is an extremely potent medium in India, both reflective of the societal mindset as well as having the potential to influence and alter the same.

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## Introduction

Child sexual abuse is the involvement of a child in sexual activity that he or she does not fully comprehend, is unable to give informed consent to, or for which the child is not developmentally prepared and cannot give consent, or that violates the laws or social taboos of society (World Health Organization ,Regional Office For Africa, 2004). It is a most cruel and tragic occurrence and a serious infringement of a child's rights to health and protection. Unfortunately, this violation of children, the most vulnerable section of society and the future of the nation, occurs every 15 minutes in India<sup>1</sup>.

The impact of CSA is manifold, long-lasting, and with multiple nuances. As per a report, CSA has a severe impact on a child's psychological state, health, level of independence, social relationships, and education, impact that may last throughout the lifespan of a survivor<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> India sexual abuse: "four child victims every hour," BBC News (2017), <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-42193533> (last visited Dec 23, 2025).

<sup>2</sup> *ScienceDirect*, <https://share.google/EVniqCd4fVALOprm2>.

Survivors suffer from anxiety, PTSD, and eating disorders among others.

In the present-day socio-cultural environment of India, victims are disbelieved or coerced into silence, leading to trust issues. Many times, the children are victim shamed, by even their parents, which causes a permanent dent in their minds and impacts their views about sex. Rape has a stigma that deters families from reporting it, and the appalling attitude of the police, hospitals, and judiciary forces the victims to give up their fight<sup>3</sup>. Another reason for silence is that traditional values profess that family is a safe place and a known person cannot harm, however a large number of sexual abuse is inflicted by a person known to the child. When a child reports the incident it shatters the carefully cultivated image of a happy family, and the family views her as someone rocking the boat unnecessarily. Inability to report the crime may lead to repeated long-term abuse- directed at them or a younger sibling – which can cause feelings of guilt and helplessness, leading to various psychological problems. Former Chief Justice of India D Y Chandrachud said sexual abuse of children remains a hidden problem, as there is a culture of silence, and therefore the state must encourage families to report abuse even where the perpetrator is a family member.

### **CSA Through the Lens of Bollywood**

The issue of Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) remains one of the most distressing social challenges, and its depiction in cinema illustrates its multifaceted nature, stigma, and deep-seated trauma it inflicts. CSA, especially incestuous, has not been explored fully in cinema, due to society's discomfort with confronting the proverbial elephant in the room. A few brave films have dared to confront the bull by its horns.

I have taken Bollywood movies *Kahaani 2*, *Highway*, *Dil Se* and *Monsoon Wedding* for analyzing how films have depicted the sensitive issue. All these movies, except *Dil Se*, have depicted the offender as a known person, and it takes courage on the part of the filmmaker to break the mirage of family being loving and protective. These movies serve as a societal mirror, advocating for greater awareness and empathy, by examining the nuanced experiences of survivors and the failures of societal structures, these narratives promote critical dialogues about justice, healing, and accountability.

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<sup>3</sup> 73% Of Rape Survivors Say Police Treatment Worsened Their Mental Health, End Violence Against Women (Nov. 12, 2024), <https://share.google/sr5sSPG1twxGTzJ3H>.

## **Portrayal of Trauma and Betrayal in *Kahaani 2***

The movie depicts Minnie, a school girl who suffers sexual abuse perpetrated by her uncle. The film effectively portrays her suffering and the betrayal she experiences from her grandmother, who attempts to bribe her to silence, victim shames her, even attempting to murder her for the sake of 'family honour' rather than offer protection<sup>4</sup>. The grandmother's actions highlight the failures of both societal and familial structures in supporting victims. Durga, played by Vidya Balan, who is Minnie's school teacher as well as a victim of CSA herself, steps in to help, symbolizing the hope and courage necessary to break the cycle of abuse. The film compellingly demonstrates how familial denial and the prioritization of "honor" can perpetuate cycles of abuse, ultimately leaving survivors in isolation and re-traumatized.

## **Highway: Escaping Trauma Through Captivity**

Highway narrates the journey of Veera, a young woman whose abduction unexpectedly compels her to confront her past traumas of molestation at the hands of her uncle and the subsequent failure of her family to provide protection<sup>5</sup>. The narration by Veera makes the audience aware of not only the traumatic abuse but also the confusion the child feels when her own mother negates her abuse, the turbulent state of mind of the girl is poignantly depicted when she is expected to behave courteously with her aggressor and how she finally, after being recused by the police, garners the courage to refuse to continue the charade, that too in the presence of her future in laws.

Although her abduction initially feels scary, Veera begins to interpret it as a paradoxical escape from the oppressive structures imposed by her family. Alia Bhatt's portrayal of Veera captures the character's emotional journey with remarkable vulnerability and resilience, emphasizing the long-term psychological consequences of CSA, such as distrust and feelings of alienation, while holding a beacon of hope for survivors to reclaim their lives. The film's narrative invites viewers to re-evaluate their assumptions about safety and familial bonds, illuminating the complex ways in which survivors may seek refuge.

## **The Haunting Aftermath of the Trauma in *Dil Se***

Moina is profoundly affected by her history of sexual abuse inflicted by the military. This

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<sup>4</sup> *Kahaani 2*, YouTube, <https://youtu.be/WWBhfdaRfro?si=YbsBd3r488uvUOP5> .

<sup>5</sup> *Highway*, YouTube, <https://youtu.be/HomXjXjVJb0?si=YjJtqCMqsKE4gqeC> .

trauma significantly shapes her adult mindset, instilling a deep-seated fear of intimacy and failure to experience emotional openness, along with an intense hatred towards the perpetrators of the horrific crime, pushing her into the throes of militancy. The film effectively portrays her hesitation towards Amarkant's (Shah Rukh Khan) romantic advances as a direct consequence of her unresolved psychological issues. A particularly moving scene illustrates how Amarkant's gestures of intimacy evoke Moina's painful memories, leading to a complete emotional breakdown<sup>6</sup>. This representation serves as an example of the "sleeper effect," a term that describes the delayed psychological impacts experienced by survivors of childhood sexual abuse in their adult lives. Through Moina's struggles, *Dil Se* powerfully depicts the lasting scars of abuse and the challenges faced by survivors in cultivating healthy relationships in adult life.

### **Family – A Cauldron of Multiple Dynamics: Monsoon Wedding**

*Monsoon Wedding* presents a subtle but powerful portrayal of the tension between maintaining family relations and the pursuit of justice in the event of CSA, highlighting the economic and social supremacy of the perpetrator, pushing family members into silence even when they empathise with the victim. Central to the narrative is Ria, who reveals the trauma she experienced as a child at the hands of a family member. When she confronts her perpetrator, the family patriarch exhibits reluctance to intervene, being obligated to the abuser's financial support to him. This scenario highlights the dynamics that hinder families from confronting CSA, characterized by denial, fear of being insulted by other people, and economic dependence. The film climaxes in Ria's courageous act, which ultimately results in the abuser facing insult in public, thereby illustrating the significance of survivor narratives and the critical role of familial support in the processes of healing and accountability. Another noteworthy aspect of the movie was the depiction as to how survivors are perpetually scared that other younger children may end up being abused like them, which depicts them channelizing their trauma and the bitterness of not securing justice into, attempts to protect further potential victims

### **Conclusion**

The portrayal of CSA in films both mirrors and critiques prevailing societal attitudes towards

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<sup>6</sup> *Dil SE*, YouTube, <https://youtu.be/MebWf6V9MI4?si=xvqPutHykXKeofa5> .

abuse. These cinematic works illuminate the often-hidden traumas experienced by survivors, revealing the shortcomings of societal and institutional responses. They emphasize the necessity of awareness, empathy, and justice, while also calling for systemic reforms. Although cinema alone cannot eliminate CSA, it functions as a potent medium to challenge existing prejudices, elevate the voices of survivors and stimulate essential discussions regarding this widespread issue. By exploring the complex dimensions of CSA, these films urge audiences to reflect on their own roles and advocate for a more compassionate and secure society.