

# Hierarchies and Power Relations between Adults and Children

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**Abstract** *The present paper aims to explore the nature and manifestations of power and subjugation within adult-child relations. It rests on the assumption that as a developmental stage and 'category', childhood is often defined in relation to other generational categories. Therefore, to understand childhood fully, the positional status of childhood in relation to adulthood must be explored. Childhood cannot be captured without locating it within the web of social relationships within which it unfolds. As a repository of social meanings, it has to be situated and understood through a cultural lens and its varying contexts such as schools and families. The paper revisits the portrayal of adult-child relations and attempts to bring to fore the depictions of hierarchies and power relations that appear between adults and children within school and family contexts; as represented in some select films drawn from popular Bollywood Cinema. It sheds light on the trials children face on account of lack of power, authority and control in adult-child relationships. It concludes by proposing that children do not submit to adult authority unresistingly, rather they dynamically negotiate with them.*

As is implicit in the title, the paper attempts to explore how hierarchies and power relations between adults and children are represented in some select films drawn from popular Bollywood Cinema. The paper has been organised in three sections. The first section briefly discusses some assumptions on which the paper rests, and argues for cinema being an important means of portraying societal realities, including the depiction of childhood. The second section describes the process that was followed in researching and developing the paper, presents a brief storyline of each of the selected films and delineates the themes that relate to childhood within them. The final section presents an analysis of the representation of adult-child relations as they emerge, in relation to the different contours typifying this life stage.

## Section One: Assumptions about Childhood and their Representation in Bollywood Films

As a developmental stage and 'category' (Qvortrup, 1994), childhood is often defined in relation to

other generational categories (Alanen & Mayall, 2001). It is viewed as 'something' short of adulthood and a state of 'becoming' an adult (James & Prout, 1997). This creates childhood and adulthood as disjunct categories; often understood in opposition to each other. This paper looks at the depictions of the two status groups positioned as 'adults' and 'children' and attempts to uncover the hierarchies and power emanating from these positions. Further, childhood needs to be viewed and understood in terms of the locale, context and social landscape (Aries, 1962; Jenks, 1996) in which it unfolds and the spectrum of experiences that children undergo. Childhood cannot be understood without locating it within the web of social relationships within which it unfolds. Childhood is thus a social construction (James & James, 2008). As a repository of social meanings, it has to be situated and understood through a cultural lens and its varying contexts such as schools and families. In unraveling how children are defined in opposition to adults, a significant aspect of adult-child relations, that is, the authority, and perhaps



the lack of it, that define and colour these categories have been kept at the centre. An attempt has also been made to highlight the dominant social contexts of school and family within which children are embedded. These reveal the experiences that children are likely to have. Alongside, the implications of these experiences of childhood, for the mental well being of children, have been discussed.

While it may be contended that films are produced primarily to entertain, there is no denying that they also mirror various dimensions of society (Dhar, 2013), particularly the existing popular culture, reflected in the dominant beliefs, values and cultural notions that prevail in the society which they are trying to depict. Popular Bollywood Cinema in contemporary times has become fairly experimental in nature, looking for different subjects and new ways of treating them. It is moving away from stereotypes and the characterizations are changing (Mooij, 2006). For instance, there are now some examples wherein certain films have emerged as cult films and the characters come almost as icons, such as in the Munnabhai series (Ghosh & Babu, 2006). Likewise, in the last few years there have been several films with a child or a group of children, as the central characters. These have been very impactful and have drawn attention to a number of issues related to childhood in general and children in specific. Thus, it was felt that the manner in which the changing creative visualisation and eventual on-screen picturisations of children's worlds are being depicted in films, makes them an interesting source to understand childhood in India.

What also makes films a potent source for study is that even though they are symbolic representations of 'created' worlds, yet the viewers participate in the imaginative recreation of those worlds and may thereby reshape and extend their thoughts (Nadaner, 1984). Further, in terms of their portrayals of children, they help to set temporal and behavioural limits to childhood as a life stage and also delineate some of its features. In addition, the symbolic content of a film may also provide some indication of the chief characteristics and

expectations from a given stage of childhood. What also needs to be highlighted is that when children watch films, they 'find' themselves and thereby find their identities as children (Smart et al., 2001). Viswanath and Malik (2009) add that films weave reality for children that allow them to be a part of the collectivity.

Recognizing this, the present paper tries to explore and explicate the hierarchies and power relations between adults and children as they come across in the selected Bollywood films.

### **Section Two: Selection of Films and Delineation of Childhood Issues Represented in them**

To identify representative Bollywood films which lend themselves to studying the issues mentioned above, an elaborate scouting task was undertaken. To begin with, a list of films released in the last decade, which had children as the central characters or which depicted any dimension(s) of childhood as a life stage, were identified. A wider consultation with researchers and scholars who work in the area of childhood was done to build up and validate the list. Each of the identified films was then viewed analytically. From among them, six films were selected, ensuring that they addressed the diversity and variability that mark childhood in India.

Following this, each film was viewed with the objective of identifying the images which portrayed adult-child relations and culling out the issues related to childhood, that it highlighted. The themes identified helped to consolidate the framework that was used for analyzing the constructions of childhood. The section that follows presents a brief story line of each of the films, along with a delineation of issues related to childhood that it specifically depicted. The films are chronologically arranged from the most recent to the earliest.

#### ***Chillar Party, 2011 (Film) Directed by Nitesh Tiwari and Vikas Bahl***

The film embodies several significant themes, such as the early adultification of children in the lower socio-economic class, children's resourcefulness and commitment; their abilities of negotiation and persistence towards completion of a mission.



***I Am Kalam, 2011 (Film) Directed by Nila Madhab Panda***

The film shows the contrasting worlds of childhood in upper and lower class families. Transcendence of social class disparities through childhood friendships is also depicted. The agency of children in difficult circumstances is personified in the character of Kalam. The film depicts lack of voice of children in decisions pertaining to their own lives and circumstances.

***Stanley ka Dabba, 2011 (Film) Directed by Amol Gupte***

In terms of thematic depictions, the film highlights the subversive form that adult-child relations can take and the development of resilience in children in difficult circumstances.

***Bumm Bumm Bole, 2010 (Film) Directed by Priyadarshan***

The film highlights impact of deprivation on children; their struggles when faced with deprivation; the desperation that they are driven to; their vulnerability to danger in their attempts to cope, and early adultification of children. The contours of parent-child relationship are foregrounded in the film.

***Paathshaala, 2010 (Film) Directed by Milind Ukey***

The film serves as an important case in point to highlight childhood being viewed as an instrumental economic possibility in the hands of adult interests. It critiques the Indian education system, the web of commercialisation and the invasion of media and technology in exploiting children.

***The Blue Umbrella, 2007 (Film) Directed by Vishal Bhardwaj***

The film represents the gradients of human nature that lead them to sometimes exploit children's vulnerability and fragility.

After laying out the spectrum of themes identified across the six selected films, the next section takes up a detailed analysis of these in relation to the research question.

**Section Three: Analysis of Hierarchies and Power Relations between Adults and Children as Depicted in the Films**

This section discusses how power and hierarchy unfold between adults and children. The central plot of most of the films projected contrasting images of the world of children (and young people) and that of adults. Traditional oppositions and commonly perceived conflicts of everyday family life between 'children' and 'adults' got highlighted by the power, control, competence and responsibility that were shown, often exaggerating elements of these dichotomous relationships. As a group, children held little power and were constructed as passive recipients of adult mores and norms (McCourt 1996). The selected films placed adults at the apex of decision making for children, making them the deliverers and children, the receivers. This was seen in different contexts and forms.

In most of the films, the adult-child dichotomy stood out as a binary. Adulthood was shown to be associated with control, rationality and discipline and children were shown with the lack of these, necessitating them to get socialized into giving up their 'childish ways' in order to 'grow up' and 'become' adults. The adult-child binary found exposure in the comments made in *Paathshaala*, where when a peon interacted with the children, he was told 'not to be childish'; pointing to the sharp divide and distinction between being childish and not 'adult-ly'. Furthermore, anything that had to do with children was shown to hold lesser value and in contrast anything associated with adults was shown to be valued more. In *Chillar Party*, the Politician comments that '*Earlier Politicians were invited to inaugurate 'bridges' (here, denoting the adult world) but now they are invited to inaugurate children's playgrounds*'. It clearly points to the relatively low esteem and prestige associated with children's belongings and facilities.

The adult-child dichotomy made itself explicit in issues of power, authority and control. Adults (both parents and teachers) supposedly were shown to have more power over children, which placed them in advantageous positions. This authority was displayed by dictating children what they are



expected to do; controlling, monitoring and occasionally abusing them as well. The films carried projections of adult dominance over children which especially came out overtly in teacher-student interactions. In *Stanley ka Dabba*, neither Stanley nor his Hindi teacher brought their own *dabbas*. The teacher used his power and ate from children's *dabbas*. In addition, he accused, ridiculed and abused Stanley for eating from his 'friend's' *dabbas*. On account of holding a lower position in a hierarchically arranged society, Stanley had no means to counter this domination. The teacher in a fit of anger, disgust and frustration, went on to tell Stanley that if he did not bring a *dabba*, he need not come to school. This episode also highlights how sometimes adults project their own insecurities and frustrations on harmless children whom they know are not harmful and indeed are petite enough to raise their voice or counter argue their point of view. '*I am Kalam*', showed how children are denied personhood and individuality (Kalam being addressed as Chotu, despite repeated objections raised by him on it). When he came to work at Bhati's dhaba, Laptan who was already working there and was much older to Kalam, told him bossily that he will have '*to work under him*'. Whenever Bhati was not around, he made Kalam clean tables, even if they had already been cleaned. This was only to establish his alleged power over Kalam. Manifestations of adult power over children were also accentuated in '*Paathshaala*', where the photographer and the music and cookery show media persons, disregarded and disrespected children's efforts. The message embodied was that children's efforts were not worth-respecting and delaying immediate attention to them was non-offensive. The adults seemed indifferent to children's needs.

Indifference to children's needs was also shown by the fact that 'the best interest' of children were voiced by adults but whether these always pertained to children's well being, can be debated. The films did not rule out adults' agendas, purposes and interests being served in the name of children. In *Stanley Ka Dabba*, when the Principal discussed an invitation for the inter-school concert received

by the school, the Science teacher sternly asked the Principal, 'who will take the students for the rehearsals-the teacher or the parents?' Pursuits of adult interests rendered children passive as adults seemed more concerned about their own time and availability rather than children's needs and their 'best interests'.

What was also depicted was children's vulnerability and subordination making them prone to a further disadvantageous position. This was seen in the film, *Paathshaala*, which revolved around the theme of politicisation and commercialisation of education. Here, themes of subordination of children's needs and interests, overpowering adult agendas, children's lack of voice in the process of decision-making and their underrepresentation in their own matters, came to fore. The film raised questions on the subtle violation of the national commitment to education, RTE and propagation of education as a business. It exposed how children's interest are sidelined to give visibility to schools through means of media-reality television shows, participation in cookery, singing and other such competitions, bringing glory to the name of the schools. This approach was seen to establish the school as the 'best' school and fetch donations and justify unreasonable fee hikes. The film clearly highlighted the marketization and commodification of education and how adult-motives of making money drive this 'business'. The film contends the issues of dismissing children as less knowledgeable and 'too young' to understand adult agendas. Cunnigford (1992) puts forth the view that children indeed do understand how power and politics operate. However, on account of lack of means, children seem unable to directly confront acts of dominance. Nonetheless, the film also brings out the positive and supportive role played by the teachers and the Principal to the audiences. However, the teacher's position as a meek dictator (Kumar, 1991) was reiterated and s/he has limited means and authority to combat the corrupting system and thus also becomes a deliverer of the same.

'*I am Kalam*' makes one ponder whether authority has to do with the 'position' one holds; whether children's lack of authority can be account to their



lower 'position' in the social hierarchy. Adults in the film talked to the 'Prince-child' with great respect on account of his princely position. Thus, it is not always that adults show authority over children because they consider them 'children' but because they also see them as 'lesser' on account of their lower social positions, 'bodies-in-the-making', getting socialised, lesser on experience, skill, knowledge and so forth and where the social hierarchy is reversed, the converse happens.

With regard to how children perceive their own position in the adult-child dichotomy, they seem to pick up messages from the larger community. In the films, they were shown to assume a lower social position as the 'natural' state of order, believing that their voices would seldom be heard. In *Chillar Party*, a child, scared of the situation commented, '*Hum bhool gye the, hum bacche hain* (We forgot we are children)' and commented on the girls who featured on TV programmes and offered to help save Bhidu that, '*Tum kya help karogi, tum bhi to bacchi ho ... baccho ki koi nahin sunta* (What will you help, you are also a child... nobody listens to a child)'; showed that children tend to believe themselves as 'lesser' than adults in terms of information, experience and power. They thus try to find anchors to help them decode and act on such power politics. The lyrics of the song, "*Hum chup ho jayenge* (we will be quietened)...*Baccho ka dard, koi dard hi nahin* (children's pain is 'no pain')...*behla do, fusla do* (trick us) also pinpoints at the subordinate position of children. Their lack of rationality, reasoning and economy as perceived by adults was depicted in *The Blue Umbrella*, where Khatri offered Biniya Rs 50/- (In five, ten Rupee notes) instead of the actual value of the Umbrella which was around Rs. 2500/-. Similarly, when her umbrella goes missing, the entire village gave her illogical reasons for the same.

In addition to the themes mentioned above, childhood as a stage of life was not seen in its own right but as a preparatory stage to adulthood. This accounts for why children occupy a subordinate position within the social ladder. In '*Bumm Bumm Bole*', childhood was seen as a time for 'becoming'. This was evident when Pinu's father told him to accompany him to the city to find a gardening job.

The following conversation illustrates this.

Father: *..main bhi kal jaldi sheher chala jauga, arre kal itwaar hai, tere school ki chutti hai na, tu bhi chal mere saath, waise bhi poora din khel kood me bigaad dega, mere saath chal duniyadari seekh lega.*

(...I will also go to the city early tomorrow, its Sunday tomorrow, isn't your school closed? You also accompany me; anyhow you will waste the entire day playing, come with me and learn worldly wisdom).

While on the visit to the city, the father kept telling him what all to say while introducing themselves and their work to the people from whom they would seek the opportunity to work as gardeners. Parents envision themselves as agents of socialisation for their children. They push their children from early childhood towards ambitious and distant goals (Ananadlakshmy, 2002). Children's achievements are seen as family achievements; and education, a means for upward economic and social mobility.

In terms of children's contribution to the family responsibilities, their contribution to household chores was hardly acknowledged even when they washed, served, brought materials from the market, bartered items, made cane baskets and other handicrafts and delivered things. In *Bumm Bumm Bole*, Rimjhim engaged in various household chores, nevertheless the primary task for children was seen 'to study'. Children's 'work' of play was seen as an activity of lesser importance. As mentioned above, Pinu was told by his father that he will end up wasting time playing and should instead accompany his father to the city.

Another aspect that reflects adult control over children came through in the manner in which children are exposed to institutionalized childhood. Qvortrup (1994) suggests that childhood within social institutions is characterized by administrative procedures, organizational practices, special limitations and clock-regulated time-use. Children's free time, as shown in the films was not completely free but monitored, scrutinised and structured by adults, often in the name of their best interest and good. This happened both at home and at school. In *Stanley Ka Dabba*, the Hindi



teacher complained that children's loud noise resonated far into the corridor; hence, their free time was also put under surveillance, guarded and monitored. In the same film, as examinations approached, children's study periods were increased and recess period altered without any consultation with them. In *Bumm Bumm Bole* too children were answerable to adults for their utilisation of time. The adults weighed whether children's time was spent 'wisely' and 'constructively' or 'wasted' by their own adult standards. Children were answerable for their actions as well as 'utterances'. While disciplining their children, parents sought clarifications from them and in the garb of being 'providers' exercised their power to withdraw facilities that they provided to them. When Pinu reached home late, his father scolded him for coming home late by half an hour.

Father: *"Ye time hai ghar aane ka, 6.00 baje bola tha, 6.30 aa raha hai. Awaara kutte ki tarah sadak par matargashti karni hai to aaj se khana peena band tera. Itne mehngi school mein bhejta hoon, tujhe kya lagta hai, tere maa baap chai patti ki jagah note todte hain?...engineer-doctor kuch to bann aur nikal iss gandgi se"*

(Is this the time to come home, told you 6 o'clock, you are coming at 6.30. If you wish to loiter around in the streets like a dog then from today, no food for you. I send you to such an expensive school, what do you think, your father plucks currency notes instead of tea leaves?...become engineer-doctor, and move out of this filth).

In another episode, the following utterances were made by Pinu's father to his children:

Father: *...zindagi bhookh se bhi upar hoti hai, main apne baccho ko bada aadmi banana chahta hoon, taish me aakar sabse acche school me daal diya, ab agle 6 mahine ki fees kahan se lauga main, bahut badi galti ki acche school me daal diya. Ek baap ko apne baccho ke liye itna to karna hi chahiye"*

(...life is above hunger, I want to make my

children 'big' persons, I send you to good school, from where will I bring the school fee for the next six months, I made a mistake in admitting you to a good school. A father should do atleast that much for his children).

Parental scolding is sometimes a consequence of parents' own frustration over not being able to provide their children with the best. They wish to make their children better than themselves in terms of education and general achievements in life.

### Conclusions

The films depicted a dichotomized and oppositional relationship between childhood and adulthood. Holding the position of an 'adult', brought with it a certain sense of power and authority to organise, monitor, regulate and control the lives of those who occupy a subordinate social position, that of 'children'. This subjugation has implications for mental health. Young children might feel stressed and pressurised on account of being dismissed and lacking power to choose and decide for oneself. Most decisions pertaining to children are taken by their parents and teachers and this devoids children from their legitimate right to decide for themselves. Nevertheless, children do not submit to their lower status without resistance. The nuances of the transgression of limits set by adults for children were also captured well in the films. I would like to point out that while the films brought out the variability in childhood experiences, they also helped to point out some of the universals which bind children together as a community. The need for belongingness and anchors, play, fun, exploration and action, irrespective of the milieu or context are common threads. To conclude, the paper hopes to contribute towards making a difference in the ways we understand childhood as a life stage. It urges to contextualise childhood within adult-child relations and the social contexts that colour it.

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- Screwvala, R. and Khan, S. (Producers), & Tiwari, N. and Bahl, V. (Directors). (2011). *Chillar Party [Motion Picture]*. India: UTV.
- Chillar Party: This film revolves around a team of eight children-called 'Chillar Party', Fatka, a street child and his dog, Bhidu. The film begins by showing children's interactions in a community of peers. Fatka enters the residential society where the Chillar Party group exists, and is employed for washing cars. Initially the Chillar Party does not like Fatka and his dog (Bhidu) but eventually they develop friendship with them. However, their happiness is short-lived when a reckless politician, driven by political interests announces that all the stray dogs (for whom the particular society does not give an NOC) will be caught in order to make Mumbai safe. In their struggle to get the NOC, the children of the Chillar Party organize a 'Chaddi March'- marching the streets with nothing on their body except underwear. This disturbs the 'adult' politician and he invites them for a confrontation battle hour, during which he accuses children for telling lies, playing dirty tricks and following uncultured techniques. He questions their textbooks and what they are taught at school. All the children come together and argue that quite contrary to his allegations; their textbooks promote the values of helping and caring for others.
- I am Kalam: The film is set in Rajasthan where an intelligent boy named Chotu is brought to a roadside Dhaba by his mother to work under the owner, Bhati. Chotu prepares tea and washes utensils at the Dhaba and is mistreated by another employee, who is a young man named Laptan. One day Chotu sees President Dr. A.P.J Abdul Kalam on television and gets inspired by idea espoused by him that a person's destiny can be changed by his/her own hard work and he immediately rechristens himself as 'Kalam.' The dhaba is located near a heritage hotel in the palace of an erstwhile royal family. Kalam strikes up a friendship with the lonely prince of his age, but the prince is forbidden by his father from mixing with commoners. The two boys secretly meet and play defying control levied upon them by the adults in their lives. In a twist, Kalam is accused of theft of



prince Ranvijay's books. In order to protect the prince from his father, Kalam does not reveal that the prince himself gave him the books. Bhati mama gets angry at Kalam and beat and scolds him. Kalam runs away to New Delhi where he tries to meet the President. Meanwhile, the prince tells his father that he gave the books to Kalam. The king realizes his mistake and sends the Prince to find Kalam, who is finally found near India Gate and is brought back home. The king tells him that he can study in the same school as the Prince. Bhati offers to pay the school fees, but Kalam says he will pay his fee himself.

*Stanley ka Dabba'* is the story of a talented fourth grade child. Unlike his classmates, Stanley does not bring his lunch box or '*dabba*' to school. The Hindi teacher of the school also does not bring his dabba and eats from everyone else's box. He particularly likes to eat from the lunch boxes of Stanley's group of friends. One day, upon being late and missing eating from the boys' dabbas, he expresses his frustration by accusing Stanley as being responsible for this lapse. Stanley is hurt and subsequently the friends group constantly keep changing their eating venue in school to avoid the Hindi teacher. One day when the hostile teacher discovers them, he again takes out his anger on Stanley and tells him not to come to school until he brings a lunch box of his own. Stanley stops coming to school. Later in the film, Stanley brings his own dabba to the school, replete with festive food which he gives to the Hindi teacher, who realises how he had used his own ego and power to shatter a child's psychological world completely. He apologises to Stanley and leaves the school. Towards the end of the film, the truth unfurls that understanding the plight of the boy, the cook of the hotel, where orphaned Stanley washes dishes, packed the leftover food in Stanley's lunch box, so that he could carry it for his Hindi teacher.

Bumm Bumm Bhole: Khogiram, his wife and two children-Pinu and Rimjhim live in a terrorist dominated region. Khogiram and Ritu are poor and work at a tea plantation. Pinu and Rimjhim go to a respectable school, as Khogiram wishes to give his children good education. However, the financial constraints of the family leave them with limited money for buying uniforms and shoes. Things become worse when Pinu misplaces Rimjhim's only pair of shoes. They work out a plan where both of them share the same shoes-Rimjhim wears them to her morning shift school and Pinu to his afternoon school. Meanwhile, Pinu's father,

desperate for money, borrows some gardening equipment and takes Pinu along to the rich suburbs of the town to find some gardening work. They make money but meet with an accident on their way back home. The children's struggle for procuring shoes is accentuated by Pinu's dilemma to pick up shoes from outside the temple and unknowingly working for terrorists to get some money. The film ends with Rimjhim's father getting a job and Rimjhim finally getting a pair of shoes.

*'Paathshaala'* revolves around children on a school campus. The story begins with a new English teacher joining the school and immediately building rapport with all. The Principal of the school is a man of strong principles, who silently struggles against the school management's decision to commercialise the school. The school management engages media planners to raise the image of the school, even at the cost of compromising with student's interests. It demands students' involvement in reality shows on television and other media and public relations activities in order to build the school's image in the public eye. This creates high pressure and stress on the students, teachers as well as parents, who unify to offer resistance.

*'The Blue Umbrella'* is the story of a young girl child named Biniya who lives in the mountains. As the story progresses, in order to take Biniya's necklace, a group of foreigners give her a 'blue umbrella'. The Blue Umbrella becomes Biniya's prized possession. The shop owner, Khatri offers her money to buy her umbrella but she refuses to sell it. Acting out of greed, the envious shopkeeper steals it. The girl finds her umbrella missing and the shopkeeper gets a similar umbrella in red. With this, the center stage shifts from Biniya to the shopkeeper. But soon the villagers discover that the umbrella was stolen and dyed red. As a result the shopkeeper's name is tarnished in the village and he is boycotted by the entire village community. Khatri's struggle and remorse feature in the second half of the film. The story concludes with the girl giving the umbrella to the shopkeeper as a sign of forgiveness.

