

From 'Self-Discovery' to 'Acceptance of Change': A Thematic Textual Analysis of Children's Aspirations in Post-2000 Marathi Cinema

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ABSTRACT

Marathi cinema, renowned for its cultural depth and realistic narratives, has long been a medium for social commentary, often focusing on children as symbols of hope, innocence, and resilience. Following India's economic reforms in 1991, Marathi films began reflecting the tensions of a globalized yet traditional society, particularly through the experiences of children navigating these dualities. This study examines the portrayal of children's aspirations in select Marathi films post- 2000, analyzing how these films depict the impact of globalization, family dynamics, and socioeconomic challenges. Using qualitative content analysis, the research focuses on five critically acclaimed films: *Shwaas*, *Elizabeth Ekadashi*, *Taryanche Bait*, *Killa*, and *Shaala*. These films explore children's negotiations with adult-imposed values, societal expectations, and their own evolving ambitions. The findings reveal a nuanced portrayal of childhood where neoliberal ideals such as competition and self-actualization coexist with traditional values of family and community. Themes of migration, friendship, and emotional growth intersect with material aspirations, presenting children as active agents in shaping their futures. This study underscores how Marathi cinema uses childhood as a lens to address broader socio-economic shifts, offering a layered exploration of aspirations in a rapidly modernizing India.

Keywords: Marathi cinema, children, aspirations, globalization, neoliberalism

INTRODUCTION

Marathi cinema, with its rich history of storytelling, has long mirrored the cultural, social, and economic landscapes of Maharashtra. Since India's economic reforms in 1991, a noticeable shift in the portrayal of societal dynamics, particularly concerning children, has emerged. The rise of a new middle-class post-liberalization, coupled with globalization's impact, has reshaped both urban and rural realities, profoundly influencing cinematic

narratives (Pendakur, 2003). Children, previously peripheral figures, have become central to narratives exploring aspirations, anxieties, and moral dilemmas. Films like *Killa* (2014) and *Elizabeth Ekadashi* (2014) highlight these evolving themes, presenting the complexities of childhood shaped by internal and external forces (Mitra, 2020). In *Killa*, Chinmay's emotional struggle as he adjusts to a new environment is framed through adult perspectives, intertwining the child's internal conflict with broader societal uncertainties (Joshi, 2019).

Similarly, *Elizabeth Ekadashi* portrays Zendu and Dnyanesh's attempts to preserve their late father's legacy while facing economic pressures, highlighting rural indebtedness (Sawant, 2021). These films underscore how children in rural Maharashtra navigate their aspirations, shaped by personal desires and economic hardships within a society increasingly driven by neoliberal values (Deshpande, 2018). A significant theme explored in these films is the intersection of aspiration and economic struggle. In *Taryanche Bait* (2011), Omkar's dream of visiting a city creates a moral dilemma for his father, who resorts to unethical means to fulfil his son's wish, reflecting the impact of urban consumerism on rural children (Chakraborty, 2017). *Half Ticket* (2016) contrasts the lives of two children from different economic strata, using pizza as a symbol of Western consumer culture to illustrate how desires shaped by globalization become obsessions for the marginalized (Patil, 2019).

These narratives highlight socio-economic divides created by neoliberalism, where children's aspirations are deeply intertwined with economic survival (Sundar, 2020). This study critically examines the representation of children's aspirations in post-2000 Marathi cinema, focusing on films set in rural Maharashtra. It explores how these films address themes such as migration, family, friendship, and economic struggle, and how these factors shape children's ambitions. Using content analysis methodology, the research focuses on five Marathi films – *Shwaas* (2004), *Killa* (2014), *Elizabeth Ekadashi* (2014), *Taryanche Bait* (2011), and *Half Ticket* (2016) highlighting recurring themes of economic struggle, urbanization, and the role of family in shaping aspirations (Bryman, 2016). The findings contribute to the discourse on globalization's impact on childhood, particularly within the rural Indian context (Kumar, 2020). The single parent children in *Killa* and *Elizabeth Ekadashi* depicted the anxieties of life where the narrative focused on children's actions through the eyes of adults. What factors contributed in showing the uncertainties of the children? How the children responded to these situations? *Killa* depicted Chinmay's initial struggle to cope with the new place along with the new friends and later leaving behind those places he attached with whereas *Elizabeth Ekadashi* showed the struggle of Zendu and Dnyanesh to keep the last memory of his late father, for which they secretly ran the shop to repay the loan amount. Through *Taryanche bait*, the narrative focused more on the moral values of Omkar, where he realised how his aspiration became the burden on his father who lately involved in cheating and stealing too. How the city and the skyscrapers became the aspiration for Omkar? How the neoliberalism influenced the narrative, in which Omkar, a child came from rural space astonished by the consuming trends of city such as shopping malls and multi-cuisine hotels. On the similar note, half ticket portrayed the children who depicted two sides of the same city i.e. privileged class and poor strata. The pizza here depicted the western influence on the urban space which

later replaced the aspiration and became obsession for the children. Though half ticket majorly portrayed the city, it focused more on the dividing line of the city.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review critically examines the representation of children in post-2000 Marathi cinema, a significant cultural phenomenon that mirrors the evolving societal dynamics and aspirations within the region. This cinematic lens not only reflects the socio-political landscape but also provides insight into the intricate relationships between childhood, identity, and societal transformation in contemporary India.

Children as Sites of Sexuality and Socioeconomic Transformation

The scholarship surrounding children's representation in post-2000 Marathi cinema reveals a profound engagement with themes of sexuality and socioeconomic transformation. Aarti Wani's research highlights how these films become pivotal sites for exploring the intersection of adolescent sexuality and the socio-economic shifts instigated by neoliberal policies (Rajagopalan, 2011). Through her analysis of the film *Fandry*, Wani articulates how the portrayal of adolescent desires is intricately linked to the marginalized socioeconomic backgrounds of the characters. This reflection elucidates how children's experiences serve as a barometer for broader societal transformations, illustrating the anxieties and power dynamics associated with the region's transition towards economic liberalization and globalization. McKee (2001) reinforces this perspective, suggesting that children's narratives in such films act as prisms through which the impact of economic changes on local identities and lived experiences is critically examined. Moreover, the framing of children within these narratives not only reveals their vulnerabilities but also critiques the societal structures that perpetuate inequality. The intersectionality of childhood experiences intertwined with class, caste, and gender further underscores the complex realities that children face, positioning them as crucial agents of social commentary in the cinematic landscape.

Children as Symbols of Hope and Resilience

Contrasting the darker themes of sexuality and socioeconomic struggle, A.K. Sharma's work posits that children in post-2000 Marathi cinema also emerge as potent symbols of hope and resilience. Films such as *Killa* and *Babasaheb* utilize the narratives of young protagonists to confront the myriad challenges posed by urbanization, cultural displacement, and educational inequities. Sharma's analysis illuminates how these films harness the figure of the child to envision alternative futures and to challenge prevailing social norms. This portrayal positions children not merely as passive subjects but as individuals who navigate the complexities of a rapidly modernizing society. The narrative arcs of these young characters often encapsulate themes of empowerment, creativity, and the pursuit of dreams amidst adversity. This representation serves as a counter-narrative to dominant discourses that depict childhood solely as a phase of vulnerability, thereby enabling a richer understanding of children's agency and potential within the societal fabric.

Children's Aspirations and the Tension between Tradition and Modernity

Building upon the existing scholarship, this paper further explores how the representation of children in post-2000 Marathi cinema reflects a complex negotiation between traditional societal values and the aspirations of a modernizing, globalizing India. The cinematic portrayal of children functions as a lens through which to scrutinize societal shifts, power dynamics, and evolving cultural landscapes within the region. The narratives encapsulate a struggle between adherence to cultural heritage and the allure of modernity, revealing the multifaceted lived experiences of the younger generation (Rajagopalan, 2011). Within this context, the figure of the child is often imagination, serving as a site for the exploration of broader socio-political concerns. This dichotomy evoked as a symbolic referent in popular culture between tradition and modernity is poignantly captured in cinematic narratives, where children's aspirations often reflect a desire for agency and autonomy, challenging traditional roles and expectations. Such portrayals not only highlight the transformative potential of youth but also raise critical questions about the future trajectories of cultural identity in the face of globalization.

Knowledge Gap

The literature review has illustrated the diverse thematic representations of children in post-2000 Marathi cinema. These portrayals range from depicting children as sites of sexuality and socioeconomic transformation to presenting them as symbols of hope, resilience, and the tension between tradition and modernity. The cinematic narratives provide a nuanced understanding of the evolving societal dynamics and aspirations within the region, positioning children at the heart of articulating alternative futures and challenging dominant social norms (Rajagopalan, 2011). While the existing literature on post-2000 Marathi cinema provides valuable insights into the representation of children, there remains a significant gap in understanding how these portrayals collectively inform and shape societal perceptions of childhood in rapidly modernizing India. Current scholarship has highlighted thematic elements such as the intersection of sexuality and socioeconomic transformation, as well as the portrayal of children as symbols of hope and resilience. However, there is insufficient exploration of how these representations interact with traditional values and modern aspirations, and how they reflect the lived experiences of diverse child populations across different socio-cultural contexts. Furthermore, the dynamics of agency among child characters, particularly in relation to their navigation of urbanization, educational challenges, and cultural displacement, require deeper analysis. This gap calls for a comprehensive examination of the multifaceted roles that children play in the narratives of Marathi cinema, as well as how these roles impact societal attitudes towards youth and influence broader cultural dialogues surrounding childhood in contemporary India.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How do family dynamics influence the shaping of children's aspirations as depicted in the selected films, and what themes emerge from the interactions between child characters and their families?

2. In what ways do children's aspirations reflect the societal changes presented in these films, and how can these representations illustrate the theme of transition and instability?
3. How is the influence of neoliberalism articulated through the narratives of children's aspirations in the selected Marathi films, and what recurring themes highlight the cultural implications of this ideology?

METHODOLOGY

This study aims to analyze how directors portray children's aspirations in select Marathi films and to explore the factors that shape these depictions. By interpreting film as a cultural text, this research seeks to unpack the meanings encoded within cinematic narratives. Treating films as texts allows us to understand how meaning is constructed and conveyed, especially in relation to children's aspirations. Given the complexity and subjectivity of the themes, a qualitative research approach is most suitable for this study, allowing for an in-depth, contextualized analysis of the films.

Qualitative Research Approach

A qualitative approach is particularly valuable for examining the subjective and nuanced representations of children's aspirations in film. According to Kothari (2004), qualitative research focuses on the interpretation of meanings embedded in texts and visuals, providing insights into attitudes, opinions, and behaviours. The aim is to explore subjective realities and interpret how these realities are represented through artistic mediums like film. In this research, qualitative analysis allows for the contextualization of cinematic events within theoretical frameworks that explore aspirations, family dynamics, and socio-economic influences. The study seeks to offer interpretative insights rather than definitive conclusions, making it open to multiple readings and scholarly engagement.

Method: Textual Analysis

The primary method employed in this study is textual analysis, which is ideal for decoding the

meanings encoded within films. Textual analysis allows the researcher to interpret visual and narrative elements in the films, with a focus on scenes where children's aspirations are constructed. As McKee (2003) notes, textual analysis involves making educated guesses about the potential interpretations that a viewer might derive from a given text. This method does not aim to reveal definitive structure of the text, but rather to uncover the messages and meanings conveyed by the filmmaker.

In this study, the researcher focuses on themes such as the role of family and the influence of neoliberalism in shaping children's aspirations. By examining key scenes and dialogue, the analysis explores how meanings are fragmented, dispersed, and layered within the film narratives. The textual analysis will consider both explicit and implicit meanings, with attention to how the children in these films navigate their aspirations in a constantly evolving social landscape.

Sampling: Non-Probability Purposive Sampling

To select the films for analysis, the researcher employed non-probability purposive sampling. This method ensures that the films chosen are relevant to the research objectives, focusing on narratives that occur predominantly in rural settings where family dynamics play a central role in shaping children's behavior and aspirations. The purposive sampling approach, as outlined by Wimmer and Dominick (2011), involves selecting films that exhibit specific characteristics or qualities essential to the study's focus. This method excludes films that do not meet these criteria, ensuring targeted and in-depth exploration of the theme. The selected films reflect scenarios in which children are portrayed with complex aspirations that often mirror adult responsibilities, challenging traditional notions of childhood innocence. The researcher selected the following five films for in-depth analysis:

1. *Killa* (2014)
2. *Taryanche Bait* (2011)
3. *Shala* (2011)
4. *Elizabeth Ekadashi* (2014)
5. *Half Ticket* (2016)

Each of these films presents narratives where children's aspirations are deeply intertwined with family structures, societal expectations, and broader socio-economic transformations, making them suitable for this study.

Brief summary of the films selected:

Film 1: *Killa*; Director: Avinash Arun; Year of Release: 2014

Killa explores the life of Chinmay, a young boy forced to relocate from an urban city to a rural area in Maharashtra following the death of his father. Raised by his single, working mother, Chinmay must adapt to a new environment, make new friends, and adjust to a different school system. The film focuses on his emotional journey, particularly his vulnerability and resistance to change, as he faces yet another impending move by the end of the narrative. The recurrent motif of the fort (*Killa*) symbolizes Chinmay's internal struggles and his fear of being trapped, representing both the isolation and transition he experiences as he navigates through loss and change without the constant presence of his mother.

Film 2: *Taryanche Bait*; Director: Kiran Yadnyopavit; Year of Release: 2011

Taryanche Bait examines the aspirations of Omkar, a rural boy who dreams of staying in a five-star hotel in Mumbai. His father, Sridhar, a man of limited means, is portrayed as struggling to fulfill this extravagant wish, resorting to dishonesty to achieve it. The film contrasts Omkar's carefree attitude and lack of interest in academics with his sister's obedience and diligence. Set against the backdrop of rural Maharashtra, the narrative highlights the sharp disparities between rural and urban lifestyles, as Sridhar regularly commutes to Mumbai for work. The film subtly critiques the material aspirations brought

about by urbanization, as the father's desire to meet his son's demands reflects the pressures of modern consumerism.

Film 3: Elizabeth Ekadashi; Director: Paresh Mokashi; Year of Release: 2014

Elizabeth Ekadashi revolves around the struggles of two siblings, Dnyanesh and Zendu, as they endeavour to save their deceased father's bicycle, which is under threat of being sold to repay a family debt. Set in the pilgrimage town of Pandharpur, Maharashtra, the film portrays the children's efforts to secretly raise money, including setting up a bangle stall with their friends. The narrative delves into the economic vulnerabilities of the family and highlights the children's resourcefulness in protecting their father's last remaining possession. The film paints a vivid picture of the precarious existence of families trapped in a cycle of debt, making the children's aspirations more about survival than luxury

Film 4: Half Ticket; Director: Samit Kakkad; Year of Release: 2016

Half Ticket narrates the aspirations of two unnamed children from a marginalized community in an urban slum who dream of eating pizza from a newly opened café. Living with their single mother, the children are unable to attend school due to their family's financial hardship and are forced to work by selling coal. The film highlights the children's fascination with the inaccessible luxury of pizza, symbolizing the growing social and economic divide in an urbanizing India. The narrative critiques the impact of urbanization on marginalized groups, showing how they are excluded from economic growth and subjected to systemic injustice.

Film 5: Shala; Director: Sujay Dahake; Year of Release: 2011

Shala is set against the political backdrop of the 1975 Emergency in India and portrays the everyday life of schoolchildren, with a particular focus on Mukund and his affection for classmate, Shirodkar. As the narrative progresses, Mukund's world begins to fracture as Shirodkar leaves the school due to her father's transfer, and his close friends either fail their exams or transfer schools. The film reflects the anxieties of adolescence, intensified by political unrest, and Mukund's rebellious confrontation with a teacher serves as a subtle critique of the authoritarianism of the time. The narrative also touches upon the pressures created by neoliberal reforms in education, which foster competition and disrupt childhood friendships and innocence.

DATA ANALYSIS

This analysis explores the themes of family dynamics, aspirations in a state of flux, and the impact of neoliberalism as depicted in the films Killa, Shala, Elizabeth Ekadashi, Taryanche Bait, and Half Ticket. The role of family and friends, children's aspirations, and their navigation through the broader societal structures are crucial in understanding the characters' development. Additionally, the portrayal of childhood under neoliberalism where the pressures of competitive, individualistic society reshape traditional values is examined through the lens of existing theoretical frameworks such as Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital. This analysis attempts to ground the films within these frameworks to better understand how cinematic narratives reflect larger social, cultural, and economic transformations in contemporary India.

Exploring Familial Bonds and Social Dynamics in Marathi Cinema

In the Marathi film "Killa," the director skillfully navigates the complex relationship between the protagonist, Chinmay, and his single mother, as they adjust to a new lifestyle in a rural area of Maharashtra. Chinmay's interactions with his classmates, Bandy and Omkar, further highlight the role of family and friends in shaping individual identity and socialization. Bandy, who comes from a family that has experienced a tragic loss, and Chinmay, who has recently lost his father, share common ground that allows them to form a close bond. Their contrasting personalities, with Bandy's enthusiastic and carefree nature, and Chinmay's initial hesitation to adapt to the new environment, create a dynamic that underscores the diversity within their peer group. As Chinmay gradually embraces the local customs and activities, such as catching crabs and visiting the fish market, he demonstrates his ability to navigate the cultural transformation, showcasing the multifaceted nature of his personality. Similarly, in "Elizabeth Ekadashi," the relationship between Omkar, Zendu, and their father's legacy, the cycle named Elizabeth, highlights the family's attempts to maintain their financial stability and preserve their father's creation. The plan to open a bangle shop in secret reflects the pressures faced by the family, as they strive to repay the debt incurred from the handloom machine, which had become their primary source of income. These Marathi films delve into the complexities of familial relationships and the ways in which they intersect with broader social dynamics. The directors' skillful portrayal of these themes not only captures the nuances of regional identity but also reflects the universal human experiences of loss, resilience, and the importance of community.

The role of culture and tradition in shaping individual identity

The Marathi films examined in this analysis also explore the influence of cultural traditions and their impact on the characters' sense of identity. In "Killa," Chinmay's gradual immersion in the local customs and activities, such as catching crabs and visiting the fish market, demonstrates his ability to adapt and embrace the cultural transformations he experiences in the new environment. This process of cultural assimilation not only reflects Chinmay's resilience but also highlights the fluidity of identity, as he navigates the multifaceted aspects of his personality.

Similarly, in "Elizabeth Ekadashi," the family's efforts to preserve their father's legacy, the cycle named Elizabeth, reveal the significance of cultural heritage and its intergenerational significance. The characters' attempts to maintain the cycle as a tangible representation of their family's identity and values underscore the deep-rooted connections between tradition, family, and personal identity. These narrative elements within the Marathi films illustrate the complex interplay between individual agency and the shaping influence of cultural traditions.

The Importance Of Community And Social Dynamics

The Marathi films examined in this analysis also emphasize the role of community and social dynamics in shaping individual experiences and identities. In "Killa," Chinmay's interactions with his classmates, Bandy and Omkar, highlight the diversity within their peer group and the ways in which their backgrounds and personalities intersect. The film's depiction of the social communities surrounding Chinmay reinforces his response to the transition and unpacks the

multiple facets of his personality (Sharma, 2024). In "Elizabeth Ekadashi," the family's struggle to maintain their financial stability and preserve their father's legacy reflects the broader social and economic pressures faced by marginalized communities. The characters' efforts to open a bangle shop in secret showcase the resilience and resourcefulness of these communities in the face of adversity.

The Role Of Family And Friends

In *Killa* (2015), the relationship between Chinmay and his single mother serves as a focal point to explore their coping mechanisms in adapting to rural life in Maharashtra. As Chinmay navigates his first day at school, he encounters classmates like Bandya, Omkar, and Umesh. Despite both Chinmay and Bandya losing their fathers, they represent contrasting worldviews and personalities. Bandya's extroverted, action-oriented demeanour, characterized by his initiative in activities and his disinterest in academics, aligns with the concept of a "boisterous child," often categorized as socially dominant but academically disengaged (Bourdieu, 2011). Chinmay, on the other hand, is portrayed as a more reserved and sincerer student, embodying the traits of a traditional, conscientious learner. Over time, as Chinmay befriends his classmates, his character undergoes subtle transformation, symbolizing cultural assimilation and the fluidity of identity (Erikson, 1968).

A significant moment in the narrative occurs when Chinmay initially hesitates to engage in crab catching with his peers but later fully participates in selling the crabs at the local market. This progression not only demonstrates Chinmay's evolving comfort with his new environment but also signifies a broader cultural transformation, where local social structures and rituals become integral to his personality development. This aligns with Hall's (1989) theory of cultural representation, as Chinmay's adaptation reflects a negotiation between his prior identity and the new cultural practices he encounters.

In *Elizabeth Ekadashi* (2014), Omkar and Zendu's determination to save their father's invention, the bicycle named Elizabeth, represents the pressures of financial survival and familial responsibility. Their secret attempt to open a bangle shop underlines the economic hardships faced by families in rural settings. The bangle shop endeavour is not just a financial strategy but also a form of resistance to systemic poverty. Characters like Ganya and Bandya, who share a disinteresting education, reinforce the recurring theme of marginalized youth in Indian cinema, where economic constraints often dictate educational outcomes. Mahadev, the son of a prostitute, embodies societal discrimination, yet his role in helping Dnyanesh set up the shop suggests the resilience of marginalized individuals in navigating societal exclusion. Dnyanesh's innocent visit to Mahadev's house further symbolizes a subtle defiance against societal norms, highlighting his moral clarity amid oppressive social structures.

The film *Shala* (2012) introduces another layer of social commentary, particularly through the character of Mukund, who challenges the authoritarian figure of Mrs. Bendre, a teacher symbolizing colonial oppression. Mukund's act of writing "Anushasanparva" (translated as authoritarian rule) on the blackboard is a clear act of rebellion against imposed authority, drawing parallels to postcolonial resistance (Spivak, 1988). Mukund's awareness of the

political context of the Emergency period, and his admiration for figures like Che Guevara, represents his inclination toward revolutionary ideals and his yearning for a free, democratic society. His relationship with the three activists further emphasizes the film's exploration of rebellion and the quest for social justice, themes central to Marxist critiques of class struggle (Gramsci, 1971).

In *Half Ticket* (2016), the contrast between the two brothers from the slums and Sarang, privileged boy, is stark. Their interaction with global trends, such as luxury wristwatches and expensive dogs, underscores the growing economic divide in urban India. The brothers' dream of eating pizza, a symbol of globalized consumption, reflects their inspirational desire to belong to world that remains largely inaccessible to them (Appadurai, 1996). The film juxtaposes the realities of slum life with urban affluence, critiquing the social inequalities that persist despite India's economic development (Nandy, 1983).

Taryanche Bait (2011) similarly explores themes of aspiration and moral conflict, as Omkar's family confronts the overwhelming scale and modernity of Mumbai. The narrative emphasizes the tension between traditional moral values and the pressures of modern capitalism, as exemplified by Shridhar's secret sale of a family heirloom. His eventual involvement in corruption and theft highlights the desperation that arises from economic inadequacy and the moral dilemmas faced by individuals trapped in poverty. This aligns with the concept of structural violence, where societal structures constrain individual agency and perpetuate suffering (Galtung, 1969).

The Aspiration in State Of Flux

In the films *Killa*, *Shala*, *Half Ticket*, and *Elizabeth Ekadashi*, children's aspirations are depicted as being in a state of flux, shaped by their socio-economic environments and personal transitions. These aspirations highlight broader social and cultural shifts in contemporary Indian society, where traditional values collide with modern challenges, producing both tension and opportunities for self-growth.

Aspirations Amidst Migration and Transition in *Killa*

In *Killa*, the recurring motif of water symbolizes migration and transition, reflecting the psychological and emotional transformations experienced by Chinmay and his mother. Water, as D'Aloia (2012) suggests, often serves as a "substance that embodies both physical immersion and psychic states" (p. 234). The film uses the symbol of water to reflect Chinmay's evolving mindset—from resistance to adaptation—as he navigates new landscapes, relationships, and his own emotional turmoil. His initial reluctance to integrate into the rural environment of Maharashtra transitions into a gradual acceptance of the new setting. This mirrors how children's aspirations are often redefined by their circumstances.

The unstable and fluid nature of water is a metaphor for the shifting realities of childhood dreams, which are often moulded by external forces such as relocation or family situations. Chinmay's aspirations are realigned through his interactions with the natural environment and

his classmates, symbolizing the internal struggle between maintaining old ambitions and forging new ones amidst change. The film "Killa" offers a nuanced representation of this thematic aspect. Throughout the narrative, the protagonist Chinmay's encounter with water, whether it be a lighthouse, a fort, or a bridge, serves as a recurring motif that symbolizes the transitional phase he and his mother are experiencing (Sharma, 2024). Water, as a symbol of migration and transition, reflects Chinmay's changing perspective on life, as he moves from hesitation about the new place to gradual acceptance of the transition and the new space. As Chinmay's mother struggles to adapt to the new work environment, the water becomes a medium through which Chinmay's inner psyche and the characters' troubles are visualized and symbolized.

The distorted reflection of Chinmay captured in the water reflects his anxious and perplexed state, suggesting that water is not merely a representational substance, but a medium in which the characters' bodies are immersed, along with their troubles (Rajagopalan, 2011). When Chinmay ventures out fishing with a local fisherman, the unknown depth of the water symbolizes the bewildered state of the character, torn between the desire to leave the place and the drive to explore the new environment (Mishra, 2020).

The portrayal of children's aspirations in a state of flux is further explored in the film, as Chinmay navigates the challenges of adjusting to a new school and the changing dynamics within his family.

The film's use of water as a recurring motif effectively captures the emotional and psychological transitions experienced by the characters, particularly the protagonist, as they grapple with the complexities of their aspirations and the shifting landscapes of their lives. (Rajagopalan, 2011). The theme of "aspirations in a state of flux" is not limited to the individual experiences of the characters, but also extends to the broader social and cultural contexts in which they exist. The films examined in this study delve into the interplay between individual desires, social expectations, and the broader economic and political realities that shape the aspirations of children in the post-2000 Marathi cinema landscape.

Aspirations of Friendship and Learning in *Shala*

In *Shala*, children's aspirations are shaped not only by their desire for academic success but also by their yearning for emotional connections, particularly in the context of early romantic experiences. Mukund's deep affection for Shirodkar and his friendship with his peers reflect his aspiration for stability in both his social and academic life. However, as childhood desires give way to the complexities of adolescence, his aspirations are disrupted by the realities of societal expectations and personal limitations. Mukund's inquiry into higher education, despite being only in the 9th grade, symbolizes his determination to escape the limitations of his present circumstances. Yet, his social isolation after the academic failure of his friends and the sudden departure of Shirodkar highlights the fragility of children's aspirations during a period of rapid personal and societal transformation (Hogan, 2009). The collapse of Mukund's relationships reflects a broader theme of emotional vulnerability and disillusionment during adolescence, where aspirations often confront harsh realities.

Aspirations of Economic Mobility and Self-Respect in *Half Ticket*

Half Ticket presents children's aspirations as a struggle for economic mobility and self-respect in the face of poverty. The narrative of two brothers, striving to save enough money for a pizza, symbolizes the larger socio-economic divide in Indian society, where even basic aspirations are complicated by class barriers. The children's refusal to accept a half-eaten pizza from Sarang, privileged boy, underscores their sense of self-worth, even as they face systemic injustices. The film's metonymic portrayal of the children's aversion to borrowing money in advance reveals strong work ethic and high moral standards, qualities that are juxtaposed against a capitalist society that commodifies their struggles.

The slap from the store manager and the opportunistic behavior of the local political figures who blackmail the café owner illustrate the challenges faced by children in negotiating their aspirations within a system that often prioritizes profit over justice. The narrative critiques neoliberal ideologies that commodify human suffering while highlighting the children's resilience in pursuing their goals without compromising their values.

Aspirations Tied to Familial Duty in *Elizabeth Ekadashi*

In *Elizabeth Ekadashi*, children's aspirations are intricately linked to familial responsibilities and the collective well-being of their communities. The central symbol of the bicycle, named "Elizabeth," represents not just a beloved object but a legacy of their late father's scientific aspirations. The film positions Omkar and Zendu's struggle to save the bicycle as a metaphor for their attempt to preserve both their father's memory and their family's economic survival.

As children are often viewed as agents of social mobility within their families, their aspirations are frequently shaped by the needs and expectations of those around them (Bourdieu, 1986). In this context, the children's aspirations are not just personal but communal, rooted in a collective effort to secure a future amidst financial uncertainty. The film critiques the capitalist society that exacerbates their vulnerability, highlighting how children's aspirations are in constant negotiation with external economic forces beyond their control.

The Influence of neoliberalism on children's aspirations in Marathi Cinema.

The theme of neoliberalism's impact on children's aspirations in films such as *Killa*, *Shala*, *Taryanche Bait*, *Half Ticket*, and *Elizabeth Ekadashi* highlights how neoliberal policies shape the educational system, consumption patterns, and the overall societal fabric, influencing children's futures. This analysis breaks down the impact of neoliberalism into sub-themes, including the commodification of education, consumption and materialism, and the creation of vulnerability among children.

Commodification of Education and the Meritocratic Ideal

One of the significant ways neoliberalism influences children's aspirations is through the commodification of education, wherein education is no longer just a means of learning but is tied to competition, reward systems, and preparing children for the labor market. The

narrative of *Killashows* how Chinmay is thrust into a competitive environment where academic achievement, such as winning scholarships, becomes central to his identity and success. His scholarship separates him from his peers, reflecting the neoliberal focus on competition and meritocracy. This focus turns education into a "race" rather than an opportunity for holistic development, as noted by Marx and Cooper (2019), who links this meritocratic ideology to neoliberalism's emphasis on individual success over collective well-being. The same theme appears in *Shala* and *Taryanche Bait*, where the institution of education is portrayed as a competitive battleground. Mukund in *Shala* experiences this firsthand when the results of the school exam leave him isolated. The sense of isolation and vulnerability he feels as the only one in his group to pass the exam underscores how the neoliberal focus on individual performance erodes communal bonds and support systems within educational settings (Sima, 2017). This competitive ethos reflects the broader shift in education towards creating future workers who can thrive in the global capitalist market, rather than focusing on personal development or cooperation.

Consumption, Materialism, and the Aspirations of the New Middle Class

Neoliberal policies in India after the 1991 economic reforms have brought about a rise in consumerism, which in turn has affected children's aspirations. *Taryanche Bait* and *Half Ticket* highlight the desires of children who are exposed to consumer culture, where material goods become symbols of status and success. In *Taryanche Bait*, Omkar's aspiration to stay in a hotel after visiting Mumbai is tied to his desire to experience the urban, lavish lifestyle. His fascination with the shopping malls and escalators symbolizes the allure of consumerism, which is central to the neoliberal order. David Harvey (1990) argues that neoliberalism accelerates "volatility and ephemerality" in goods and labor, highlighting how the children in these films constantly chase transient pleasures and material success, disconnected from their rural or lower-middle-class origins.

Similarly, in *Half Ticket*, the children's pursuit of a pizza, a Western commodity, illustrates how global consumerism infiltrates even the poorest sections of society. Their exposure to pizza through television, a modern commodity of the neoliberal world, ignites their desire for something they can neither afford nor fully understand. The film critiques how neoliberalism's promise of upward mobility through consumption leaves the less privileged behind. The children are not only working harder to achieve their goal but are also exposed to class disparities through their interactions with Sarang, a wealthier child, further deepening their sense of deprivation (Fernandes, 2000).

Vulnerability and the Exploitation of Children

Neoliberalism's emphasis on the free market and deregulation has created vulnerabilities, particularly among children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. In *Elizabeth Ekadashi*, the narrative revolves around Omkar and Zendu's struggle to save their bicycle, "Elizabeth," a representation of their deceased father and their means of earning. As children, they are forced into the labor market, juggling their education with the responsibility of helping their family survive in an increasingly commodified world. Their situation reflects the brutal

effects of neoliberal capitalism, where children are often the "soft targets" of an unregulated market, and the means of production are concentrated in the hands of a few (Harvey, 1990).

In *Taryanche Bait*, Sridhar's loss in the stock market symbolizes how neoliberal policies create a precarious financial environment, where even adults are at the mercy of market forces. This uncertainty trickles down to children, who inherit the anxieties and vulnerabilities of their parents. Sridhar's son, Omkar, is caught between the aspirations of his neoliberal middle-class parents, who encourage participation in the "rat race," and his own limited ability to cope with the pressures of consumption and competition. The pressures of neoliberalism manifest not only in the children's lives but also in their parents' attempts to navigate a society governed by corporate elites and unregulated market forces (Fernandes, 2000).

Social Class and Discrimination

Neoliberalism's impact on children's aspirations is also visible in how it reinforces class divisions and discrimination. In *Half Ticket*, the stark differences between Sarang, the privileged boy, and the two brothers highlight how neoliberalism perpetuates economic inequality. The children's comparison of their lives with Sarang's creates a deep sense of inadequacy and reinforces their lower social status. This depiction aligns with neoliberalism's tendency to concentrate wealth in the hands of a few, leaving the majority of the population to struggle with the consequences of poverty and limited access to opportunities (Harvey, 1990).

Moreover, the slap received by one of the brothers from the store manager in *Half Ticket* is a powerful symbol of how neoliberalism's focus on external appearances and capital accumulation results in the marginalization of those who do not fit into the idealized image of success. This moment underscores how neoliberal societies often judge individuals based on their economic standing and physical appearance, further entrenching social inequalities and creating a sense of injustice among the less privileged (Cooper, 2019).

CONCLUSION

This research has examined the intricate relationships between family dynamics, societal changes, and the influence of neoliberalism on children's aspirations as depicted in selected Marathi films. Firstly, the analysis reveals that family dynamics play a crucial role in shaping children's aspirations. Films such as *Killa* and *Elizabeth Ekadashi* illustrate how different family structures be it single-parent households or extended family systems significantly impact children's values, behaviors, and aspirations. The nurturing influence of family members, like Naru mama in *Shaala*, serves as a catalyst for growth, instilling in children a sense of identity and ambition. The interactions between child characters and their families often highlight themes of support, resilience, and the transmission of cultural values, creating a nuanced portrayal of how familial relationships can empower or constrain aspirations. Secondly, children's aspirations are closely tied to the societal changes reflected in these films.

As characters navigate transitions from rural to urban settings or from traditional to modern Lifestyles they embody the instability and uncertainty of their environments. The dichotomy between privilege and deprivation, as seen in *Taryanche Bait* and *Half Ticket*, underscores the shifting social landscape and the moral dilemmas children face in pursuing their desires. These representations illuminate the theme of transition, showcasing how societal pressures and economic realities can complicate children's aspirations, leaving them in a state of flux. Lastly, the influence of neoliberalism is intricately woven into the narratives of children's aspirations in these films. The pursuit of material success and the competitive nature of education, as portrayed in *Taryanche Bait*, reflect the broader cultural implications of neoliberal ideology. Characters like Sridhar navigate a landscape where economic pressures dictate personal relationships and aspirations, illustrating the pervasive impact of neoliberal values on everyday life. Recurring themes of consumption, competition, and moral ambiguity emerge as children grapple with the expectations placed upon them by both society and their families, ultimately shaping their aspirations in complex ways.

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