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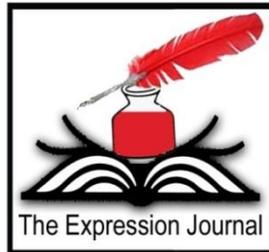
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THE DEPICTION OF THE CULTIVATOR PLIGHT IN AUSHITOSH GWARIKER'S MOVIE *LAGAAN*

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Abstract

Bollywood is one of the leading industries which truly reflects the realities, emotions and the psyche of the people of Indian society. Unlike Hollywood films which depict the apocalyptic and dystopian world with gruesome futuristic weapons and machines hovering over the unreal settings, Bollywood portrays the sighs and sobs of common masses. Indian cinema is historically connected with the Indian culture. Although the Indian cinema is primarily concerned with entertainment, it is also a source of information as it depicts many informative historic events through the movies. Most of the Bollywood directors roll their camera films by keeping their focus on the traditions and customs of the Indian culture but a few of them also try to revive the past history of India i.e. the precarious and horrible conditions under the harsh British rule. Among them Gwarikar is on the frontline to show such worse conditions of the Indian peasants. One of his most famous movie *Lagaan* depicts the plight of poor farmers under the brutal rule of Britishers. The 2001 released movie is set in a hamlet whose inhabitants are overburdened by the *lagan*, a kind of tax imposed by English rulers over them. They find themselves in an extremely complicated state because they are not in a position to pay it as the draught and other natural calamities have left them in an utter penury. Aushitosh through this movie highlights the Machiavellian regime of Britishers over the poor peasants. The present paper will focus on the issue of victimization of the poor Indian peasants as highlighted by Gwarikar through his movie *Lagaan*.

Key-Words

Cultivator, *Lagaan*, Bhuvan, Captain Russel and British Raj.

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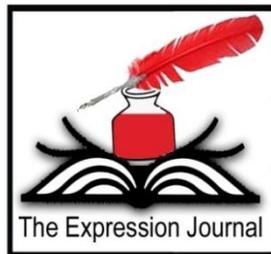
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Bollywood is one of the leading industries which truly reflects the realities, emotions and the psyche of the people of Indian society. Unlike Hollywood films which depict the apocalyptic and dystopian world with gruesome futuristic weapons and machines hovering over the unreal settings, Bollywood portrays the sighs and sobs of common masses. Indian cinema is historically connected with the Indian culture. Although the Indian cinema is primarily concerned with entertainment, it is also a source of information as it depicts many informative historic events through the movies. Most of the Bollywood directors roll their camera films by keeping their focus on the traditions and customs of the Indian culture but a few of them also try to revive the past history of India. i.e. the precarious and horrible conditions under the harsh British rule. Among them Gwarikar is on the frontline to show such worse conditions of the Indian peasants. One of his most famous movie *Lagaan*, depicts the plight of poor farmers under the brutal rule of Britishers. The 2001 released movie is set in a hamlet whose inhabitants are overburdened by the *lagan*, a kind of tax imposed by English rulers over them. They find themselves in an extremely complicated state because they are not in a position to pay it as the draught and other natural calamities have left them in an utter penury. Aushitosh through this movie highlights the Machiavellian regime of Britishers over the poor peasants. The present paper will focus on the issue of victimization of the poor Indian peasants as highlighted by Gwarikar through his movie *Lagaan*.

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Although there were many conquests of India, the British conquest directly differed from all the previous conquests. It had a pronounced and profound impact on India. There was hardly any section of society which could escape the long arms of British colonialism. India being a country with predominance of agriculture, any impact of government on the people turned out to be essentially the impact on the village. With the initiation of British rule, their new land revenue triggered of far reaching changes in rural economy. Britishers introduced a new class of landlords called Zamindars who regarded land as their private property and aimed at obtaining maximum monetary gains out of it. The cultivators, the actual tillers of land where mere tenants with no rights and could be evicted by the land owners. They were forced to produce cash crops to feed the industries in England. It ruined the self-sufficiency of those cultivators which resulted in mass poverty and problem of landlessness. Such an environment deteriorated the conditions of the cultivators resulting in the stagnation of Indian agriculture which ultimately turned India as an agricultural colony of Britain.

Indian cinema has had a long and illustrious run, even more than century. In this century long journey of twists and turns, there have been a few directors who have really made a lasting impact on the Indian society as a whole, one of them is Aushitosh Gwarikar. In this last decade of Indian cinema's century, Aushitosh has left an indelible mark on the pages of Indian cinematic history. A lot of Aushitosh's movies have significant social and societal undertones; they revolve around social issues and demonstrates the face of contemporary Indian society. For the purpose of this research *Lagaan* has been chosen as a representative movie depicting the precarious and dubious conditions of the Indian cultivators under a draconian rule of Britishers.

Colonialism had a far reaching effect on the people right from the soils of the Indian subcontinent to the wild woods of Africa. We find many instances in the movie where Gwarikar has been successful in depicting the miserable conditions of the people who are overburdened by taxes (*Lagaan*). In the movie a village by the name of Champaneer serves as a microcosm for the whole Indian peasant class who are levied heavy taxes by the British government. In the first instance Aushitosh very accurately depicts the life style of the people who are simpletons as the setting demands it because the movie is set in the 1893 colonial India. At that time the natives were considered second class citizens who were often paid less wages than the British workers for the same task. As clearly shown in the movie when Captain Russell a British officer beats Arjan 'a peasant' saying him that "tum salagulam log hamari jhootikeneeche hi rahoge" you bloody slaves will remain under my boots. They were treated with contempt and were often flogged for nothing. The British applied the same kind of apartheid policy in India as they had employed in other African colonized states. No matter how much the farmers toiled in their fields, the harvest ended to fill up the granaries of the British government. Though each and every societal class was

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affected more or less by the coming of the British but the peasant class was worst hit by their cruel policies of imposing heavy annual taxes. The movie *Lagaan* revolves around the story of a small village where the villagers lived under the oppressive rule of the “tribute” system in British Raj, their king was but a dummy and exercised no real power at all and they had to pay high taxes. The king under this “tribute” system had to pay a certain portion of his earnings to the Britishers for the protection of autonomy. Therefore the kings usually levied heavy taxes on agricultural yields so that the Britishers could maximize the earnings. The conditions of peasants were getting worse due to successive years of droughts. As the climatic conditions were also pathetic for the fields and farmer-villagers of Champaneer were barely able to harvest enough crops for sustenance and were not able to pay taxes. As a result they went to their Raja (Raja Puram Singh) to ask for waiver of the taxes, but despite his intention to do so, he is unable to help them as he is also bound by British law. To forward their petition the villagers go to the British officials, who were busy in playing cricket and villagers have to wait till the end of game. During this period Bhuvan, the hot headed youngster of village mocks the foreign game and gets into skirmish with one of the British officers. Taking an instant dislike to Bhuvan, captain Russell offers to waive the taxes for three years if the villagers can beat his men in the game of cricket. The condition, however was that if the villagers lost, they would have to pay three times the amount of their normal taxes (*lagaan*). Bhuvan accepts this challenge on behalf of all the villagers without their consent. When the other villagers learn about the stake, they are furious with Bhuvan. He argues that it is important for everyone to fight against British rule. Bhuvan begins to prepare the villagers for the match. He initially finds only five people willing to join the team. In his efforts Elizabeth, the soft hearted, fair sister of captain Russell joins to support Bhuvan and the other members of the team. She does it because of the reason that she feels her brother has mistreated the villagers. Eventually, as the villagers realize that winning will give them an unprecedented opportunity to gain freedom and as a few of villagers are insulted by British, most of them join the team or come in its support. In spite of creed and caste they became one to fight against the brutal system imposed by Britishers. Short by one player, Bhuvan invites Kachra (an untouchable), who can spin the ball. Gradually after a lot of turbulent moments, Bhuvan succeeds in making a team of his own to take on the British contingent. The second half of the movie focusses on the cricket match itself, which is spread over the period of three days. On the first day, Russell wins the toss and elects to bat, giving the British officers a strong start. Bhuvan brings Kachra into the match only to find that Kachra has somehow lost his ability to spin the ball, because new cricket ball does not spin as compared to worn-down ones. In addition, as a part of his agreement with Russell, Lakha the spy-boy deliberately drops

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many catches. In the evening, Elizabeth sees Lakha meeting with her brother. She races to the village and informs Bhuvan of Lakha's deception. Rather than allowing the villagers to kill him, Bhuvan offers Lakha a chance of redemption. The second day of the match was even more dramatic as the day brought redemption for the Champaneer side. At this point, the British have already figured high numbers on scoreboard, losing only three wickets by the lunch break. Kachra is brought back with an old ball, he takes a hatric which sparks the collapse of British batting side. The villagers soon start their innings, British side took advantage of the inexperience of the Champaneer side with their brutal bowling and continuous sledging; attempts were made on each player of the home side. Hence the villagers' team ends the day with four batsmen out of action with barely a third of the required runs on board. On the third and the final day Bhuvan passes his century, while most of the batsmen on the other end keep walking towards their dugout. The Champaneer side is seen struggling, as most of their batsmen hardly reaching the double figures. Meanwhile Ismail, who had been limping due to an injury returns back to bat with the help of a runner and bats well to pass his half century, reducing the required runs to an attainable total. The game reaches to its climax when the last over is to be bowled and Kachra is on strike. With one ball remaining and the team down five runs, Kachra knocks the ball, managing only a single. However, the umpire signals a no ball thereby providing a chance to Bhuvan to try his fortune. At this very moment it was not only the fortune for Bhuvan but it was the fate of the villagers in the hands of striker. He returns to bat and lifts his bat only to swing it hard at the next ball. The ball goes high up in the sky as it has been struck hard, Captain Russell backpedals and catches the ball, gleefully believing that the British team has won the match. However to his surprise, he realizes that though he has taken a clean catch, he has landed beyond the boundary line. The umpire raises his hands to signal the strike as a six, thus the victory falls over the Bhuvan's team. While the home-side celebrates its victory, nature also bestows them with their most awaited gift of rain thereby ending the harsh drought. Bhuvan's victory over the British team leads to the disbanding of the humiliated cantonment. In addition, Captain Russell is forced to pay the taxes for the whole province and is transferred to central Africa. Thus the movie ends on a note of righteousness where honesty and goodness prevails over deceit and treachery.

Through the movie Gwarikar has beautifully portrayed various shades of human life, behavior and emotions. He shows innate sense of empowerment and the hope which is an individual's greatest strength. Lagaan showed not only to the India but to the whole world the capability of Hindi film industry for its high production values and strong script. It is not just a story but an experience of human life. Though Gwarikar has not used any special effects, he has been very successful in portraying the universal human values through the

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movie. It shows self-esteem, integrity, unity, strength, fighting spirit, inspiration, determination and lot of other things. Kevin Thomas of the *Los Angeles Times* argued that the movie is: "... an affectionate homage to a popular genre that raises it to the level of an art film with fully drawn characters, a serious underlying theme, a sophisticated style and a point of view." In this regard Sudish Kamath in *The Hindu*, suggested that: "... the movie is not just a story. It is an experience. An experience of watching something that puts life into you that puts a cheer on your face, however depressed you might be". *Lagaan* shows the portrayal of the grief-stricken villagers, who come under the umbrella of unity and make a team to fight for their self-determination. The movie is one of the perfect examples which show the devil actually lies in the details. For instance, the team has a Hindu player Bhuvan, a Muslim player Ismail, a Sikh player Deva, people from the then lower classes Lakha, Kachra and Arjan, all coming together to fight against the British Raj. *Lagaan* shows that true hope never dies. Drawing his players from the village outcasts and outsiders Gwarikar unites the farmers in a common front against their colonial exploiters and even the local rajah, whose livelihood depends on the British, is drawn into an excitement of the match. The climatic tournament lasts three days and takes up some eighty minutes of screen time. The dialogues of the movie have been drawn according to the situation and setting of the movie. In addition, Gwarikar has used various new techniques in order to communicate effectively the underlying ideas. First, the use of songs and dances were evident all throughout the film. The music and lyrics are effective tools in seething through the emotions of its audience. Gwarikar has been accurate in the use of songs through which the peasants reveal their inner self. Through these songs he presents an echoing of the past colonial history and the harsh cruelty of the nature. Secondly, Gwarikar has added the sports aspect which is quite entertaining. Through this ingredient, he very precisely demonstrates the struggle of the peasants who fight for their rights. It is not only a game for them, it is a matter of their prestige and livelihood as it is the only way through which they can free themselves from the bondage of paying taxes. He has been very able to present the societal realities and human indignities in a creative way. It is an eye-opener for the audience as it reveals the existence of injustice in a better way. Thus *Lagaan* is an artistic movie handled carefully by Ashutosh, truly depicting the miserable conditions of the poor farmers plunged in a quagmire of severe British rule.

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