**Research Paper**

# Understanding Issues in The Indian Education System Through the Lens of the Movie 3 Idiots (2009)

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**ABSTRACT**

The integration of media and education has highlighted important social issues and created better-informed citizens. Considering the significance of media, the present study is an attempt to examine the issues within the Indian education system through the movie, 3 idiots directed by Vidhu Vinod Chopra. The qualitative method of thematic analysis was used to achieve the objective of the study. The various themes that emerged from the movie were, (i) rat race and rote learning, (ii) societal norms and pressures, (iii) barriers to learning, (iv) authentic education, (v) diversity and inclusive classrooms and (vi) emotional burnout of the students.

***Keywords:*** *Education, India, movies, 3 idiots, learning*

The word "education" derives its roots from the Latin verb, "educere" which refers to "to lead out" Craft (2017). Education refers to the intergenerational transmission of societal knowledge, morals, values and skills (Giusta et al., 2016). It affects the mind, moral character, physical abilities and emotional capacities of an individual (Kumara, 2016). Teaching is one of the oldest professions, which has interested humans since centuries (Johnson, 2016). While not all societies invest equally in education, they do acknowledge the importance of it (Kumara, 2016). Education is used to transmit the norms, cultural accomplishments, moral, values of a society from one generation to another (Giusta et al., 2016).

It also is employed as a mechanism for social classification which further impacts an individual's economic, physical and emotional wellbeing (Kumara, 2016). Education facilitates the members of the society to become fully functioning and autonomous citizens who are equipped with skills and knowledge that enable them to define and pursue their desires and goals (Kumara, 2016). Education and society collaboratively form the education system as they together define the functions of the social system in facilitating educational endeavours and also determine the way in which the educational system would be structured to achieve those functions (Shah, 1965). The education system in India has changed dramatically from the ancient gurukuls to the current formal education system (Valluri, 2018).

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Millions of students graduate in India every year yet most of them are unemployed due to lack of practical skills (Kumar & Sahithi, 2019). There exists a gap between the knowledge of theoretical concepts and their practical application (Kumar & Sahithi, 2019) which needs to be addressed by redefining the existing curriculum to accommodate creativity and the existing technologies which would encourage innovation and efficient problem solving (Thanky, 2013). One of the most prominent ways in which the collaboration of education and technology is realised through media.

Research suggests that students learn better through methods involving multi-media and visuals products as compared to verbal lectures (Hakkâri & Kantar, 2008). Movies are the most consumed form of media (Eeden & Chow, 2020) and also one of the most effective measures to propagate ideas and engage people. Movies when used in the context of education can facilitate innovative learning (Hussain & Ahmad, 2016). Students can observe, imitate and learn from characters in the movies. Thus, keeping in mind the significance of movies in education the present study attempts to explore the issues within the Indian education system through the movie, "3 Idiots" directed by Raj Kumar Hirani and released in 2009.

## METHOD

In light of the above review and pressing issues and concerns, the present study adopts a qualitative, exploratory design with the objective to understand and gain an insight into the issues of the indian education system. Under this view, the researcher attempts to explore the issues within the Indian education system and experiences of students as the victim of it through mainstream media. Since, movies are the most consumed form of media (Eeden & Chow, 2020), To fulfil the objective of the study the movie, "3 idiots" (2009) directed by Raj Kumar Hirani was chosen as the movie for analysis. The movie revolves around three friends, Rancho, Farhan and Raju who meet at Imperial college of engineering (ICE). The movie critically comments and portrays various issues and drawbacks of the Indian education system. The movie challenges these issues and leaves the audience with ideas that could facilitate in bringing about the change which is long due for the Indian education system.

### The rationale for the study

The term 'education' has been subjected to various interpretations by experts from diverse disciplines. While some equate education with formally institutionalised education others view it as a process that involves lifelong learning. The integration of technology, media and education has helped bring forth societal issues and also create better-informed citizens. Since the education system in India is redundant and old (Patel, 2013), there is an urgent need on the part of the media to attend and shape up the public opinion in the context of issues pertaining to education. Hence, there is a need to understand the portrayal of the Indian education system in various media forms like press, radio, television, films and new media.

Keeping in mind the importance of media in understanding issues pertaining to the education system, the movie 3 Idiots directed by Raj Kumar Hirani was chosen for analysis (Hirani, 2009). The movie was released over a decade ago, in 2009. It was one of the first movies that took a dig on the Indian education system. The movie touches upon various issues within the education system such as rote learning, redundant teaching methods, lack of imagination and creativity, to name a few. Another reason for choosing this movie was

that it is India's highest-grossing movie even after eleven years of its release (Box Office India, 2020).

The movie earned over 60 million USD worldwide (The numbers, 2020). This indicates that it was largely consumed and appreciated globally, and there is a dire need to analyse such popular media products as it contributes significantly to the process attitude formation of the audiences. Thus, a movie like 3 idiots, which speaks volumes about the attitudes towards the education system was selected. The film accurately defines the negative outcomes of the current educational practices like rote learning. The movie brings forth the importance of critical thinking and creativity. The movie talks promote knowledge acquisition through learning instead of mindless cramming of textbooks. It encourages students to ask questions and educators to address the student's inquisition instead of dismissing it. Most importantly the movie targets the societal attributes of the education system which, if imparted accurately can help improve the accountability, responsiveness and transparency of the current education system. Thus, keeping in mind the above-mentioned factors along with the underlying potential of the movie to initiate a conversation about developing and propagating novel approaches to education, the movie, 3 idiots (2009) was selected.

*Procedure*
The procedure for conducting this research was divided into six stages. Stage I involved an extensive literature review of the studies which focused on the theme of education and media globally and in India. In stage II, the author watched the movie multiple times to ensure no scene or aspect of the movie was ignored. Stage III involved selecting the relevant scenes, keeping in mind the dialogue, intent, context and underlying meaning. Transcription and translation of the relevant scenes from Hindi to English was done in stage IV. The dialogues were coded at stage V and stage VI involved the creation of themes and sub-themes.

*Data Analysis*
Since qualitative analysis is referred to as extensive and multifaceted (Holloway & Todres, 2003), a grounded thematic analysis was employed to analyse the movie. Braun and Clarke (2006) in their work define thematic analysis as "a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (p.79). Furthermore, the thematic analysis contributes to generating "qualitative analyses suited to informing policy development" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.97). The generated themes were analysed in view of the existing evidence and research studies.

## FINDINGS & DISCUSSION
The study was initiated with an aim to explore the issues within the Indian education system as portrayed in mainstream media. The various themes that emerged from the scenes include, rat race and rote learning, societal norms and pressures, barriers to learning, authentic education, diversity and inclusive classrooms and emotional burnout of the students. Each of these themes is discussed below

*Rat Race and Rote Learning*
Rote learning refers to the process of memorizing information without considering its meaning and practical significance (Duff et. al., 2003). The movie challenges the method of rote learning and mindless cramming which facilitates a conversation where individuals could empirically analyse the effectiveness of such methods. According to Dore (1976), the

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Indian education system is infected with "diploma disease" (Dore, 1976). Where the test scores and grades are given priority over enjoying the process of learning. The current education scenario in India quantifies education in terms of marks and test scores which unduly pressurises the students, teachers as well as parents (Majumdar & Mooiji, 2012).

Schools actively discriminate between the high rankers and low rankers, like in the movie the first rankers got to sit with the director of the university while others had to stand at the back when posing for the class photograph. Some high schools provide different colours of uniform to the scholars such that they look "different" from the crowd. These schools use the innocence and sentiments of the students to pressurise them such that they receive high scores on the tests. This type of social segregation instils fear of discrimination which then promotes a rat race, where one student is trying to outshine the other. In such a rat race, the students no longer care about learning and expanding their knowledge base but to get better scores than others. instead of understanding the content and enjoying the process of learning. A study conducted by Bergin and colleagues, (1995) indicated that competition in education creates a hostile environment where students sacrifice learning for performance. These students experience decreased enjoyment, self-worth, self-esteem and increased levels of test anxiety (Bergin & Cooks, 1995)

Higher education in Indian propagates a mechanical system and promotes rat race. Where the students are expected to memorise the information and replicate that on their answer sheets. Since the goal is to get high scores, the focus is not on retention of the information. Since this rat race is all about quantifying the performance in marks no room is left for analytical thinking and creativity which is why most of the graduates perform poorly on aptitude and decision-making tasks which makes them incapable of joining the workforce. Research suggests that rote learning is an effective method as it focuses on memorization and surface-level passive learning (Niswati, 2016; Gu & Johnson, 1996; Klemm, 2007; Li, 2004).

To be more precise the Indian education not only promotes a rat rate for marks but also encourages an unhealthy form of competition among the students. The system creates mechanical robots who are programmed to focus on the reward of education (high scores) instead of actively participating in the process of acquiring knowledge. The students are not only expected to perform good but also to outshine others. They are constantly reminded that if they would not study, some other students would walk over them. An inflated sense of pride is instilled in the students from a very young age to be the "topper" and to be first. This kind of mindless dog-eat-dog mentality is very harmful to the mental as well as physical health of the students. Individuals who cannot cope up with such pressures students indulge in maladaptive behaviours such as cheating. Some of the students end up harming themselves and also others. Students are primed that life is a competition and if they are not fit, they shall not be able to survive. The system scares the students into believing that education is a serious business and not something they can even think of gaining happiness from.

*Societal Norms and Pressures*
The concept of filial piety is of utmost importance to the eastern cultures (Sarma, 2014). The parents take pride in their child's success and often make sacrifices to ensure their wellbeing. They also set up certain levels of expectations from their children especially academically (Fuligni & Pederson, 2002). These expectations often times are way over the

child's capabilities which lays undue pressure on them. Students who are unable to meet their parents' expectations feel ashamed and guilty (Chow & Chu, 2007). Students feel overwhelmed and "over the edge" due to the pressure which is noted to be one of the major causes of student suicide in India (Bertolote et. al., 2004). It is not uncommon in India for parents to experience nervous breakdowns, anxiety, increased stress levels and sleep deprivation when their children have to take exams (Boruah, 2014; Mohan, 1975). The academic excellence of students is a matter of pride for their parents. Not all academic disciplines are valued equally in India, subjects like sciences, engineering are considered to be prestigious and superior to liberal arts, which is usually looked down upon (Roysircar, et. al., 2010). Thus, parents often force their children to pursue an education in the "prestigious" disciplines and not much consideration is given to the child's interests and curiosities (Gupta & Tracey, 2005).

The movie accurately depicts the negative impact of a parent's irrational and unrealistic expectations on the child's academic performance and mental health. Raju despite being a bright student could not realise his full potential because he was afraid of failures as he was under a lot of pressure to look after his family, take care of his ill father and get his sister married. When the director of ICE suspends him from the college, he succumbs to the pressure and attempts to commit suicide. Research suggests that academic stress is a strong predictor of suicidality (Le et. al., 2012). Another study pointed out that in India, the rates of suicide committed due to academic stress are higher than the rates of suicide committed due to mental illnesses (Jacob, 2008).

Similarly, Farhan's father did not acknowledge his dream of being a wildlife photographer and instead forced him to become an engineer. Most of the students in India are primed since childhood to pursue certain careers. Parents often impose their unfulfilled career aspirations and dream in the pursuit of realizing them through their children. Most of the children are primed to pursue specific disciplines since their childhood and are not given the opportunity to explore other options. As these children grow up, they assume that they are inclined towards these career pursuits but in reality, their parents have manufactured their consent. More often than not, these students realise after entering the field and practically experiencing it that they maybe are not the right fit for it. Given the parental pressure and high financial and emotional investments already made, the students tend to not drop out of these programs which leads to increased levels of job dissatisfaction which then contributes to overall life dissatisfaction.

### *Barriers to Learning*
The commercialization of education leads to the creation of various private schools in India. The private schools provide better quality education and focus on the holistic development of the children. These schools for-profit institutions which are not regulated by the government and thus, are allowed to create their own fee structures which are usually extravagant (Borgohain, 2016). These schools provide quality education but are not affordable for everybody thus increasing the gap between rich and poor. The children of parents who cannot afford private schools, go to public schools, and the infrastructure and quality of education there is rock-bottom low. Thus, the children are not qualified to join the workforce and the vicious cycle of poverty continues. The education system in India is the third-largest in the world after China and the United States of America, in terms of students and is heavily dominated by the private sector (Sheikh, 2017). Over the years the number of universities and enrollments have increased significantly (Shaguri, 2013) but the quality of

education has not witnessed any significant advancements (Mitra, 2008). The parents and the students are paying the price for the country's deplorable education system (Thomas, 2015). The tuition fees for medical school or engineering are skyrocketing. Institutes like FIIT-JEE, AAKASH which are cram schools and do not even render a formal degree but "prepare" the students to crack entrance exams for medical and engineering colleges charge thousands of dollars.

The issues of discrepancy in the demand and supply of educational facilities are well documented in the movie. In the scene where, during orientation the director of ICE proudly explains to the students that every year over four hundred thousand students apply at ICE, and only 200 are selected. He emphasis on the race everybody is in to achieve the best. He preaches that "Life is a race, and if you won't run, you would be like a broken egg". The issues relating to the expense of education are also touched upon, where the washerman of ICE could not get an education because he was unable to afford the fees of the school. In another scene, Farhan's father mentions that they did not have enough money and could afford only one air conditioner which they installed in Farhan's so he could study peacefully. Parents often take loans to pay for the formal education of their children, and thus expect "returns" out of the investment so made, thus then pushing their children in the vicious circle of expectation and failures.

*Authentic education*
Authentic education encourages students to explore, follow their passion and be inquisitive. Authentic education rejects methods like rote learning and attempt to bridge the gap between theortecial knowledge and practical application of it (Pearce, 2016). Since authentic learning adopts a learning by doing approach, there is a constant craving for knowledge and learning among students. In the movie, the character of Rancho expresses the ideas of authentic learning. despite of being repeatedly told that education is not something to enjoy and it is a serious business, students like rancho are not satisfied with the limited knowledge given in the books and often wish to explore fare and above it. Students nowadays acknowledge that money cannot be their only priority and emphasis is given on happiness, job satisfaction and overall life satisfaction. It is eminent for students to draw meaning from the information they have learned and the best way to do that is to relate it to situations in the real world.

The intrinsic motivation to learn, reflect, be creative and the ability to critically analyse and point of the redundancy of traditional methods is the core of the principle of authentic education. To create an environment for authentic learning, students cannot be kept in the cage or asked to go by the rules, the basic requirement to promote authentic learning to to create an environment that is free from rules and "bondages", it is wise to bond with the students and not to bondage them. It is essential for students to follow their passion, put themselves over money and use the theoretical knowledge to invent novel ways. As for students in India, teachers and parents measure the level of their knowledge by comparing it to the marks they obtain on exams which created undue pressure and stress on the students. When learning is measured through numbers, the students refuse to learn anything that is not part of the curriculum or would be asked on the "test" thus killing the instrict motivation to learn. Authetic education on the other hand, makes learning a pleasurable activity. It focuses on contextual learning which equips the students with essential life skills. Unlike rote learning which focus on acquisition and recall of information and recall, authentic education focuses on acquisition of information followed by making sense of meaning of it and utilizing it to solve real life problems (Wiggins & McTighe, 2011). Research sugegsts that

through authentic learning we can enhance our classroom experience by breakdown the power within the education system (Steventon, 2016). Authentic learning can the educators as well in their assessment and learning as it helps them to view the world from the student's standpoint. Authenticity in education paves way for relevance which promotes enthusiasm and engagement and together the entire process creates a meaningful learning experience (Pearce, 2016).

### *Diversity and Inclusive Classrooms*

Education in India is segregated on the basis of one's socio-economic status. The parents of children who cannot afford private schools resort to public schools, which as mentioned above widens the gap between the rich and poor. Given the diversity in India, the education system needs to be accommodative and welcoming to all the students. Scholars have critiqued the education system and recommended to create inclusive classrooms where students from all socio-economic statuses learn together (Jha, 2001). The current education system should adopt to the needs students and not otherwise. In the movie rancho highlights the importance of inclusive classrooms and including individual differences as he mentions the importance of recognisizng one's passion and talents. The movie breaks the "one size fits all" approach and challenges the dominant paradigms of segregating and commercializing knowledge. By creating inclusive classrooms, we can strengthen the current education system and reach out to every learner. Acknowledging the fact that every child is unique and working along with these individual differences is what is meant by the essence of inclusive classrooms. Inclusivity is often seen as including the disabled with the abled here the argument that opposes this judgement is that inclusive education also includes divergent thinking, thinking that challenges the common and the mainstream paradigm, students who question the teachers, and their methods, ask them about the rationale about the steps are also to be included for which inclusive classrooms are required.

### *Emotional Burnout*

According to Freudenberge (1989), burnout syndrome refers to intense physical and emotional exhaustion caused due to excessive demands on the individual. To put in simpler words, burnout is over-expenditure of force, energy or resources. In the movie, the emotional burnout is illustrated through the song "give me some sunshine" that expresses the mental pressure endured by the students due to the constant academic stress and uncertainty regarding their future. Researchers like Fuehrer & McGonagle (1988) have tried to explore the reasons behind burnout among college students. The research highlighted those students are likely to experience high levels of stress during examinations and develop severe distress at the recruitment stage.

Moreover, expectations from the family and professors along with academic commitments, and workload add to the difficulties of a student. In India, the burnout rates for students are extremely high which is a consequence of relentless pressure of the academic syllabus. The fear of failure takes over the joy of learning and by the time students graduate they are physically and emotionally drained. The movie accurately depicts that the pressure on the students kills their passion and intrinsic motivations to learn. Joy, who designed a drone ended up killing himself as he was not able to put up with the pressure of the expectations of his parents and teachers. Often in the quest of pleasing others, the students ignore their mental health. Researches indicate that burnout negatively impacts an adolescent's academic performance (Yang, 2004; Kutsal & Bilge, 2012). Burnout is also positively related to lack of social support from teachers, family and peers (Boudreau et.al., 2004).

## CONCLUSION

The movie 3 idiots although released in 2009, hold relevance even today. The movie is an accurate representation of the current education system in India. The director challenges the dominant paradigm and poses some difficult questions which can be answered taking cue from the movie. For decades, education is considered as a rat race, where every student is trying to outshine the other. The redundancy of the teaching methods is such that, the students are not motivated to learn anything that would not be asked on the test. One's knowledge is measured through the marks they obtain and the rank they hold. The movie covers the theme of parental expectations and the emotional burnout the stduents experience because of this. The expenses to get quality education expands the already huge rich-poor divide socio-economic divide in India. The movie accurately promotes principles of authentic education and the need for more diverse and inclusive classrooms. There is an urgent need to analyse the existing educational policies laid out by the central government. The redundant policies need to be abandoned and new policies which would accomodate the latest advancements in technologies should be created. Additionally, as documented in the movie, there is a dire need to reduce the demand and supply gap within the education system. Efforts need to be made to make high quality education accessible to all groups irrespective of their socio-economic status or class The education system needs to adopt a student centric approach and transparency needs to be established between policy makers and the students as well as educators. It is essential to focus on rectifying the flaws of the education system and revamping it to fit the needs of the 21st century.

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