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Prof Shrinivasa Varakhedi
Prof Gauri Mahulikar

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Understanding Vedānta through Films (A Pedagogical model)
A Case Study of 'Matrix'

Shakuntala Gawde[1]

Introduction

Indian Philosophy has reached across the globe. It is popular for its practical way towards life. Study of Indian philosophy should be a part of all streams of education.

Film is effective tool of communication. It attracts all generations and makes strong impression in the mind. Film is always considered as an effective tool in Pedagogy. Philosophy deals with abstract concepts and correlation of these concepts with logical reasoning. It deals with the complex problems of reality. People have notion that philosophy is a dry and theoretical subject.

Students can understand complex philosophical ideas if they are demonstrated through films. There are films based on biographies of philosophers, life picture of great people, incidences in life of philosophers. But it can attract only limited number of audience.

Some popular Hollywood films have amalgamation of science fiction, super natural elements, fantastic story guided by some philosophical principles. Such films attract audience from

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different strata. Viewer is totally captivated by extraordinary super natural and fictional elements in the film. As a result, certain philosophical principles are taught to audience without their conscious effort. Teaching philosophy (*Kāntāsammita upadeśa*) with the means of such films can be definitely effective tool in Pedagogy.

Such practise will not only create liking for Indian Philosophy but will result in effective understanding of complex ideas. It can create awareness that Indian Philosophy is embraced across the globe, there are no boundaries for philosophical deliberations and there are certain common threads in different philosophical schools. Paper takes case study of popular movie 'Matrix' to explain the principles of Advaita Vedānta and proves that 'film and philosophy' can be a new model in pedagogy.

(a) Pedagogical Model for teaching Vedānta Philosophy: Philosophy can be made interesting to students with the pedagogical model **'Film and Philosophy'**. Conceptual ideas of philosophy are better understood with films. Selection of film for teaching particular philosophical ideology is a task which is to be done by a teacher.

1. Matrix- understanding Kevalādvaita Vedānta Philosophy
2. Inception- Gauḍapāda's dream theory
3. Unbreakable- Philosophy of dualism
4. Dark city- Theory of Adhyāsa

These four films were selected at initial level for teaching philosophical ideas. Case study of Matrix is presented here to explain the process of Pedagogy. Different pedagogical methods and techniques are used in this model. Verbal learners, auditory learners and visual learners benefit from this model. Classroom teaching may be beneficial to only verbal learners. Auditory learners and visual learners feel much deprived in that case. Film presents musical as well as visual effects which prove effective way of teaching to such type of leaners. Methods which

are implemented while practising this model can be cited as follows:

(b) Pedagogical techniques: Simulations: In normal classroom teaching, there is great possibility that students can find tough to understand abstract as well complex philosophical ideas presented through *bhāṣyas*. Interest is maintained throughout the session when film is shown and student is given free scope to think upon.

Demonstration: Concepts are understood in better manner when they are demonstrated. Philosophical concepts are demonstrated through characters, incidences and different visuals.

Story telling: Story is effective tool of teaching. Whole philosophical ideology is narrated through a story of film. Generally ideas learnt through stories are not forgotten but get fixed in mind.

Role play: Philosophical ideas are effectively communicated through characters of the film. Neo, Trinity, Cypher, Morpheus are representative of particular philosophical phenomenon. They convey ideas through their expressions.

Case studies: Film is taken as case study for application of particular philosophical school. Students can enhance their skill of application through this type of pedagogical model.

(c) Pedagogical methodology: Film 'Matrix' was shown to audience with a special purpose of teaching Vedānta philosophy. While doing so, audience was given total freedom to enjoy the movie at first hand. Interpretation of the movie from Vedantic perspective was followed to make the concepts more clear. Case study of matrix was fit into following pedagogical model.

1. **Watching the film and enjoying it:** Audience enjoyed the movie without keeping into mind any particular perspective. They enjoyed the supernatural elements as well as tried to understand the message conveyed by the film without any particular bias.

2. **Explaining film from Vedantic perspective:** Concepts from Kevalādvaita **Vedānta** were explained with co-relation to the film. Concepts of māyā, adhyāsa, jaganmithyātva and Satyatva were explained in co-relation with the film.

3. **Question answer session:** Students are given full scope to ask questions. They can share their views about movie. More detailed clarifications regarding the philosophical phenomena are given. Students gain more knowledge about particular phenomena when enquired.

4. **Discussion:** Students share views and their philoso-phical understanding about the film. Students don't have to play passive role in learning process but their views are considered valuable. There can be even scope for team based learning.

(d) Case Study : The Matrix is a 1999 science fiction film written and directed by The Wachowskis, starring Keanu Reeves, Laurence Fishburne, Carrie-Anne Moss, Hugo Weaving, and Joe Pantoliano. It states the journey of hero 'Neo' who is aspiring to know reality. He is struggling between illusory world and the real world.

Neo, Morpheus and Trinity are three important characters in the film. Neo is struggling between two worlds- digital world and real world. Entire story is interwoven into science fiction. All beings are living into digital world and this world is taken as real by all. Neo somewhere feels that world in which we live is not real, there is something real beyond this. Neo receives messages from Trinity which helped him to go towards reality. Morpheus is the person who confronts Neo with reality.Neo though instructed by Morpheus, he is not able to comprehend reality but he understands reality at the end on his own with experience.

Philosophy of matrix is coated in science fiction which makes the film full of *adbhuta* rasa. Science fiction which is embedded

in the film says that the world we consider real is digital world called matrix. Matrix is created by machines which are using humans as batteries to create power. Real world is far ahead than this digital world. Real world is in the year 2020 but digital world is in year 1991. Human beings are programmed machines or slaves.

Digital world is simply projection in which every human being is living with happiness as well as sorrow. Digital world is shown as the world of materialistic pleasures. Behaviour of every person is conditioned by assuming this world as reality. Reflections of Advaita Vedānta are found in this movie. Entire movie can be interpreted and explained through the viewpoint of Advaita Vedānta.

(e) Philosophical ideas explained through film

(i) **Neo as *sādhaka* : *mumukṣu* attaining *mokṣa*** - Film shows the journey of Neo towards realization of truth. Philosophical truths get revealed to the viewer in very subtle manner. Film depicts Neo as 'chosen one' or who is destined to know the reality. Neo had to make choice between knowing truth and remaining ignorant. At the beginning of movie, Neo is shown very much curious to know about the reality. This is the pre-requisite of knowing Brahman even in *Uttaramīmāṁsā*.[1] Entire movie shows the difficult path through which Neo had to go. *KaṭhUp* says in this regard that path towards reality is very difficult like sharp knife to tread upon.[2] Morpheus plays the role of preceptor (*guru*) in the life of Neo. Morpheus has himself realized the truth and wants to impart the knowledge to Neo. Neo went through rigorous training given by Morpheus. Neo ultimately attains the truth at the end of movie.

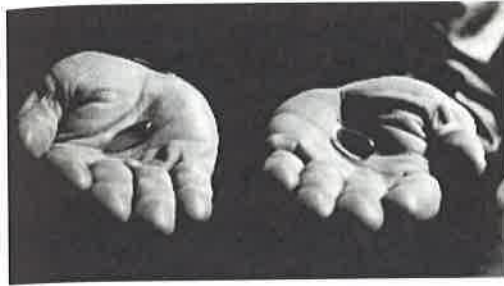(ii) **Concept of *Viveka*: *jñāna* (path of knowledge)** - Kevalādvaita Vedānta gives utmost importance to knowledge.

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1. Brahmasutra I.1.1
   अथातो ब्रह्मजिज्ञासा
2. *KaṭhUp* I.3.14 b
   क्षुरस्य धारानिशितादुरत्ययायादुर्गपथस्तत्कवयो वदन्ति।

Jñānāt mokṣah is the fundamental principle. Same principle was found highlighted in the film Matrix. Morpheus gives option to Neo whether he wants to go for the path of knowledge or not. He offers Red and Blue pill. Morpheus clearly says - "After this, there is no turning back. You take the blue pill - the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill - you stay in Wonderland, and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes. Red pill symbolizes painful path of reality whereas blue pill symbolizes blissful path of ignorance.Morpheus says - 'Remember, all I'm offering is the truth.' This is totally similar to the concept of *Śreyas* and *Preyas* which comes in *KaṭhUp*. If one selects *Śreyas* over *Preyas* attains Supreme goal. Whosoever chooses *Preyas*, keeps on revolving in the wheel of birth and death. 'Path of reality' is always difficult whereas 'path of ignorance' is blissful in the beginning but sorrowful in the end. This is explained with the *Ratharūpaka* in *KaṭhUp*. Chariot is assumed as body, mind as the reins, senses are horses, and objects are roads.[1] One who has discursive intellect (*viveka*) gets freed from the cycle of birth and death[2] whereas one who lacks this goes to death again and again.[3] Wise person

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1. *KathUp* I.3.3
   आत्मानं रथिनं विद्धि शरीरं रथमेव तु।
   बुद्धिं तु सारथिं विद्धि मनः प्रग्रहमेव च।।
2. Ibid I.3.9
   स तु तत्पदमाप्नोति यस्माद्भूयो न जायते।
   सोऽध्वनः पारमाप्नोति।
3. Ibid I.3.7
   न स तत्पदमाप्नोति संसारं चाधिगच्छति

chooses *Śreyas* over *Preyas*.[1] In the film, Neo chooses red pill, a path towards truth which may be very difficult but having bliss as result. There is one more character Cypher who even after knowing the path towards reality chooses to live in material world.

He says -'I know this steak doesn't exist. I know that when I put it in my mouth, the Matrix is telling my brain that it is juicy and delicious. After nine years, you know what I realize? [Takes a bite of steak] Ignorance is bliss.' Cypher chooses *Preyas* because it's always blissful to senses. He is also the example of a person who gets deviated from the path of knowledge or one who knows the reality theoretically but lack in experience. Therefore, he is happy to live in *vyāvahārika* world. Such a person goes to the continuous cycle of birth and death as said in *KathUp*.[2] At the end of the movie, Neo realizes the truth and attains Supreme goal.

(iii) Bondage: *Saṁsāra* (Cycle of birth and death) Morpheus immediately takes him to the path of reality. Here again everything is presented into the covering of science fiction. Neo is laid down on a chair where all chords are attached to electronic instruments. Neo is attached to many chords. Here chords can be taken as symbolic of kārmic bonds. As far as

1. Ibid I.2.2
    श्रेयो हि धीरोऽभिप्रेयसो वृणीते ।
2. Ibid II.1.10
    मृत्यो: समृत्युमाप्नोति य इह नानेव पश्यति ।

any person is tied to *karmans* cannot get freedom. Morpheus therefore says in the film, there is necessity of getting unplugged about which people are apprehensive. Neo went on journey of reality where he had to go through the reverse process of birth. He is shown to be travelling from the womb. He is connected to many chords, has attained form like a baby. Then he gets freed from all chords. This whole journey is depicted as very painful to Neo. This represents the pain and suffering involved in the process of birth which is rightly penned by Śaṅkara as –"*punarapi jananam punarapi maraṇam punarapi jananī jaṭhare śayanam..*"Great suffering of *Saṁsāra* is shown in the journey of Neo towards reality. There can be no best visual for this than shown in the film matrix. Many people are in the process of birth and death is very effectively conveyed by the scene. Neo gets freed from all types of bondages ultimately.

(iv) Concept of *Māyā* and *jaganmithyātva*: Illusory and Real: Morpheus instructs Neo about the difference between projected world and real world. Morpheus and Neo get involved into fight scene in which Morpheus wins. Morpheus says that I'm trying to free your mind. I can only show you the door; you are the one who must walk through it. Here he clearly cites the difference between 'knowing the path' and 'walking the path'.
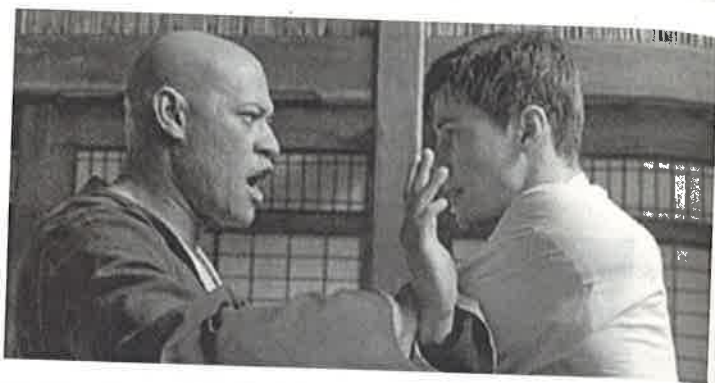
Then Morpheus says 'stop trying to hit me' but 'hit me'. You are faster than me. Don't think you are but know you are. Neo says 'I thought- It was not real'. Morpheus replied that your mind makes it real. When Neo considers himself faster than Morpheus then he could win.

These dialogues resemble *adhyāsabhāṣya* of Śaṅkara where he talked about knowing the Self. Neo is not able to defeat Morpheus because he is not aware of his own power. *Sthuloham, kāṇoham, gauroham, klīboham, saṅkalpavān aham* etc expressions are nothing but the result of superimposition of senses, body, mind and intellect on soul. *Adhyāsa* is defined by Śaṅkara as-understanding particular thing that which is not.[1] Soul gets freed only when it is freed from all these limiting adjuncts. Neo when realizes the truth is capable to defeat Morpheus, then he jumps from tall storeyed building without single injury. These visuals are created to suggest the immortality of the soul.

Morpheus explains the conflict between illusion and reality with nice example. Morpheus asks question- 'Have you ever had a dream, Neo, that you were so sure was real? What if you were unable to wake from that dream? How would you know the difference between the dream world and the real world?

Same logic is provided in *Gauḍapādakārīkā* to falsify the *jāgrat* state. It is proved in *Vaitathya Prakaraṇa*, that *Jāgrat* and

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1. Adhyāsabhāṣya अतस्मिंस्तद्बुद्धिः ।

Svapna are identical on the basis of argument that both consists multiplicity.[1]*Svapna* is considered *vitatha* (false) because one experiences its falsity when one wakes up. It has beginning and end which is again a similar characteristic of waking state.[2] Similarly, when person wakes from the sleep of *māyā* then knows the falsity of waking state and knows the truth.[3] As far as we are in this world of *māyā* - we find this world real, every incidence as real. In the film Morpheus says - 'free your mind...don't think what you are not...' one should get free from the notions of I'm strong, I'm weak, I' m fat, I'm thin, I'm intelligent - all is *adhyāsa* in the language of Śaṅkara.

Morpheus clearly says to Neo -'you have been living in a dream world, Neo'. Morpheus says 'Welcome to the desert of real'. This definition of reality is again very close to the monistic approach of philosophy. A phrase 'Desert of real' suggest that reality is without any differences, illusory objects or misleading shiny appearances. It clearly connotes that - There is no difference existing at all. According to Advaita Vedānta, this world is unreal because it is full of differences. Difference is temporary and therefore illusory. Variety is just due to different names and forms as said in *ChāUp*.[4] It means whatever we experience in this world is not real. It is simply interpretation of our senses, mind, brain and intellect. Advaita Vedānta considers *bheda* as *mithyā*. Brahman i.e. true reality is far beyond apparent differences. It is described as *nirguṇa, nirākāra, nirviśeṣa.*

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1. Gauḍapādakārīkā II.5
   स्वप्नजागरितस्थाने ह्योकमाहुर्मनीषिण:।
   भेदानां हि समत्वेन प्रसिद्धेनैव हेतुना।।
2. Ibid II.6
   आदावन्ते च यन्नास्ति वर्तमानेऽपितषाथा।
   वितथै: सदृशा: सन्तोऽवितथा इव लक्षिता:।।
3. Ibid I.16
   अनादिमायया सुप्तो यदा जीव: प्रबुध्यते।
   अजमनिद्रमस्वप्नमद्वैतं बुध्यते तदा।।
4. *Chā Up* VI.1.4 वाचारम्भणं विकारोनामधेयं मृत्तिकेत्येव सत्यम्।

Morpheus says - World you see, smell, taste is simply electrical signals interpreted by your brain. Vedānta says mind etc are *upādhis*. Limiting adjuncts like senses, body, mind and intellect give finite view about the reality. What we call real is through our lenses of sense organs, mind and brain. Reality is much beyond this. Trinity says in the film- "Matrix cannot tell who you are" Vedanta says that one cannot know the truth as

far as one is in bondage of limiting adjuncts. *KathUp* says Ātman as far more superior than *indriyas,* mind and intellect.[1] *KathUp* says that God created holes in the form of *indriyas* which are outward. Therefore, we always see outer world, we never see inside. Wise person turns these senses inward and realize the Self.[2] Neo is representative of wise person who negates the external world. Though he lives in matrix, tries to know the true nature of reality.

There is a scene where Neo went to a lady to know whether he is the 'chosen' one. This lady is represented in the film as messenger of oracle. Many amazing things are shown in this

1. *KathUp* I.3.8
   इन्द्रियेभ्यश्चपराह्यर्था: अर्थेभ्यश्च परं मन:।
   मनसस्तु परा बुद्धि: बुद्धेरात्मा महान्पर:।।
2. Ibid II.1.1
   पराञ्चि खानि व्यतृणत्स्वयम्भूस्तस्मात्पराङ्पश्यति नान्तरात्मन्।
   कश्चिद्धीर: प्रत्यगात्मानमैक्षदावृत्तचक्षुरमृतत्वमिच्छन्।।

house. People living in this house are mystic. There is a small boy serene and detached focussing on the spoon. When Neo enquires about that, he says don't try to spin the spoon but understand that there is no spoon. Here again the concept of *mithyātva* of all differences gets reflected as accepted by Vedāntins. Reality is never regarded as object of sense experience but always beyond sense experience.

(i) Sattātraya siddhānta: 'Matrix' is the title and keyword of the film. Neo wants to know reality of Matrix- a world in which he lives, a world in which he is caught. Matrix can be interpreted as *Vyavaharikī sattā* created due to *Māyā* which is illusory. There are limitations in the material world. All

knowledge is conditioned by sense organs, mind and intellect. Morpheus uttered this fact – 'Matrix is digital world controlled by machines.' Therefore all are controlled and therefore lack freedom. Everyone enjoys in this world considering it as real. Jagat according to Śaṅkara is the appearance of different temporary objects due to Māya. Māya is two-fold: *āvaraṇakara* (conceals the truth), *Vividhavicitravikṣepakarā* (projects multiple objects). Brahman is not perceived due to Māya and people are deluded due to its projections.

Neo in the film is curious to know the truth. He is not ready to tolerate that he is controlled. He is aspiring for freedom.

Morpheus says while explaining Matrix- 'It is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth'. Neo asks 'What truth'? Morpheus says -'That you are a slave'. I'm trying to free your mind, Neo. But I can only show you the door. You're the one that has to walk through it. Morpheus clearly said that truth is to be experienced. This concept goes very much near to the idea of *sākṣātkāra*. Brahman cannot be seen, heard, touched, desired or thought. It can be known only through *sākṣātkāra*.[1] True reality exists in *Pāramārthika* level i.e. level which is different from worldly level.

(ii) Mokṣa : **freedom from bondage :** Morpheus emphasises the fact that Neo has to free his mind in order to see the truth. He says 'You have to let it all go, Neo - fear, doubt, and disbelief. Free your mind.This idea coincides with the concept of 'amanībhāva given in *Gauḍapādakārīkā*. It is nothing but freedom from bondage. Desire of person is responsible for *karmans* and *karmans* for bondage.

Concept of 'Grace of god' gets reflected in the film Matrix. Neo is chosen by Oracle to know the true reality. This concept is not there in Advaita Vedānta but accepted by Vaiṣṇava Vedāntins. *KathUp* says in this direction - one realizes the ātman when ātman exhibits its own form to the chosen one. [2]

Concept of *Jīvanmukta* also gets reflected in the film. Neo resembles the person liberated at the end of movie. In the climax scene of matrix, Neo realizes the truth on his own. Neo's fight with agents is shown with special effects. Agents push Neo when the train is about to come and it is the moment when audience thinks that Neo will die. In fraction of second, Neo jumps and then trains passes. Here the lesson given by Morpheus is realized

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1. *KenUp* I.2
   श्रोत्रस्य श्रोत्रं मनसो मनो यद्वाचोह वाचं स उ प्राणस्य प्राण: ।
   चक्षुषश्चक्षुरतिमुच्यधीरा: प्रेत्यास्माल्लोकादमृता भवन्ति ।।
2. *KathUp* I.2.23
   नायमात्माप्रवचनेन लभ्यो न मेधया न बहुना श्रुतेन ।
   यमेवैष वृणुते तेन लभ्यस्तस्यैष आत्मा विवृणुते तनूं स्वाम् ।।

by Neo that if mind thinks 'I'm faster' then I really become faster'. Then Neo jumps with utmost speed. When Agents shot Neo with bullet, Neo realizes that he is beyond any limitation of birth and death. Many bullets passed through him, but he still lived. Key concept of Advaita Vedānta - *jñānāt mokṣaḥ* gets reflected here. In the climax of the film, Neo realizes the truth which was told by Morpheus at different times. *Jīvanmukta* once liberated goes beyond every worldly limitation. Film visualized this fact in much fantasized manner with the help of bullet scenes. Neo has gone beyond all finite limitations and therefore cannot be dead by bullets. Here the concept of *sadyo mukti* also can be correlated because the moment when Neo realizes the truth goes beyond all worldly limitations.

Conclusions

1. Science fiction attracts the audience of all age. Matrix is totally based on science fiction. When philosophy is conveyed through science fiction, students don't even realize that they have learnt any philosophical ideas. Outer fabric of film is covered by science fiction and inner layers are about complex philosophy. Fight between the team of Neo, Morpheus, Trinity and Agents on the terrace of extremely tall storeyed building has presented some awful, wondrous and amazing moments for audience. Scenes are not just limited to delineation of *adbhuta*, *raudra* or *bhayanaka* rasa but suggests philosophy in very subtle manner. Neo came to know about superpowers hidden in him, realized and experienced the same. Ignorance is that when one is not aware about one's own self. Knowledge is when one realizes 'I'm Brahman'. Neo realizes that he is not controlled by anything in reality and therefore fights with agents with full prowess.

2. Concept of Māyā, illusory world, negation of differences, immortality of the soul, temporary nature of the world are very well understood from the film 'Matrix'. Matrix has shown the journey of Neo who ultimately realizes truth and goes beyond birth and death. Concept of *mokṣa* and *jīvanmukta* are exemplified

through the character of Neo. Truth is explained in the film through the idea of negation which coincides with the Vedantic method of *neti neti*.

3. This method of Pedagogy was adopted for students of Vedānta as well others who had no background of Vedānta but had great interest in knowing philosophy. Films - Matrix, Inception, Unbreakable and Dark city were chosen and interpreted to teach different philosophical dimensions from comparative approach.

Students of Vedānta understood already learnt concepts more clearly. They were able to co-relate and compare concepts learnt through commentaries. Those who had no background of Vedānta learnt these concepts for the first time in very interesting manner through films. Their interest regarding learning Vedānta was much more aroused.

4. When film is seen through philosophical perspective, following goals of pedagogy are served -

i.   Learning the theory clearly

     It is fact that students can learn effectively through visual and sounds. When students have already learnt certain philosophical theories through texts then it is great opportunity for them to make it clear through visuals and sounds.

ii. Comprehension through illustrative method

     Philosophy when presented though science fiction story form then it is liked by students of any age. It becomes direct illustration to philosophical principles. Certain theories are exemplified through characters, scenes and dialogues. E.g. special effects in fight scene or bullet scene in the film 'Matrix' exemplifies that Neo has transcended worldly limitations.

iii. Application oriented learning:

     Most of the time, students understand philosophy in theoretical manner. One can learn application of

philosophical concepts in film. It gives ample scope for students to judge whether particular philosophical concept fit into that situation or not.

iv. Learning Comparative approach:

Most of the time film is not exact replica of philosophy. When students watch the film, they can co-relate, compare and contrast with the theorems learnt. Teacher can give comparative themes according to that. Even influence of other philosophical schools, diversions taken can be stated. E.g. While watching the film 'Matrix', comparison of Advaita Vedānta with Plato's Philosophy was shown. It was for the sake of understanding that though there are geographical, cultural, temporal and spatial differences in philosophical schools, there are universal problems faced by human beings. Answers found by human being from philosophical approach are more or less similar.

Those who are watching film as an entertainment can be acquainted with philosophical ideas therein. Teacher can easily teach conceptual matter of philosophy based on film. Teaching philosophy through films becomes more interesting, innovative and effective means in Pedagogy.

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