

The Changing Image of the Nation in Popular Hindi Cinema: From Nehruvian Socialism to the Present

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If we are to accept Raymond William's explanation of the term popular culture as 'belonging to the people' and its historical shift towards the widespread modern usage of being " 'widely favoured 'or 'well liked' " ¹then the commercial Hindi cinema can be dubbed popular both in terms of attracting vast audiences and in terms of dominating all other forms of entertainment : " on an average day, India releases more than two-and-a-half feature films, produced by the world's largest film industry, and sees some 15 million people throng the country's 13,002 cinema halls"² There is a thriving film culture in our country and for most Indians, cinema is an integral part of our lives. It is not just a distant two or three hour distraction but a whole vicarious lifestyle for them. The large screen provides an alternative, an escape from the realities of a humdrum existence. The protagonists, larger than life, are identified with, the hero is applauded, the heroine is admired and the villain is condemned. The actors and actresses are household names and obliterating the popular distinction of high and low art , the reach of cinema is far and wide – from the humble 'paan' vendor to the highly celebrated barefoot painter who painted a paean to the beauty of a film actress. The cultural hegemony of Hindi cinema is

indisputable.

Hindi cinema has been a major point of reference for Indian popular culture in the twentieth century. It has shaped and expressed the changing scenario of pre- independence, post- independence and modern India to an extent that no other art form could ever achieve. Cinema has always reflected the anxieties of the age, the changing social mores and attitudes of the nation. In a facile manner I have tried to pick on the landmark films that have lain dormant in collective memory of viewers from my generation to show how Hindi cinema, since its inception, to the modern times has helped forge the identity of a changing nation. At every crucial juncture in the nation's history, the corresponding films reflect the major social preoccupations of the times. Film scholar Sumita S. Chakravarty in the Department of Communication in the New School for Social Research, New York writes, "The cinema is widely considered a microcosm of the social, political, economic and cultural life of a nation. It is the contested site where meanings are negotiated , traditions made and remade, identities affirmed or rejected."³ Describing the relationship between nation and cinema as an intimately symbiotic one, she says her book deals with a "master narrative [Indian national identity] and a mistress narrative [Indian entertainment cinema]"⁴

Tracing the origins and development of cinema in the early twentieth century, chakraborty notes that the Presidency towns of Bombay, Calcutta and Madras, busy port cities, active in culture and commerce and bearing the deep imprint of British influence developed into major film producing centers. Bombay, now Mumbai, in particular had developed an industrial base and its mixed population gave it a cosmopolitan air. The influx of western visual technology-first photography and then film, found congenial soil and a commercially successful class which could adopt and exploit these technologies for profit . The agents of Lumiere Brothers held the first film screening on July 7, 1896 at Bombay's Watson's Hotel and the city's elite had enthusiastically received the new medium. Soon the arrival of motion picture attracted a large number of business people, artists and craftspeople into film production and exhibition of rudimentary shots.

The man generally acknowledged as having laid the foundation of Indian film industry, Dadasaheb Phalke (1870-1944) produced and directed

the first silent feature film *Raja Harishchandra* in 1913. He produced a series of mythological, devotional and historical films, thematically familiar to the audience. These films established the ever appealing themes of the undeniable virtue of truth, goodness triumphing over evil; and played upon the Indian spiritual code of self abnegation and self sacrifice. According to Chakraborty, Phalke was engaged in reclaiming the past glory of a Hindu culture and cinema to him was a 'cultural-nationalist' vehicle. His films, emphasizing India's glorious heritage was meant to generate a sense of pride and patriotism. He is the first filmmaker to link Indian politics and statehood, the cinema screen became a 'political space' and Indian films established a "distinct identity for themselves as indigenous national products"⁵. But he also asserted the primary function of cinema, which is entertainment. The 1920s saw the beginnings of Studio Era, a period of consolidation of film industry which bears all the marks of a capitalist enterprise- the standardizing of product, investment in technological machinery, work of studio pioneers in advancing the craft and language of cinema. With the advent of Gandhiji came a plea to accord better status to women , the clarion call to remove untouchability which got reflected in the reformist and socially conscious cinema of the 1920s and the 30s , as in the works of and Devika and Himanshu Rai's *Achyut Kanya*(1936) and V. Shantaram's *Doctor Kotnis Ki Amar Kahani*(1946).

In the post independence Nehruvian India, an intricate relationship came about between the Indian film industry moored in the private sector and the nation state symbolizing the public sector. To some extent film industry became the ideological mouthpiece of the Indian state, which as Chakraborty says, was capitalist in its structure and functioning but socialist in its aims and rhetoric. Along with the fledgling nation, cinema , reformist in nature, entered into a nation building exercise. Questions of film policy, of finance and government subsidies , of state censorship, as well as state instituted film awards and festivals became crucial factors in determining the wider role of cinema in society. Consequently cinema arrogated to itself a responsible social role of guiding public morality and looked upon itself as a propagator of family values and private virtues. As a culture industry, the cinema churned out in its studio factories was supposed to enhance the prestige of the new nation and if we were to look back at the dominant lasting images of the cinema of this period, they are those of large scale

industrial projects like building of dams; power plants spewing smoke symbolically spiraling upwards into the sky; the bellowing hoots from factories sounding a clarion call to progress ; tractors triumphantly marching into the fields; this is how “Modernity as a product of technology-the technological quartet of railway, irrigation, electricity and telecommunications-also makes it an important character within the national saga: named, celebrated, ferried across, invited into the frame”⁶. To quote Ashish Rajadhyaksha again, social themes got “mapped on to the narrative destinies of the post-war Indian state, specially its epiphanic ‘Nehruiite’ moment”⁷ and according to him, cinema in the hands of filmmakers began a process of reworking an earlier mythical, feudal, traditional language into one that moved into new and post feudal uses. To reinforce his point Rajadhyaksha further quotes another influential film critic Nasreen Munni Kabir:

The 1950s was a golden time for Indian cinema. Filmmakers created authored and individual workswhile sticking strictly within the set conventions of films. The example of Mahatma Gandhi and Prime Minister Nehru’s vision of the newly independent nation was also highly influential throughout the decade, and many excellent Urdu poets worked with filmmakers in the hope of creating a cinema that would be socially meaningful.⁸

One of the results of State stepping in as the patron of arts and culture resulted in film censorship laws. The Film Enquiry Committee in 1950 stated what measures should be adopted to “enable films in India to develop into an effective instrument for the promotion of national culture, education and healthy entertainment”. Setting up of Film Censors in 1952 was done in the name of culture preservation. The Government looked upon itself as the guardian of public morality and put familiar puritanical injunction on cinema as a medium of education plus entertainment and cinema as a repository of family values.

The film *Mother India* (1955) christened a “nationalist epic” (Rajadhyaksha,143) is also a first in the long line of the popularly termed ‘women oriented’ films with an inherent ambivalence regarding the position of women. The iconic film poster sends out very strong socialist image of the hero and heroine the husband and wife, sickle in hand working together in the fields, suggesting equality of gender, presenting the comrades in

arms. Despite this the film offers a predominantly patriarchal view of woman's role in society, her duties and obligations as a wife and a mother. The worldview reflected in the film shows the archetypal life experiences of a rural woman, which is mired in misery, debt and despair. The protagonist Radha is shown to lead a very circumscribed life where the riveting moments of her life are marriage, childbirth and rearing of children and finally a careworn old age. The trajectory of her life has shown her fulfilling the role of a loving wife, a dutiful daughter in law and a doting mother. However the travails in life that she goes through – abject poverty, drought, starvation – with complete resilience is also emblematic of the spirit of an undaunted nation. The iconic film poster showing an agonised face of the peasant woman carrying a plough on her shoulder became a symbol of the overburdened nation determined to plough ahead through all adversities.

In keeping with the socialist ideals of Nehru, a special significance was attached to the idea of poverty in the cinema of the fifties. There is a suspicion of capitalism, wealth and affluence and a certain dignity attached to sparse living and frugal habits. There are a number of films where the hero is living on a meager income and the woman he loves would belong to an affluent family, very often this affluence connoting taint and corruption, especially if there is a prospective suitor in his flashy imported car, in an impeccably tailored suit, smoke spiraling out of his cigarette. In case the heroine is in want of it, she lends herself to a genteel upbraiding regarding the accumulation of her wealth. Even so, the hero's so called poverty is only an approximate term denoting lack of economic resources and a consequent difficulty in maintaining a certain lifestyle, not abject poverty.

The psycho analyst Sudhir Kakar explains this deep seated suspicion of money and a certain embarrassment about possessing inordinate material wealth by attributing it the religio –cultural beliefs of the age which tended to attach negative connotations to material acquisitions. The fifties cinema deployed this value system by pointing to the corrupting influence of wealth . This distrust of money a critique of western materialism also served to underscore India's inherent 'spirituality' which as Ranjani Mazumdar argues served to give a 'cultural identity' to India, different from western ethos. The fifties film's code of work ethic posited belief in honest earnings through hard work and selfless, principled service. Possession of the basics was a

social virtue but excessive accumulation of wealth was decried. Thus the cinema of the times showed ubiquitous figures of the poor but joyous peasant, miserable but blessings-showering alms seeker, hard put up labourer reveling in bucolic rectitude, the scrupulous doctor or the idealistic teacher. The principled schoolteacher in a crumpled tunic riding a bicycle is a most familiar trope, the last of which was seen in the 1975 film *Deewaar*, where the intense narrative gets stalled by a ten minute long digressive story of an honest schoolteacher who holds his deprived, bread stealing son guilty of theft. He has no grounds to plead his son's innocence, that his booty is small while others are amassing more wealth, because as he points out stealing one rupee or stealing one thousand is immaterial, what is unpardonable is the act of appropriating that which does not belong to him. But this minor interpolation serves to provide a moral lesson to the police officer protagonist who was vacillating till now whether to bring his errant criminal brother to book or not.

The Fifties decade also saw the growing importance of the city and the perils of urbanization. The cityscape was fraught with greed, avarice, competitiveness and meanness of spirit. Raj Kapoor playing the eternal country bumpkin trumped by the city dweller in films like like *Shree 420* (1955) and *Jaagte Raho* (1956) pitted the charmed and idyllic village life against the hypocrisy and deceit of the town-bred, one of the polarizations of rural/urban, village/ city that continues to be worked till day.

During the stable Sixties decade, the country had glided into a relatively calmer phase where the immediate concerns and anxiety of nation building were not weighing heavily on the film makers's psyche. There was a discernible shift from social issues towards more romantic genres, involving a greater thrust on musical soundtracks, melodious scores, exuberance of emotions and newer stars with romantic pairings. Some of the factors responsible for the emergence of this cinema could be the passing of Nehruvian era with its preoccupations with nationhood and reformist predilections, paring of social responsibility and the advent of colour medium in cinema. The relative stability of the period is reflected in the cinema of this decade which in popular parlance is referred to as the Age of Innocence in cinematic history. A major shift can be seen in the change of locale – cinema moves out of the decadent, over industrialised cities to the more

salubrious countryside. There is a certain flamboyance and joie de vivre in the films which is encapsulated in the 'yahoo' song of gay abandon, the liberating cry from all cares of the world. In fact one can discern the classical constructions of the features of Roman comedies in these Romances-the love interest of the hero and heroine with all the stereotypical complications forming the main plot which acts as a foil to the comic sub plot of another pair of lovers, usually involving the hero's sidekick and the heroine's confidante; a few pedantic elderly characters, the aunts or uncles mouthing vast quantities of sententious dialogue; a comic suitor sometimes bordering on the villainous; the misunderstandings, either love related or about actual parentage, ultimately resolved in the end with multiple marriages. The films largely adhered to this time proven melodramatic formula of love-intrigue- marriage evoking the Victorian novelist Wilkie Collins' prescription for his reader/ audience: 'make them laugh, make them cry, make them wait'.

The Sixties is also notable for a few patriotic films asserting an aggressive Indian nationalism when the nation was in grips of war. The Indo-China war of 1962 and the Indo -Pakistan war of 1965 spawned patriotic films like *Hum Dono* (1963), *Haqeequat* (1964) and *7 Hindustani* (1969) celebrating the valour and grit of the Indian armed forces which appealed to and assuaged the anxieties of the national imagination.

However, the ebullience of the Swinging Sixties gave way to the political incertitude and turmoil of the early Seventies- the Nav Nirman movement led by Jay Prakash Narayan in Bihar and Gujarat, the faultlines in the model of the welfare state, the imposition of Emergency and the ensuing muzzling of dissent, the growing social inequality, unemployment and a lopsided pace of development generated such angst and frustration that it resulted in the rise of the anti-establishment persona of the Angry Young Man, who single handedly took on the unsympathetic and corrupt elements in the legislative, executive or judicial arm of the political edifice. The nation hobbling out of the dark period of Emergency and institutional breakdown gave rise to the Bachchan phenomenon, and his relentless fight against the unjust and exploitative 'System' can be understood in this context. The darkness and despair of the times gave rise for the first time in the Hindi cinema to a figure of the hero who is morally ambiguous, who takes the

law into his hands and whose solution to the problem are questionable, bordering almost on the anarchic.

In the post modern, post-liberalised Nineties of India, Hindi cinema changed the way the country had transformed – the economy underwent a complete overhaul and there emerged a burgeoning middle class with its easy accessibility to global culture and consumerist goods and its aspirational lifestyle. The potential worth of overseas market for Indian cinema became apparent. Filmmakers tapped into the Indian diaspora's irrepressible longing for their nation's tradition and culture. A further fillip came in the year 1998 when the Government of India in deference to its pro-diaspora policy, accorded industry status to the Indian filmmaking enterprise. Post liberalization the complexion of Indian cities changed- new cityscape with its ritzy shopping malls, gleaming foreign cars, global fashion house apparels, new gadgets and commodities brought a new cosmopolitan look to Hindi cinema. This transformed picture of India needed to be showcased in cinema, before the diasporic community and could best be coupled with the time tested formulae of projecting Indian traditions and customs, its extravagant weddings and festivals and the abiding 'family values'. A new 'export-oriented commercial cinema' came into being, inaugurated by the extremely successful *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995) which spawned an entire gamut of such films that satisfied the non resident Indian's nostalgia. The essay "Beyond Diasporic Boundaries" describes the stupendous success of this cinema on account of these factors:

With music, melodrama, elaborate costumes, and the feel good factor, these films evoke the nation through cultural practices of the diasporic Indian family. They structure these practices with a certain attitude of nostalgia and sentiment towards the 'family film' that was a prominent part of the history of Indian cinema.⁹

These films evoking the harmonious Indian joint family, with its small joys and tears, traditional celebrations of festivals, their spirited handling of family crisis, songs and dances with a genteel patriarch or a gentle matriarch holding the family together, became the staple of cinema of the decade, where to quote Rajadhyaksha slightly out of context, a new brand of 'cultural nationalism' was offered to the global consumer of hindi cinema.

If cinema is a reflection of the times and the major preoccupations of its nation then the current wave of cinema, in keeping with the new found confidence and political and economic stability, is willing to experiment with new forms and engage with off beat ideas. If the Nineties were a reflection of the post liberalisation effervescence then the current spirit of new age start ups and brave entrepreneurship has produced a generation that is not averse to taking risks, to reevaluating the canon and reassessing traditions. The last couple of years have seen an unleashing of new creative energies and a spurt in cinema that has increasingly rejected the formulae – films like *Udaan* (2010), *The Ship of Theseus* (2012), *Masaan* (2015) and a host of films from filmmakers like Anurag Kashyap, Vikramaditya Motwane, Neeraj Pandey, Abhishek Choubey, among others, has resulted in ground breaking experimental cinema. To sum up in words of Farukh Dhondy, Films “came to colonized India and developed its nationalist instincts against the colonizers. It continued through a ‘free’ India looking for a national personality that transcended the histories- separate and distinct-of regions, castes and religions” and it continues now when we are “ being dragged into the influences of urbanization and the ways of the modern world”.¹⁰

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- 6 Ashish Rajadhyaksha, *Indian Cinema in the Time of Celluloid: From Bollywood to the Emergency*,New Delhi, Tulika Books, 2009, p. 142.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p.80.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 Kamla Ganesh and Kanchan Mahadevan, p.99.
- 10 Farukh Dhondy, "Keeping Faith:Indian Film & its World", 1985, accessed at sites.harvard.edu/fs/docs/icb.topic543017.files/Bollywood/dhondy.pdf