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## **Cinema: Gandhian Thought, Nehruvian Vision and Proletariat Dream**

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### **Abstract:**

This research piece attempts to focus on how cinema became an essential tool for nation building in India. It aimed at uniting the country by creating a nationalist feeling. The research paper further explores the relation between cinema and nation with reference to development. Cinema not only proved to be an inspirational agent but also contributed towards strengthening the cause for independence. Lenin once firmly asserted that “of all the arts for us the most important is cinema”. Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru were both stalwarts of Indian national struggle who played a pivotal role in nation building. They both held divergent views on development. One was an idealist who stood for uniting the nation and its people with his aura and another, a visionary who took challenging and bold steps to industrialize India for a brighter tomorrow. However, their reflections in Indian cinema are not just inspirational but critical as well. The transformation in cinema as a medium, thus, witnessed and reflected the development of a nation.

**Keywords: Cinema, Gandhi, Nehru, Proletariat.**

### **Introduction**

Indian film industry being the largest film industry in the world, with an average of nearly 1500 to 2000 films produced each year, has been a major point of reference for Indian culture in this century. It has shaped and expressed the changing scenarios of modern India to an extent that probably no preceding art form could ever achieve. Cinema is one of the most important and powerful social institutions of today's time. In India, the importance and impact of cinema is basically related with society. Thus, Cinema not only reflects culture, it shapes it too. The potential of cinema being a tool of social reform has helped the art to evolve and support the society. Films have mirrored the society since its inception. Similarly, Indian Cinema (Hindi and other regional cinemas alike) has also reflected the socio-political changing scenarios. In the process they have also proved to be an agent of holistic development. With changing times, the likeness and so have the subjects in films have changed. The films which initially portrayed mythological characters transformed themselves to call for nation building. Cinema is a medium of mass culture and the most important and universal art form of the twentieth century. More than any other art form, it has the power to entertain, educate and shape our sense of what we

understand of the world in which we live. Due to this reason it can be said that cinema is linked to the fate of the nation and its perception. Cinematic culture in India, like any other form of secularist propaganda to unite its people, can be seen as a mediated form to develop national consciousness.

Cinema as a weapon, which cries out to be used, is the best instrument for propaganda [ . . . ] a propaganda which is accessible to everyone, cuts into the memory and may be made a possible source of revenue. (cited in Taylor 1998:35) Stalin was merely echoing Trotsky when he proclaimed in 1924 that “[t]he cinema is the greatest means of mass agitation. The task is to take it into our own hands” (cited in Taylor 1979:64). In Taylor’s words, Trotsky felt that, whereas religion had been the opiate of the people in feudal society, and vodka had played a similar role in the capitalist stage of Russia’s development, cinema would serve as the great eye-opener for the masses, the liberating educational weapon of a socialist society. (1998:35)

## **Cinema and Gandhi**

Indian cinema in its initial stages was closer to mythological themes. Phalke was overwhelmed and inspired by the screening of 'The Life of Christ'. He thought if Jesus could be a valid subject of films in the West, then the innumerable adventures of the Hindu Gods and Goddesses could provide an inexhaustible material. This inspired him to present 'Raja Harish Chandra' before the Indian audiences (a story of a mythical king of Ayodhya). This gave the Indian Cinema a cultural content and a nationalist character. Satyajit Ray believed that the Indian film industry needed 'a style, an idiom, a sort of iconography of cinema, which would be uniquely and recognizably Indian' very similar to French and German cinema and without which it would dilute soon.

The Cinema has always been a reflection of the mores and outlook of any society at a certain period. The mediums to accentuate this reflection varied from costumes to music and dialogues to mise-en-scene; but the most crucial medium became the characters. The mind-set, thinking, apprehensions or the prejudices of the characters were the same as those of the general public. In context of the Indian Cinema, Gandhi can be seen as an inspiration who not only became a popular subject for Cinema in India and abroad but his teachings too turned out to be a relevant message for contemporary films like *Lage Raho Munna Bhai* (2006) and *Gandhi, My Father* (2007). Gandhi's contribution to the nation and cinema was predominantly seen as secular and inspirational. It can't be a mere co-incidence that as Gandhi's sabhas began with prayers and hymns to promote and support humanity and oneness, so were the ninety-one films produced during 1913-22 had strong essence of *Puranic* folklore. Gandhi spoke of secularism and held equal faith in the Quran and the Bible. He stayed at a Muslim's home in Kolkata and in a Harijan's home in Delhi to send a clear message to his followers on brotherhood and casteism. He preached the concept of one religion which was humanity. Films of those times, too, spoke of humanity and oneness. Interestingly, a dominant shift from mythological genre to films

promoting nationalist fervor became a noticeable feature in Bombay cinema. Majority of films reflected what Gandhi preached. *Ekta* (1942) by J.B.H. Wadia was a plea for Hindu-Muslim unity. *Achhut Kanya* (1936) under the banner of Bombay Talkies narrated a tragic tale of a Harijan girl's love for a Brahmin boy. *Achhut Kanya* delved into a situation which India faced, a situation with which the nation struggled, the 'Class Structure'. In fact, the film so moved Nehru that he wrote a fan letter to Devika Rani requesting for an interview. Gandhi believed in calling the untouchables as *Harijans* to overcome the stigma they bore, whereas, Ambedkar advocated the idea of class struggle for the emancipation of oppressed section of society. It is evident that both the leaders understood the situation and supported the cause of equal rights for *Harijans* with dignity. Indian Cinema's projection of national consciousness was based on the concept of oneness. The divides on the basis of class, caste, creed etc. was vehemently discouraged by the nationalist leaders and cinema alike. *Neecha Nagar* (1946) shot with an expressionist tone reflected the early socialist influence of IPTA (Indian People's Theatre Association). Film-makers specifically associated with IPTA and later with the New Wave cinema focussed on social dramas and disregarded imposed morality. Soon a change was witnessed – a change which formed the true character of Indian cinema as dreamed by Satyajit Ray. Chetan Anand in his directorial debut dealt with the economic inequality. It portrays the two worlds at two extremes, similar to Fritz Lang's representation in his master-piece – 'Metropolis', *Ooncha nagar* inhabited by the elites and the *Neecha nagar*, the land of the penurious. The struggle between the two classes arose when a drain is diverted to the settlement of the poor. A scene showing the sewage - filled water contaminated by the industries gushing inside the *Neecha nagar* was a symbolic representation of the oppression. The film beautifully evokes workers' power within the nationalist struggle. It did put-forth the idea of Gandhian and Marxist ideologies. Chetan Anand sketched the characteristic of his protagonist as one who uses non-violence at the time of resistance and presented the idea of unity within the working class against fascism. In 1921, Dwarkadas Sampat played the role of Vidura under the directorial guidance of Kanjibhai Rathod in the film *Bhakta Vidur*. The film drew reference from Mahabharata but the character of *Vidur* which resembled Gandhi was reportedly portrayed so to support his cause of non co-operation movement. 'The character dressed like Gandhi ji and even his walk was identical'. The film was the first to be banned in India for the sole reason that it portrayed his personality. Censor Board restricted the screening of the film with a report stating that "We know what you are doing, it is not Vidur, it is Gandhiji, we won't allow it." It reasoned with another statement, "It is likely to excite dissatisfaction against the government and incite people to non co-operation".

### **Cinema and Nehru**

Since its inception, Indian cinema has concentrated on various subjects highlighting the problems, complexities and the various aspects of the Indian society in general. Cinema before independence was involved in showing the issues of freedom struggle directly or indirectly. Debaki Bose's *Inquilab* (1935) was one of the first political films which took up the cause of Indian independence strongly. Similarly, Sohrab Modi's *Sikandar* (1941) used Alexander's invasion of Sindh to arouse the urge for freedom from the British rule in India. Bimal Roy's

Humrahi (1946) was about life in post-second world war in Calcutta. The film used “Jana Gana Mana” before it became India’s national anthem. Films also addressed issues those were important in the making of constitution. Issues like rights over community, the autonomy of the individual, and the right of a woman as free agents etc. Such subjects have created ripples in the past and have got acknowledgement for notable Indian films and filmmakers throughout the world. But in Post Independence, Cinema became critical. The Nehruvian Era of rapid development, which isolated and neglected the rural communities, became the central theme for renowned Bengali filmmaker, Satyajit Ray. As several critics have pointed, the trilogy generally reflects on Nehru's 'Modernization project', which began following the Indian Independence in 1947. Soon, the 'Train' in Ray's films became an 'epitome' of Nehruvian modernisation to the world and also an object of detachment from ones' own roots. It symbolised the disenchantment of the rural community and also the middle-class society of India which could only see but could not experience this 'gift' of Nehruvian development. This detachment from reality only led to the high expectations of the masses with no development at the grass root level. The freedom which they fought for and the development which they wished to experience only turned out to be a mirage leaving them disappointed and dejected. Soon it was realised that the masses in India could not associate themselves with the Western Model of development which Nehru adopted. 'Nehruvian Modernisation Model' post independence could be traced to the rapid work on development in 1950s and 60s by the development theorists and practitioners globally. These theorists and practitioners stressed and visualised that development could be achieved by Modernisation via industrialisation and urbanisation. The focus of development was, thus, always on 'growth'. In 1950s and 1960s the economic growth, globally, was through industrialization and modernization. Modernization presented the problems of social structural constraints, urbanisation, literacy and exposure to mass media. Development did occur during this period but for already developed societies. The Trickle-down theory assumed that the benefits of industrialisation and modernization will trickle down from the rich and middle class to the poor. It was assumed that the poor will have capital gain as well as gain in knowledge and awareness from the developed to developing countries. But this theory did not work and rather created a gap between the rich and the poor. Thus, the divide which national leaders and cinema tried to bridge during the pre-independence was only widened by the new policies and frameworks in post-independent India. Auteur's like Satyajit Ray used the medium of moving images to break the mirage and offer a direct critique of a 'Western' concept of 'Modernity', associated exclusively with the European Enlightenment. Inspired by Di Sica and Visconti who introduced and popularised Italian Neo-Realism to the world, Ray wanted to project a similar trueness and closeness to reality by narrating the story of the 'Real India'. In order to understand the western concept of modernity one needs to broadly understand the 'Western Model for Development' which predominated during 1950s and 60s. E. M. Rogers (1960) called this the dominant paradigm of development as it exercised a dominant influence in the field of development. The emphasis of this Western Model was that Modernisation or Development could be achieved through increased productivity, economic growth and industrialisation i.e., heavy industries and

capital investment, urbanisation etc. Thus, a sudden shift from a static and agrarian Indian society to a dynamic and industrial society during this Modernisation movement by Pt. Nehru only led disillusionment and disappointment for the rural masses. The transition from agricultural to industrialized societies was parallel to the processes of ocular-centrism, 'disenchantment', nationalization, industrialization and urbanization, and 're-enchantment' towards a new kind of 'dream world of mass culture'. Cinema, thus, portrayed an unbiased view, whether in support or by being critical at the social political situation of the nation. It has been fearless and bold to voice for the unheard and brought a wave of transformation for a social cause.

### **Cinema and the Proletariat**

Films during the pre-independence period were made on two broad subjects. First was a genre of films which infused the feeling of unity and nationalism and second were films based on social themes which aimed at strengthening the social fabric of the nation. The class divide and social evils were the main hurdles before the national leaders who wanted to bridge the gap amongst Indians. Cinema, thus, proved to be a useful agent to transform the moribund ideas into liberal thoughts. The film which evoked the sense of unity among the Indian audiences was *Dharti Mata* (New Theatres; 1938) which promoted the idea of collective farming. *Savkari Pash* (1925) was the first film to deal with the exploitation of Indian peasantry by the moneylenders. *Balayogini* (1936) in Tamil language protested the ill treatment of child widows in orthodox Brahmin society. *Seva Sadanam* (Tamil, 1938), from Munshi Premchand's novel, *Bazaar-e-Husn*, dealt with rehabilitation of the fallen women. In the very next year V. Shantaram made two films *Manoos* and *Aadmi* which showed that the society would never permit a prostitute to have a normal marital life. P.C. Barua in his film *Adhikar* (New Theatre; 1938) pleaded for women empowerment. Sumangali (Telugu, 1940), for instance, justified the initiative of widow remarriage. Bimal Roy's (1953) *Do Bigha Zamin* dealt with issues like socio-economic sufferings of small farmers and rural urban migration of unskilled labourers and his 1959 film *Sujata* argued against the taboo of 'caste system' and 'untouchability'. Apart from questioning the social structure, films also supported the idea of rehabilitation and resettlement of *Harijan* women in a Telugu film - *Malli Pelli* (1939). Achhut (1940) brought the attention of everyone on the practice of human scavenging. It was based on the upliftment of women who carry head-loads of night soil. Another film in Tamil was *Seva Sadanam* (1938) which dealt with the rehabilitation of the fallen women. With these films as a precursor, Guru Dutt's masterpiece *Kaagaz Ke Phool* (1959) introduced the issues like loneliness and social pressure to maintain an unhappy marriage. Raj Kapoor's 1955 film *Shree 420* was based on unemployment, urban poverty and corruption. Guru Dutt's 1957 film *Pyaasa* evolved around the love between a poet and a prostitute – which was a rebellious theme against existing social taboos. Hrishikesh Mukherjee's *Anuradha* (Love of Anuradha, 1960) was about the right of women's economic independence, *Satyakam* (Satyakam, 1969) discussed corruption, rape and professional and moral ethics, *Abhimann* (Pride, 1973) dealt with issues like career conflict between husband and wife and separation. Films dealing with social issues were widespread during the period from

1970s to 1990s. Cinema, thus, since its past has inspired people to develop a feeling of unity and humanity to step ahead on-route to development.

Art as a medium of communication was destined to become an active social agent, which had the potential to shape reality directly. The artistic method of socialist realism adopted in the 1930s was not intended to represent reality, but rather to incorporate an idea. The original definition of the method determined that the artists must show life in its development and forward movement, and accept the active revolutionary transformative role of the arts. Soviet artists were supposed to create, consolidate and glorify the new social order, and reincarnate the spirit of Soviet society. According to Clara Zetkin's *My Recollections of Lenin*, the Soviet leader offered the following discourse on art:

... our opinion on art is not the important thing. Nor is it much consequence what art means to a few hundred or even thousand out of a population counted by millions. Art belongs to the people. Its roots should be deeply implanted in the very thick of the labouring masses. It should be understood and loved by these masses. It must unite and elevate their feelings, thoughts and will. It must stir to activity and develop the art instincts within them. Should we serve exquisite sweet cake to a small minority while the worker and peasant masses are in need of black bread?

'Accessibility' was a common theme in Soviet discourse on the arts. Political propaganda constantly reiterated Lenin's formula that 'art must be comprehensible for the masses of people' (Clara Zetkin, 1934, in her memoirs). Lenin contended that 'genuine art is one expressed so clearly, that it is perceivable for everybody. To identify the objectives of young soviet film industry, Lenin proposed to make propagandist, informative and entertaining films in correct proportion. Lenin in his interview with Clara Zetkin spoke about the basic aspects of art which should be the foundation of Soviet art form. He said, "In a society based on private property the artist produces for the market, needs customers. Our revolution freed artists from the yoke of these extremely prosaic conditions. It turned the state into their defender providing them with orders. Every artist, and everyone who considers himself such, has the right to create freely, to follow his ideal regardless of everything. But then, we are communists and ought not stand idly by and give chaos free rein to develop. We should steer this process according to a worked-out plan and must shape its results." According to Lenin, the difference between 'Performative' (constructed) and 'Realistic' art should be well defined and evident. He believed that the rights of the labourers and farmers are more important than entertainment (performative art). It is they who hold and deserve the right over this rich and great art form. Thus, the intellectuals and the educated class should work towards their emancipation by solving the problems faced by them. They will contribute towards the Proletarian Revolution only after they understand and resolve the problems of labourers and farmers. The development in all aspects of social reality is determined, in the final analysis, by the self-development of material production. Art, like law or the state, for example, has no independent history, i.e., outside the brains of ideologists. In reality, literature and art are conditioned by the entire historical development of society.

## Denouement

In a nation like India where cinema is perceived as a cultural reformer and an inspirational tool, one cannot help but see films as an agent of revolution appealing for change with changing times. It not only witnessed but mirrored the historic development with all trueness. It mirrored the history during the time of struggle and also at the time of birth of a nation. Today, that serene grimness of living for a cause has become a thing of the past and beyond all recollections but the trinity of 'Nation', 'Cinema' and 'Development' will always recollect, remind and inspire us of the environment WE lived together as ONE.

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