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Laughter at the Crossroads: Political Satire, the Carnivalesque, and Hindi Cinema

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Abstract:

Cinema and films, like other cultural forms, do not exist in isolation. They are, in fact, significant cultural texts that can be effectively used to understand the complex reality of any given time. This paper dwells on the unexamined potential of Indian cinema, particularly Hindi cinema, which has the largest audience of any regional cinema in India. Although largely known for mainstream Hindi cinema, several niche Hindi films, like *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaro* (1983) and *Peepli Live* (2010), subvert power and question authority through their unique artistic styles. This paper frames its argument by adopting a qualitative textual approach grounded in Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque. The study draws upon the close reading method by critically engaging with selected scenes and narrative strategies employed in both movies. The critique underlines how carnivalesque humour disrupts institutional bureaucratic authority and the media-run circus by foregrounding satire, parody, and exaggeration in the respective movies.

Keywords: Political Satire, Carnivalesque, Indian Cinema, Bakhtin, Media Critique.

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Introduction

Satire is old. It started with comic plays in Greece and humour in France. It uses irony, exaggeration and parody to talk about hard truths. These tools help people see problems in society. Further, political satire is not just a mode of mockery but also has tremendous potential to make people think and ask questions and sometimes push back against those in charge. The soul of both these mediums lies in enabling people to observe and think of politics beyond newsrooms. Satirical literature and especially cinema both make politics accessible to ordinary people. From an academician to a daily wage labourer, cinema enters to the corridor of people from all strata of society. More the accessibility, stronger the satire.

Through the lens of famous Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin's (1895-1975) theory of carnivalesque, this essay tries to understand the impact of political satire on Indian Cinema. Because this kind of cinema, unlike propaganda cinema, questions power. It enables people to see through the loopholes in the system and deliberate over them even for a few minutes sometimes. Films like *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaro* and *Peepli Live* with their laughable approach enriches the discourse on politics. This kind of cinema becomes witness to the any given difficult times. It also throws light on the universality of several human and social problems together. It also help us in understanding the limitations of human nature and its contradictory actions against the universal moral values of goodness and honesty. People, existing anywhere, will find ways and means to act corrupt and unfair.

Bakhtin's Carnival: When Laughter and Revolution Coincide

Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque is especially significant in comprehending the understated power of cinema. According to Bakhtin, the whole idea of carnival is based on empowering the weaker ones (in terms of power) to mock the authority, turning sacred into profane even if it lasts for temporary moments. Laughter, here, saves people

from aggression but let them exhibit their discomfort with the authority at the same time. This is where the unique and authentic power of satire lies.

"Laughter demolishes fear and piety before an object, before a world, making of it an object of familiar contact and thus clearing the ground for an absolutely free investigation of it" (Bakhtin, *Dialogic* 23).

The demystification of the power and authority offers cathartic relief to the suppressed frustration of the ordinary people against the system and bureaucracy. On the one hand, where it exposes the flaws in the system, it also reveals the thinking side of ordinary people who can fathom the dark reality even when they cannot do much to undo the damage. The mere existence of the seeds of contemplation and deliberations in human mind can sustain the hope for revolution someday. The strength of satire stems from turning even ordinary people into thinking beings by waking them up from the slumber of ignorance. It aims to tickle the thinking nerve of people and vents out their collective exasperation through artistic expression. In the daily hussle of life and limitation of circumstances, it shows that people at least 'understand' everything even if they cannot afford to protest in public. However, revolution will also make its ways on the right time not essentially in that moment but certainly in some other moment. Even if the weapons of satire like humour and sarcasm are soft but they hold an immense potential to penetrate through the closed gates of authority and power. The idea of dissent seems both relatable and executable in satire in the tradition of carnivalesque.

The World and the Indian Satire

From Aristophanes to Alexander Pope, from François Rabelais to Kurt Vonnegut, from Banksy to Varun Grover, satire has been used through different medium of arts in different eras. The universality of satire enables its creators to narrate distinctive stories of uncomfortable truths and flaws embedded in human behaviour of different countries' bureaucratic structures

through different times. The core essence and its aim remain same only its form keep taking different shapes. Having long civilization history and rich heritage, the uniqueness of Indian political satire gets highlighted amongst its global competitors especially when its rich mythology, folk wisdom and anecdotes all blends together and create their own niche. When the unique Indian art of storytelling narrates the universal stories of human frailties and corrupt systems, it strengthens its distinctive place in the global context. Indian cinema also time and again through its rich subsections of regional cinemas has employed satire to expose sometimes local and sometimes global challenges in the path of human progress.

Jaane Bhi Do Yaaro: Unmasking the Systemic Corruption

Kundan Shah (1947-2017) directed *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaro* (1983) got released when the entire nation was still introspecting the dark era of Indian democracy the Emergency (1975–1977). The movie appeared like a quantum leap in the history of Indian political cinema. The movie is considered a cult class till date for showing the courage to ridicule power and authority. The film did not overtly condemn the corruption. It brought the authenticity in its storytelling through theatrical performance in terms of boisterous dialogues, dramatic costumes and melodramatic performances. It refuses to sound didactic by deliberately choosing farce and laughter to narrate its story.

Two photographers played by Naseeruddin Shah and Ravi Baswani respectively, are desperately looking for a breakthrough story which can escalate their professional carriers overnight. Corruption confronts them in every nook and corner. From politicians to builders and to journalists, corruption seems to be performed like a well-rehearsed play with almost a Midas touch. The whole act of corruption has not just been normalised but has been systematically streamlined in our bureaucratic structure as well. The moral ambiguity of its almost all characters including both heroes and villains reveals the contagious aspects of corruption. The clever portrayal of its seemingly innocent protagonists who were initially set

out in the search of truth and exposing the corruption, themselves get mired in the rigmarole of hypocrisy. It starts feeling soon that it is almost impossible for people to remain untouched from corruption. Compromise feels easy and resistance complicated in the difficult journey of survival.

Bakhtin's idea of carnivalesque echoes loudest in its iconic cake scene when Municipal Commissioner D'Mello, role played by the actor late Satish Shah (1951-2025), "thoda khao, thoda phenko" ("eat some, throw some") by exposing the corruption embedded in the very fabric of bureaucratic structures. Bakhtin's theory laughs out loud in the parody of its climax of the hilarious Mahabharata where Salim & Anarkali, Draupadi cheer-haran sequence as the canonical cultural texts and epic like the *Mahabharata* has been deliberately subverted. This scene unravels the unscrupulous ways of the system. An epic like the *Mahabharata* which carries the age old sermon from the famous *Bhagvat Gita* chapter to inspire generations to choose the path of righteousness and truthfulness against all odds of life. But this entire scene destabilizes the entire discourse around the so-called path of righteousness and the idealism. It also foregrounds the limitations human beings and the systems build by them. This same scene also emphasizes the Bakhtinian concept of "grotesque realism" (used in his famous book *Rabelais and His World*, 1965) which underscores the abominable greed and profiteering traits of human beings.

***Peepli Live*: Misery Commodified**

Indian director Anusha Rizvi (1978-) almost after twenty-seven years of *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaro* brought *Peepli Live* (2010) an equally sharp critique of modern Indian media who thrives on the idea of 'trending' story even at the cost of suffering of innocent rural people of our country. In this entire media driven circus, human misery is turned into a spectacle and poor people mere the pawns into the hands of powerful people. A genuine human crisis where a poor Indian rural farmer named Natha played by the actor Omkar Das Manikpuri schemes to commit

suicide. This remains the only way out for the poor farmer to collect some government subsidy by the relatives of the deceased farmer. But the news spreads around and soon it turns into a media designed orgy which accentuates the immoral desperation of media houses and reporters. It also creates melodrama out of human misery for the entertainment of the news consumers and audience.

The incompetence of politicians and policymakers converts the grim issue of farmer suicide into a spectacle of absurdity and performance. The film demystifies the lofty promises made by authority to vulnerable rural populations in the name of service and public welfare. It clearly shows how the media, government, NGOs and even self-proclaimed activists exploit human suffering to gain higher ratings and public attention. This entire spectacle culminates in a Bakhtinian collapse of monologic authority (Bakhtin, *Problems*). The movie deliberately avoids offering viewers emotional closure or a clear moral resolution. Instead, it reveals that structural problems persist regardless of temporary media attention. This reflects what Slavoj Žižek identifies as “cruel optimism” where hope itself can become a mechanism of exploitation (Žižek).

The film’s treatment of media coverage also reflects Jürgen Habermas’s concerns regarding the degradation of public discourse in modern democracies. Habermas argued that modern media often replace genuine democratic deliberation with “managed publicity” (Habermas). The film dramatises this process by showing how a farmer’s crisis becomes raw material for competing narratives about development, governance and social responsibility. The movie’s strength lies in maintaining a light tone while discussing grave problems rooted in India’s agricultural economy. This balance prevents viewers from either dismissing the film as mere entertainment or sinking into hopelessness. Instead, it creates space for reflection on the systems and ideologies that enable exploitation.

Dual Purpose of Satirical Laughter

The laughter these films generate functions on both psychological and political levels. It provides relief from the frustration caused by dysfunctional politics. Yet this relief simultaneously forces viewers to recognise their own participation in the systems they ridicule. This experience reflects what psychologists describe as "cognitive dissonance". It stands for an uneasy gap between ideals and lived realities. Satirical films do not resolve this tension. In fact, they illuminate it and temporarily make it bearable through humour. The political dimension of this laughter is equally complex. When audiences laugh at incompetent officials they participate in what scholars describe as social commentary. It is a collective effort to interpret and understand shared social experiences. This type of commentary can either normalise existing conditions or expose the possibility of transformation. The most effective satirical films accomplish both simultaneously. They reveal that unjust systems persist. But they also remind viewers that these systems are human constructions and therefore capable of change. This duality explains why satirical cinema often feels both cynical and hopeful.

Satirical Cinema and Cultural Memory

These films function as repositories of cultural memory. They preserve significant historical moments for future reflection. *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaro* captures the mood of post-Emergency India marked by both disappointment and cautious optimism. *Peepli Live* documents the intersection of media, politics and agrarian crisis in early 21st century India. However, these films are more than historical records. By transforming specific political events into universally relatable narratives, they create what Fredric Jameson calls "cognitive maps". They help audiences understand complex social realities (Jameson). They also enable viewers to recognise the broader challenges of living within fractured political systems.

This mapping becomes especially significant in contemporary democracies. Political realities often appear overwhelmingly large and abstract in modern times. Satirical films

simplify these complexities into accessible narratives. They allow audiences to think collectively about social problems and perhaps even respond to them. It is also important to acknowledge the limitations of satirical cinema as a form of resistance. Some critics argue that consuming satire may substitute for genuine political action. It may create awareness without encouraging meaningful change. Thus, satire risks becoming a form of "slacktivism". Here, laughter preserves the status quo instead of challenging it. Still the most sophisticated satirical films appear aware of these limitations. *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaro* and *Peepli Live* refuse to provide viewers with easy simplistic solutions. Instead, they make the passive spectatorship uncomfortable. Moreover, these films exist within broader networks of journalism, activism and political discourse. Their contribution to resistance may not always be direct. But they certainly help creating the cultural conditions necessary for dissent to emerge. By demystifying authority and encouraging critical thinking, they contribute to what James C. Scott calls "hidden transcripts". It is a form of resistance that circulate among ordinary people outside official structures of power (Scott).

Conclusion

Such films are even more relevant today as societies witness increasing authoritarianism, media manipulation and the commodification of everyday life. The ways in which these films deploy humour, grotesque realism and narrative subversion remain crucial tools for understanding and responding to contemporary political crises. Recent developments in Indian cinema demonstrate that satire continues to evolve. Films like *Newton* (2017) and *Article 15* (2019) combine satire with direct social critique. While the web series such as *Scam 1992* and *Sacred Games* (2018–19) employ satirical elements to examine financial corruption and political violence. These works extend the legacy established by earlier satirical cinema while adapting to changing media and political landscapes. Today, streaming platforms and international film festivals allow Indian satire to reach global audiences. As a result, Indian

political satire contributes fresh perspectives to worldwide conversations about power, resistance and cultural politics.

As contemporary democracies confront political polarisation and declining institutional trust, the lessons offered by satirical cinema becomes increasingly urgent. The above selected films demonstrate that laughing at authority is not merely an act of entertainment. It can also become a mode of collective healing and political resistance. These films prove that Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque remains deeply relevant in the present. They reveal that humour can stimulate critical thought and that laughter can build collective solidarity. It also underscores the fact that the satire can make complex political realities accessible. These films suggest that resistance does not always require heroic sacrifice. Sometimes the most subversive act is simply refusing to accept power's self-importance, recognising its flaws and laughing at it collectively. In an era where democratic institutions across the world face profound crises, satirical cinema continues to remind audiences that power survives only when people unquestioningly believe in it. So, satire possesses the capacity to slowly dismantle that belief. The crossroads in this essay's title are therefore not merely where humour meets politics or where Indian and world literature intersect. They also represent the meeting point between individual awareness and collective response between inherited cultural traditions and evolving political realities.

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