How Socially Conscious is Hindi Cinema?

The moralistic nature of Hindi cinema makes it weave a moral punch or 'sabak' into its storyline. From the time of silent movies to the present, cinema has reflected the social realities of the day. Cinema draws sustenance from both the prevailing social norms as well as political environment.

The motion pictures were first imported and exhibited to India on July 7, 1896. The earliest short films to be photographed in India were by unknown foreign cameramen in 1897. An Indian ventured to make his own short film in 1899. India's first narrative feature came in 1912. And the Indian talkie film arrived in 1931.

Firoze Rangoonwalla, Seventy Five Years of Indian Cinema

The record books tell us that the first short films photographed by Indian pioneers included such titles as Coconut Fair, The Wrestlers, Splendid New Views of Bombay, and Tobaco Procession.

Harishchandra S. Bhatvadekar (popularly known as 'Save Dada') and F.B. Thanawalla set up the first Indian documentary units, and their early projects—as the titles indicate—manifest the entertainment-orientation and the spectacle-like inclination which is traditionally associated with Indian cinema. However, one of these documentaries is also said to include footage of one Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi! In later years, Gandhi's tragic assassination was to inspire several songs in the talkie Majboor. A company called The Documentary Films at Madras made a full-length feature in 1948 titled Mahatma Gandhi and Patel India compiled the documentary Gandhi, which drew on newsreel coverage of the
freedom movement. One of the earliest films to be banned by the British India government was the Madras National Theatres production titled *Congress Girl*.

These, too, are part of the history and the heritage of Indian cinema. Their significance does often seem to get lost in the melange of adolescent frivolity and stereotyped vendettas that crowd the Indian silver screen, but for the film-makers themselves the tradition of incorporating social commentaries within a raucous explosion of seemingly unintellectual entertainment is not totally absent. The placing of a photograph of Mahatma Gandhi or Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, in the backdrop behind a particular character, in a wholly ‘commercial’ film may seem to the intellectual critic to be a clichéd exploitation of the collective sentiment of the Indian people. But for the film-maker himself it serves the purpose of using a popular iconography which reinforces his attempt to underline the moral dimension of the dramatic conflict delineated in that particular sequence. Such debates about the style—or, as some would say, the lack of style—of popular film-making belong to the area of the aesthetics and anti-aesthetics of popular cinema. They need not occupy much of our attention in an attempt to trace the close interaction between modern Indian social history and the popular Indian film.

In the silent film era, as far back as 1925, Baburao Painter made the film *Swakari Pashi* (with the English title *Indian Skylock*) which was one of the earliest films to feature V. Shantaram in the lead. It can be said to be our first art film. It certainly painted an extremely realistic picture of the Indian poor in the rural vastland, focusing on rural indebtedness, feudal oppression, the poverty of the peasantry, and a myriad problems that Indian economists and social reformists had already been campaigning against.

Around the same time, P.C. Barua, who was to later achieve great fame for his version of *Deva*, made a film titled *Farmer’s Daughter*. Twelve years later Arifshir Irani was to use the same title for *Kisaan Karya* (1937).

From its very early years, the Indian feature film developed the admirable ability of focusing on both the urban and rural facets of Indian life. It has been a lively, dynamic tradition which only very recently, in the mid-1990s seems to have tilted excessively in favour of wholly urban themes. The films *Mothe India*, *Ganga Jamuna*, *Mughal-e-Azam*, and *Sholay* are considered the four biggest, longest-in-demand, popular classics of the Hindi cinema. Of these four, only *Mughal-e-Azam* is not set in rural India!

A child of modern technology, the cinema industry is a very urban enterprise. However, its market and its audience encompass both urban and rural societies and the truly popular films suggest in their contents a cultural homogeneity between the ostensibly divided world of urban and rural India. Even recent box-office successes like *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun...*, *Karan Arjun*, and *Maine Pyar Kiya* either include the rural landscape in their narrative or espouse social mores and norms common to urban and rural India.

Yet, because of the undeniable urban sensibility and family background of a sizeable majority of directors, writers, and technicians of the Indian film industry, the popular Indian film's content has always been greatly influenced and inspired by social philosophies dominant in urban intellectual circles. As a result, many social reform movements impelled film-makers to present reformist ideas and concepts for the so-called common man.

The films of V. Shantaram are perhaps the most obvious illustrations of this phenomenon. *Dahej, Padso, Do Aankhen Baara Haath*, to mention three of his most popular films, were strongly reformist and didactic in approach. So, too, the classic from Bombay Talkies, *Achha Karya* (1936). A little later Ranjit Studios produced a film on the same theme, *Achoot*, which starred the legendary Gohar and dealt with the struggle of the Dalits.

The amalgam of social reform and stylized entertainment proved to be particularly heady in the 1930s and 1940s. A film dealing obliquely with rural immigration, *Street Singer*, immortalized K.L. Saigal: *With Mela*, another film set in rural India, we saw the birth
of another legend—Dilip Kumar. Dilip Kumar, in particular, was to consciously espouse the personage of the rural Indian. Right up to the mid-1950s, in B.R. Chopra's Naya Daur, Dilip Kumar was not just the most popular (and acclaimed) star of Hindi film. He was also the protagonist of rural India in an increasingly urbanized world order.

Right through the 1960s from the 1930s, cinema's concern with social problems continued to be overtly expressed in a handful of very significant films—Mehboob Khan's Aurat and Mother India, K.A. Abbas's Dharti ke Lal, and a number of Bimal Roy films including Do Bigha Zamin and Seeta. Along with Raj Kapoor's films that highlighted the conflicts between the rich and the poor, there were Dilip Kumar's Ganga Jamuna and Sunil Dutt's Mujhe Jeene Do that focused on the socio-economic roots of very Indian social problems.

One stream of social reform came very easily to Indian feature films in the natural course of events, as it were. Since all cinema has at its core the primal relationship between man and woman, a very specific role has been played by female characters in the feature film, reflecting the changing image of women in twentieth-century society. In India, as in many other Asian countries, the twentieth-century saw womanhood gradually breaking out of unwanted, archaic, and burdensome orthodoxies. In many cases, popular leading ladies became the protagonists of the twentieth-century woman, in her varied hues through the decades. The social evils of dowry and child marriage, women's education, the dignity of the working woman—all the social reform movements that dominated the Indian scene in the early half of this century—were to find their rationale echoed and their arguments expounded in a continuous stream of films.

In the silent film era itself we had Dhiren Ganguly's Lady Teacher and films by others that focused on the personality of the working woman—Marriage Market, Telephone Girl, Typist Girl. In 1935, Dhruvika put forward an analysis of a lady doctor's life. Gohar starred in Barrister's Wife, and Kadar's Sharda and Shantaram's Duniya Na Mane became extremely powerful and popular attacks on the traditional practice of child marriage.

The 1970s are often referred to as the decade that witnessed the emergence of the dominant status of the action film. Yet film sociologists would be committing an intellectual misdemeanour if they were not to notice that the 1970s was also the decade that unveiled new portrayals of contemporary womanhood. In Hindi cinema alone, this was also the decade of Shabana Azmi and Neelam Patil, two great actresses whose performance of contemporary characters quite changed the tone of Indian films as a whole. Starting off with low-budget, so-called art films like Shyam Benegal's Ankur and Mantash, Shabana and Neelam were soon to become cult figures in the Indian cultural scenario, and, in the 1980s, were to greatly influence the concept of women characters in Hindi cinema.

Shabana Azmi and Neelam Patil were path breakers whose achievements provided new inspiration to other leading actresses of their time. The queen of showbiz, Hema Malini, broke from tradition and worked in offbeat films like Khushboo and Kinar. Raakhee established a new niche for women characters in the cinema through films like 27 Down, a national award winner, and Tapasya. Rekha and Sridevi, have from time to time revealed themselves as consummate artists capable of tackling such complex roles as in Ghar and Umrao Jaan (in Rekha's case) and Sadma and Sauten (in Sridevi's).

The 1970s also saw the unique case of a film actress working in the commercial cinema set-up, but giving it a dignity that was at once acceptable to social reformers and intellectuals. Such was the rare achievement of actress Jaya Bhaduri Bachchan. With her roles in such films as Abhimaan, Parichay, Kashish, and Mile, Jaya Bhaduri Bachchan immediately enlarged the range of characterization and realism that would be popularly accepted. It has been a rare achievement and one that deserves an exclusive analysis of its own.
This group of talented actresses of the 1970s and the 1980s did, as a matter of fact, follow in the footsteps of two other generations of great actresses. First, the generation represented by Geeta Bali, Nargis, Meena Kumari, and Madhubala and then that generation represented by Nutan, Waheeda Rehman, Sharmila Tagore. All these actresses are immortalized in a number of extremely significant and socially relevant films, that form the jewels in their respective crowns. From the years immediately after India attained Independence in 1947, actresses and women characters have, from time to time, embellished the quantum of Indian films with a contribution that is no less than that of men. And it can be argued that these three generations of great talents are representative of three chapters in the history of Indian womanhood during the last sixty years or so. A reflection, as it were, of the changing face of women in Indian society.

One of the interesting aspects of cinema, Indian cinema in particular, is that it has never espoused the cause of social evils or projected them in a positive light. This, indeed, is the reason why popular cinema has become a cultural symbol for the Indian people, who see films in close interaction with life as they know it outside the cinema hall.

At the same time, whenever society itself has seemed to have lost a sense of direction, cinema has been equally afflicted by the social confusion. At such times, film-makers have confined themselves to the limited concern of producing only entertainment of one kind or another.

Whenever the larger process of social development has been clearly defined in the body politic and has been lucidly articulated Indian cinema has quickly picked up the cue to propagate the ideas and concepts that direct social development in the country. On the other hand, whenever social development has slowed down to a listless pace, popular cinema has tended to move away from realistic themes and escape into the realm of pure entertainment.

However, any list of the most popular films in Indian cinema will show us unequivocally that the most popular films have always been those which combine the ingredients of popular entertainment with aspirations of social amelioration and humanist development. Like the novel, the feature film ‘tells a lie in order to tell the truth’, as literary critics say. Popular cinema has a hybrid style which has evolved from folk traditions but which now also includes ‘pop’ elements. An analogy here is that while modern development programmes seek to implant new technologies in ‘a historically backward’ landscape, the popular Indian film attempts to enrobe the economically backward individual in the trappings of new technology. In that sense, cinema is quick to pick up the symbols and icons of technological developments and economic evolution, and incorporate them as part of the backdrop in which the emotional drama takes place.

Since cinema is itself technology’s child, it has always been aware that new technological environments cast their own shadow on human relationships and on human aspirations. To that extent, no matter how much a film may depart from the realistic facets of contemporary life, it can never snap its umbilical bond with social development. Social struggles and social achievements provide the inspiration for many a film. For at its best our cinema is a fair image of what is happening in society at large.

Yojana, August 1995.

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Violence in Hindi Films

Indians are not as non-violent as they fondly imagine themselves to be. Notwithstanding the reverence in which Gandhi, Buddha, and Mahavir are held, violence is as much a part of the history of this country as is non-violence.