to making films primarily for children. It is only if the film-makers so wish and are fired by the vision, that the movement can be restarted, to etch out a new tradition of entertainment and education for our children.

Hindustan Times, 15 April 1990.

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**Political Themes in Indian Cinema**

_The removal of poverty—garibi hatao—holds a greater attraction for the Indian mind than resolving communal tensions between Hindus and Muslims. The film Garam Hawa did not do too well at the box office because of this collective preference in the minds of Indians._

Not since the days when the British authorities banned novels and plays has a single work of art become so involved with national politics as the film _Garam Hawa_ has. Most of those who worked in _Garam Hawa_ have inherited the legacy of the Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA). And the Left has traditionally been the major force in the movement of art towards a direct political effect. _Garam Hawa_—both in its making and in its impact—cannot thus be seen in isolation from the artistic and political antecedents of the immediate past.

The heyday of the Naxalite movement saw the arts—particularly drama and song—being forged into a strategic component of the ideological war. Though West Bengal was the main centre of such artistic activity, the influence from there on urban art centres in the rest of the country was immediate. The radical events brought artists face to face with a most significant subject material—the Indian condition, particularly in terms of poverty. As this became the centre of artistic, intellectual, political, and general debate and concern within the framework of the establishment, it transcended electoral alignments and became as respectable a subject as any other for artists.

Yet concern with the Indian situation cannot be confined to air-conditioned theatres. The limitations of the social impact of a play like Vijay Tendulkar’s _Ghasiram Kotwal_ (outside the regional cultural orthodoxy of Maharashtra itself) may, at one level, be compared with the exaltation of revolutionary chants and gestures in the fantasies of the Bombay film. In both cases, familiar lore from the past may be marginally reactivated (such as Marathi obscurantism about Nana Phadnavis). But it is not possible for the work to activate social currents that are subterranean at the moment, despite their apparent presence in the general flow of the social consciousness. Going beyond such works of art or show business, _Garam Hawa_ has now shown the possibility that a work of art can squarely confront society.

I think this is an important development in post-Independence India. For, till 1967, the urban artist was caught in a process that alienated him a little more each year from the ‘people’. In that apolitical environment, popular entertainment (in cinema and theatre) took a leap towards escapism, gloss, and sheer fantasy. There is no doubt that this flight into escapism also reflected the general obsession with the opulent toys and façades of the industrial society. Also, popular entertainment could provide some room for the airing of political comment. But the overall feeling reiterated by popular entertainment was that it was impossible to ‘change’ things, that life would move at its own pace and that resignation and acceptance were the individual’s best means of survival.

Since 1967 all that has changed. The birth of the ‘new cinema’ has, luckily, coincided with this change. The coming of age of the first generation of post-Independence India is also an important factor in the emergence of this new perspective.

The ‘new cinema’ had a propitious beginning—a beginning that linked the past and the future. The director of _Bhuvan Shome_ was
the first film-maker of today's 'new cinema' to get a loan from the Film Finance Corporation (FFC) through a personal decision of Himmat Singh, the then Chairman of the Corporation. Mrinal Sen was a man who had grown in the IPTA tradition, but who found his maturity and his time only in the mid-1960s.

In Bhuvan Shome, Mrinal Sen handled a subject close to his political and social concerns. Yet he did so in a manner that did not directly use a political terminology. On the surface, the film remained the story of the bureaucrat and the village girl. Under it, it showed the confrontation between an ossifying urbanite and the vitality of village India or, rather, with the depths of our collective potential. It was a confrontation that had a political message for society at large.

The complexities of expression embedded in the format of Bhuvan Shome make it more naturally a symbol of the diverse voices that the new cinema has brought to the fore. Young film-makers leaned to this or that side of Bhuvan Shome for their individual articulation of form and style. Yet Mrinal Sen's first Hindi film can be taken as a midway point in new cinema.

Over the years Mrinal Sen has pursued his method of using cinema both for purposes of art and of life today. This has provided some sort of continuity to film-making, culminating in Garam Hawa. Directed by M.S. Sathyu and based on two stories by Ismat Chughtai, it is a film that seems to mark the beginning of the awareness that contemporary Indian art has a major responsibility in mapping the future of our collective life.

Before one goes on to that, it might not be amiss to mention here that this emergence of a cinema with a direct political bearing also had a curious side effect. Mrinal Sen's second venture in this period—Interview—coincided with a major shift in Satyajit Ray's filmography marked by Pratidwandi. As Kironmoy Raha pointed out in a review of the film in Frontier, Pratidwandi was the first film in which Ray directly and urgently dealt with the reality of a contemporary social situation. Ray's later film, Asani Sanket, which deals with the Bengal famine of 1943, may also be seen as part of the shift in his career—a shift brought about by, among other things, by the emergence of Mrinal Sen and a socially committed cinema.

Two films of the new cinema—apart from Mrinal Sen's trilogy of Interview, Calcutta 71, and Padatik—are important in the run up to Garam Hawa. These are Samskara (in Kannada) and Swayamwaram (in Malayalam). A brilliantly concise cinematization of Nanithamoorthy's novel, Samskara made a major breakthrough in the understanding of religious dogma. What, after all is the Brahminical concept of 'purity' if the Shudra does little that the Brahmin does not, in terms of the brass tacks of human existence? Through the use of the primordial force of sex, Samskara challenges the rigidity in caste segregation. And, to top it off, it concludes that nobody can really be sure about the purity of his or her lineage. This confrontation between tradition and some basic and undeniable common sense—so that the tradition may be redefined to solve the crisis of contemporary society—attacked the roots of political life in our country. The seemingly apolitical theme of Samskara thereby becomes a part of the new cinema—a cinema that is always conscious of the Indian body politic and its infrastructure, even when it is not ostensibly oriented to political concerns.

Adoor Gopalakrishnan's Swayamwaram is perhaps the most comprehensive film about the post-Independence Indian's social life. By a juxtaposition of the inner and outer lives of individuals, Swayamwaram created with both accuracy and imagination the fall of the young into the ancient abyss—an unsung death, or life-in-death. In a particular sequence, Gopalakrishnan articulated his image and observation of this abyss.

The young man, played by Madhu (who starts life as a writer and ends it as a clerk in a squalid-timber factory), comes out of the factory and is confronted by another young man. The latter had once worked in the same factory but was sacked and is now unemployed. His job has been given to Madhu. What, Gopalakrishnan
asks us, can be the sense of security a young man feels when he perceives that the source of his livelihood has deprived another young man like him? Further, stepping awkwardly past the unemployed man, Madhu walks down the lane to the main road. Here—suggested through sound but not visually shown—he runs into a procession of Kerala government NGOs, agitating for their dearth allowance. The vital link between personal and social life that this whole sequence shows has not, anywhere else, been expressed so specifically as in Swayamwaram. Mrinal Sen too has often touched upon this link, but always in generalized terms.

Side by side with these 'public' aspects of the film's central character, Gopalakrishnan sets a curious parallel pattern. Knocking around at life's doors outside his home, and being knocked around in turn, Madhu is shown totally at ease in a strange and intriguing relationship with his wife, played by Sharda. Inside the house, the man is passive—generally lolling about—while the woman is the active member, bustling and doing things constantly. It is a juxtaposition of public and private aspects that provides director Gopalakrishnan with some of the basic premises he needed for his comprehensive account of the young Indian's life today. Swayamwaram was easily accepted by society. It did not disturb the sense of status quo as Garam Hawa threatens to.

Is it because by the time Swayamwaram came about—or for that matter Interview and Pratidwandi—the problem of the young Indian and of the immediate future of India had already been revealed to society at large by events that are now part of Indian history? The uprising at Naxalbari and its impact on the entire social fabric led to intense public consciousness of the ills of the socio-economic system, specifically in the form of the portrayals of the young as doomed. By the time these films came, we had collectively accepted the social problems the films dealt with, even if we could not solve them right away.

With Garam Hawa, it is the opposite. The communal tensions between Hindus and Muslims that the film deals with spell a problem that has not yet stormed the collective mind. A resolution of this conflict has no popularity as a social wish, completely unlike the wish for garibi hatao. For this very reason, as director M.S. Sathyu has said time and again in newspaper interviews, Garam Hawa was made with special care. It was meant to communicate and impact with the largest audience of cinema without compromising its essential message. Here is a major social problem, this message says, that still destroys so many Indian homes (twenty-six years after Partition) and we treat it like a problem that cannot be resolved and that does not, therefore, merit public debate and concern.

In this, Garam Hawa specifies one major direction along which the urban Indian artist shall have to work if he is to prove the social validity of his work; if art can influence life to make the changes that it needs.

Hindustan Times, 11 February 1990.

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The Usurper Theme in Hindi Cinema

This essay, written thirty years ago, is both playful and full of mischief. It argues that Shyam Benegal's Ankur and Mrinal Sen's Ek Adhuri Kahani pushed the 'king pin of Hindi 'philumns', Manmohan Desai, into making Dharamveer. Dharamveer is about social justice, and how a politician fails to do his duty towards the people and his office.

Mrinal Sen and Shyam Benegal may chuckle at this but there is a definite possibility that they played a role in ushering in the extravaganza's swing toward history. Bombay's film-makers generally work in a claustrophobic atmosphere. New ideas are scarcer here than space in the metropolis. It is far from imaginable that some intellectual looked around and saw in Ek Adhuri Kahani and Ankur the seeds of an alternative cinema—one that shows
social tension, conflict, and the exploitation and dehumanization of man and woman. Or that anyone considered these as perfect scenario for incorporating fights and exotica. So with Mammohan Desai's Dharamveer the big studios went further back into history, before the British Raj that Mrinal and Shyam saw as a house of mirrors reflecting contemporary India.

It may sound absurd to some that Ek Adhuri Kahani or Ankur could have the least resemblance to Dharamveer, or Azaad, or Amar-Shakti, or that these films could anticipate these box-office extravaganzas. But if you look at it from the perspective that all these films talk about poverty and the poor (yes, the big three do!), perhaps it may not sound ridiculous. It may explain, instead, how popular forms relate to the experiments of art.

When Dharamveer was ultimately given the censor's certificate in March 1977, it was clear that V.C. Shukla's ministry (the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting) had been constrained to delay the film's release mainly because of one particular line of dialogue in it where Dharmendra talks about justice as defined for the poor and as modified for the rich and that those who swear by principles to keep the weak in their place would damn these principles if they turned on them.

It is generally, and contemptuously, assumed that the 'uncultured' masses of the Indian film audience will accept a film even if all they really like about it is just one detail. In Dharamveer the dialogue that V.C. Shukla's ministry seemed to fear in 1976 and early 1977 stood out like a menacing detail. It was the core of the armed struggle waged by Dharam and Veer's band.

In Pramod Chakravorty's Azaad, the essential feature of Dharmendra's character is that, like Zorro, he's not going to let the unjust go unpunished. In A.K. Nadiadwala's Amar-Shakti both the princes from the dethroned family—Shashi Kapoor and Shatrughan Sinha—talk again and again of the poor.

It was while watching Amar-Shakti that it struck this writer that 'poverty' and the 'poor' were not, in those days, two words the media was particularly fond of. They suddenly seemed to have gone out of fashion and even politicians, who constitute along with films the two dominant communications media on a national scale, do not make much use of them at present.

The compulsions of the commercially produced and marketed Indian film are obvious. But there are occasions when its need to feel the pulse of the people eggs on producers to a blunt and straightforward espousal of the people's demands. This is understandable. For the poor themselves the most important feature in films has always been the narrative and its championing of the poor. In sharp contrast, for the middle class, the Indian film's importance lies in entertainment or, less frequently, the reflection of psychological dilemmas. A situation that is really contrary to the intelligentsia's analyses of the Indian film and its audience.

Intriguingly enough, the simple, unsubtle banner of poverty that these 'escapist' extravaganzas wave now and then is not all. If it was, these overflamboyant films would have been even more crude and unsubtle. On the contrary, a strange, at first nearly incomprehensible, complexity is introduced through the usurper theme. In Dharamveer, Azaad, and Amar-Shakti, to take but three examples, we see a king conspired against, dethroned, and imprisoned—not by an enemy but by deceiving lieutenants. The usurper, being played by a screen villain, is easily defined. But the deposed monarch is in all cases sketchily characterized. He is a vaguely defined 'good' king, a generous ruler misguided by his own administrative machinery, personifying an ideal ruler appealing to our atavistic fantasy. In the inner recesses of the mind's chaos, this fantasy hopes for an end to all dilemmas.

But strangely enough, the usurper theme seems to be easily acceptable to the 78 lakh-odd Indians who frequent the movie halls every day. It thereby introduces into the social fabric a theme that seems totally irrelevant to Indian politicians, political commentators, and scholars.
To go back now from Manmohan Desai, Pramod Chakravorty, and Nadiadwala to Mrinal Sen and Bengal, we can wonder if, in the colloquial idiom of the collective psyche, the harsh factory owner in *Ek Adhuri Kahani* and the confused young feudal master in *Ankur* are not really usurpers. And can we not apply the same sociological-cum-political yardstick and wonder if our rulers have all these years not been usurpers—never performing the roles they know they are supposed to perform?

In our society, where the image is the beginning and end of absolute reality, would the political scientist not agree with the fantasy film and feel that the real validation of public office is something permanent and supreme? Neither constitutional right—through being voted into power—nor the overwhelming powers of office provide a greater justification to the public official than his moral force as the leader of the people in the real, concrete sense. Would there else have been such support for J.P.’s movement in 1974 against a constitutionally elected government or such irritation and despair at the Janata government?

In Indian politics, and Indian society as a whole, there has been and shall remain a consistent pressure on the rulers to adequately perform the functions of their office as defined by popular need. And, as 1977 proved, neither power nor might shall for too long sustain the ruler usurping and encroaching on the functions of his office. The theme of kingship as a contract between the leader and his followers is hardly dead in the labyrinth of the democratic process in India.

Let our rulers think again about the usurper theme that comes through so obliquely in the escapism of cinema. Who remembers the administrative or martial brilliance of Aurangzeb? Dara Shikoh, Shivaji, and his brutal encroachment in religion erase all else about that Mughal’s image in the folk mind. And were not the British in India usurpers too?

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