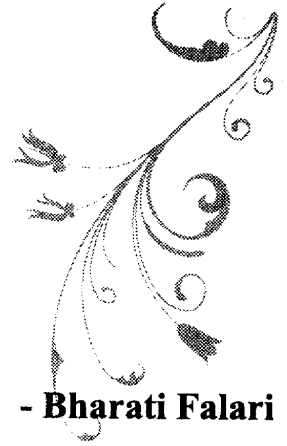


# Cinema-a Catalyst of Social Reform in the Pre-Independence Era



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Cinema: Ek Jhanki (cinema : A Glimpse)

*Kya matvale log the veh  
Haseen tha kitna junoon unka  
Aankho mein kaise khwab liye  
Dil Mein sau-sau armaan bhare  
Chitra-vichitr, Chalchitra se  
Karne lage batein,  
Sunane lage kahani  
Nav-yug ki, nav-chetna ki  
Aao samajhein unki bani.*

(Paraphrase: those were the people full of zeal/eyes filled with a hundred dreams/ hearts brimming with a mad obsession/they made the mysterious shadows of the silver screen. Come alive and speak in a new language/bestirring the minds/awakening the masses to a new renaissance/come let us grasp their message visionary).

The volatile political environment in the country in the beginning of 20th century necessitated a major transition in the social fabric of the Indian society. The partition of Bengal in 1905 had rekindled the spirit of patriotism. The entire nation echoed

with Vande-Mataram. Swadeshi Movement was launched by the great leaders such as Dadabhai Naoroji, Lokmanya Tilak of the Indian National Congress. The need to reform the Indian society and to bring about greater unity was felt by great leaders. Various means of mass mobilization were used by the leaders. It was during the same time that cinema was introduced in our country.

This atmosphere which infused hope and enthusiasm in the early 20th century was represented by both; the freedom lovers who sacrificed everything for their motherland; as well as those who toiled day and night to unfold the images and stories on the celluloid for the Indians. It is an interesting journey; providing rich and vivid glimpses of social, cultural and historical progress of our country.

Cinema was a landmark invention of the 19th century. It created a great sensation among people; for the man in the streets, the images on the screen were so 'real' that the experience was almost unbelievable. For instance, when spectators saw the short documentary film *Arrival of a train* (1895) for the first time they were shocked to see the image of an approaching train on the screen; an image so vivid and real, as to instill fear and panic in mind.

The arrival of Cinema in India coincided with the beginning of India's freedom struggle. The early cinema was generally based on Indian mythology and popular theatre (plays). Initially, the films would be shown in a tent, the sound of the projector and the moving images casting a hypnotic spell on the people.

In 1921, when Mahatma Gandhi's Non cooperation movement was gaining momentum; Dwarkadas Sampat (Founder of Kohinoor company) produced a film titled *Bhakta Vidur*. The protagonist of the film *Bhakta Vidur*, physically frail but spiritually strong., who survives the persecution of his oppressors, seemed to resemble Gandhiji. The film was a hit from the start. In Bombay it proved so popular that the two regular shows were augmented by *matinees*.

It was when the film reached Hyderabad (in Sind) that the censor got wise to its popularity and the District Magistrate of Karachi clamped a ban on it on the ground that "It is likely to excite disaffection against the Government and incite people to non-cooperation" for being a thinly veiled resume of political events in India, *Vidur* appearing as Mr. Gandhi clad in Gandhi cap and Khaddar (coarse cloth) shirt. The British feared that the intention of the filmmaker was to create hatred, contempt and to stir up feelings of enmity against the Government." Interestingly, Sampat who played the lead in the film bore some physical resemblance to the Mahatma, make-up doing the rest. Considering the repressive nature of the censors, *Bhakta Vidur* was a courageous venture. (Garga, 1996, 40). It must have been a strong catalyst for the spirit

of nationalism in a climate of political fervor surcharged by Mahatma Gandhi's recent arrival on the political scene.

Great filmmakers and literary figures realized the latent potential of cinema as a powerful means of propagating new ideas and creating awareness. Cinema, of course was a mass media, gaining tremendous popularity among the masses as well as the classes. Among the visionaries who could appreciate the mass appeal of the medium as well as contribute substantially to it, was the Nobel laureate, Rabindranath Tagore.

Prior to the introduction of 'sound' in films, a film titled *Sacrifice* (in 1927) was produced by Orient Pictures Corporation. This film was based on Rabindranath's play, *Balidan*, condemning the age-old custom of animal sacrifice in the temple of Kali, sadly a practice still extant in certain parts of Bengal. Members of the Indian Cinematograph committee were impressed enough to call it an "excellent and truly Indian film". (64) More importantly, this film held a mirror to an obsolete and inhuman practice and in its own way impacted the minds of the spectators towards the undesirability of animal sacrifice.

The arrival of 'sound' in 1931 in the first 'talkies', *Alam Ara*, led to a major transition in the focus of cinema. The 'visual' form and language had to work collaboratively with the 'sound'. This paved the way to the inclusion of dialogues from narratives based on literature, as well as of songs. Cinema never ceased to speak since.

Also, in 1931, Imperial film Company made a film titled *Wrath* on the theme of marginalization and exploitation of a so-called low-caste young girl by a 'respectable' High-caste Hindu. The film had a powerful character called Baba Garibdas who provides sympathy and shelter to the woman protagonist. The powerful impact of this film on the potential spectators can be gauged from an interesting anecdote. The amazing physical resemblance of the Parsee actor, Cowasji Makanda to Gandhi made the censor paranoid and they forced the filmmaker to cut many significant portions of the film. The aggressive title, *Wrath*, was replaced under pressure by a docile and acceptable one, *Khuda ki Shaan*. But then the film had lost its 'sting' and its impact was considerably diluted. No doubt, the censoring authorities managed to curb the implied 'social' message of this film which was aimed at using the 'political' persona of Gandhi, its capacity bestir social reform must have surely been considerable for the oppressive rule of the British had to sit back and take notice. Nevertheless, after India's independence; Bimal Roy used the theme of 'untouchability' and the icon of Gandhi in his film *Sujata* (1959), with commendable efficacy and unprecedented emotional appeal for social reform.

It is often believed that the era of stunt films must have unleashed a climate of a

make-belief and fantasy often lulling the spectators by the use of adventure, romance and escapism. But there was another dimension to such films too. For instance, Homi Wadia, who spurned a new genre of stunt films, projected the fearless, aggressive and the free-spirited image of the women, immortalized by Nadia in films like *Hunterwali* (1935). These female characters were icons individual freedom and social equality in an age of political slavery and gender based discrimination.

The symbolic effect of these female protagonists can be discerned from the write-up of a documentary on Nadia screened on the occasion of 60th Anniversary of Wadia Movietone. It included among others the following statement: "In the storm and stress of the Independence Movement, here was the most powerful voice that preached communal tolerance and secularism... She was the first true demist of the Indian screen whose physical prowess and sheer dint of action proved to the male chauvinistic society that women were equal to men- if not more fearless". (Chatterji Shoma, 1998, 242)

The conspicuous response of the censor-board to some of the films made in the pre-Independence India it itself example of the British authority's capitulation before the social impact and reform potential of the film. Here, a mention must be made of V. Shantaram's bold attempt to depict the life of 16th century Bhakti poet of Maharashtra, Sant Eknath, and his doctrine of equality and compassion in the film titled *Mahatma*. Sant Eknath had opposed the pernicious caste system and the system of 'untouchability'. The censor as could be expected objected to the title on the grounds that it had an "association with a certain political leader". They also disapproved of the film's "controversial politics". Ultimately the film was given a new title, *Dharmatma* (1935).

Undeterred by his experience, *Sant Tukaram* (1936), was yet another great masterpiece directed by V. Shantaram. For its entire historical context, the film was contemporary in spirit. The press of the day deservedly hailed it as a 'human document of great value'. Likewise, the stories from the Puranas or mythology were used as clever strategy by the filmmakers not only for commercial gains but also to promote human values and condemn discrimination of any kind. As such, Pauranic stories also got made into films with a pro-reformist message.

*Amar Jyoti* (1936) is another film which could be considered as landmark feminist film wherein the women protagonist essayed by the legendary (Durga Khote) rebels against the patriarchal society. She becomes a pirate and with the help of other women fights against her oppressors. Incidentally, Durga Khote was influenced by the feminist ideology of the reformists of her times (Avantika Gokhale, in particular), and was among the first women from an educated, upper class Maharashtrian background to

enter films.

Kunku (1937) in Marathi and its Hindi version Duniya Na Mane based on N.H.Apte's novel, Na Patnari Gosht was an unusually provocative film in terms of social oppression and need for aggressive reform. It is a story of a young, sensitive girl Nirmala who is treacherously married to a man almost double her age. She refuses to consummate the marriage and fights for her rights and dignity. The degree of its influence on the educated middle class must have been tremendous as must have been its aesthetic appeal and artistic credo. In fact, K.A.Abbas, the noted filmmaker wrote, "The stark realism of the film, the imaginative direction, the eloquent camerawork, the symbolic juxtaposition of shorts which was like visual poetry with its telling metaphors-all this and its daring characterization of the girl (played by Shanta Apte), who refused to compromise with her forced marriage, came as revelation to me. Here was a complete departure from commercial escapism of Bombay cinema....."

No doubt, the film must have provoked strong reactions among the audience. For instance, it is recorded that a lady from Kanpur upbraided Shantaram for producing a film 'against our culture..... and instigating our girls to behave this way'. However, the other end of the spectrum of impact must have also been powerful. In fact, A.K.Hangal, the noted character actor reminisces: "When I saw the film with my father, he seemed to be so much absorbed by the realistic portrayal of Nirmala that he asked me quite innocently and earnestly whether Nirmala (the female protagonist) would actually remarry as per the last wishes of her husband?" Indeed, the films had a tremendous hold on the masses, they were led on to see, question and to believe only if convinced in intellect and conscience.

Strange as it may seem today, Gandhiji did not appreciate and acknowledge the role of cinema as potential medium for reform. In the opinion of Roy, though he was born during an era of progressive evolution of communication technology, he was a passionate opponent of modernity and technology preferring the pencil to the typewriter, the loin cloth to the business suit, the ploughed field to the belching factory, printed word to the moving pictures. In fact, Mahatma Gandhi expressed his disapproving ideas on cinema in 1927, when the Indian Cinematographic committees sent him a request with a questionnaire on what were his views on cinema. Gandhiji returned the questionnaire with an unfavorable comment in a accompanying letter addressed to the Chairman of the committee (See Roy Deepak, OPPapers.com, 2009).

There appears to be rationale for such an attitude and response to films. Most of the earliest films dealt with themes such as mythology, action, thriller, comedy. Many foreign films were also screened during the era of Silent Cinema. Perhaps, Gandhiji felt

that these films would create a passion for fiction and encourage 'escapism'. Gandhiji's concern was to awaken the young and the old against social discrimination and political oppression. He wanted to bring about a social transition that would benefit the poor and the marginalized politically but also socio-economically. This required commitment. A country with teeming millions could not afford to ignore the harsh reality of poverty, injustice and subjugation to the oppressive British Raj, and chase a world of fantasy. Putting one's shoulder to the will of reform and trying to be 'the change' must have been more important to Gandhiji rather than narrating, harrowing tales of oppression and inequality. At least, a look at this work and writing makes this view plausible.

The noted filmmaker Khwaja Ahmed Abbas in an open letter to Mahatma Gandhi (1939) wrote; "Today I bring for your scrutiny-and approval-a new toy my generation has learned to play with, the CINEMA!-You include cinema among evils like gambling,sutta, horse-racing etc. .... In view of the great position you hold in this country, and I may say in the world, even the slightest expression of your opinion carries much weight with millions of people. And one of the world's most useful inventions would be allowed to be discharged or what is worse, left alone to be abused by unscrupulous people...." (as quoted by Garg,1996,65)

Rabindranath Tagore, unlike Gandhiji, showed an uncommon understanding of the new medium. He saw immense possibilities in it and hoped that it would develop into an independent art form "to express itself freely in its self-created world". Elaborating, he said: "The principle element of motion picture is the 'flux of images'. The beauty and grandeur of this form in motion has to be developed in such a way that it becomes self-sufficient without the use of words". But then, Tagore was thinking of cinema's prospects in the 'silent era'. Naturally, Tagore allowed for several of his stories to be adapted for screen, (although not always with results). This in a quaint way helps to perceive Mahatma Gandhi's apprehension of the medium of cinema (66).

Apparently, such apprehensions do not appear to have affected the making of socially relevant films. Filmmakers continued to respond to contemporary issues. In the south, for instance, filmmakers such as K.Subramanyam and B.N.Reddi- both with literary leanings and professional background - began making films focusing on issues like gender oppression and social justice. One of Subryamanyam's films, *Balayogini* (1936) was concerned with the neglect of widows among the Brahmins, a caste he belonged to, and thus the film for him into trouble with his own community. In another film *Thyagabhoomi* (1938), by the same director, a wronged wife asserts her individuality and retaliates against her husband.

Bombay film industry, in its own right, did not lag behind in sensitizing the masses

against social evils. Meetha Zahar, made in 1938, dealt with prohibition, a popular subject on the Congress Committee's agenda. At the time, it is said, women went out on torch-lit marches against the evil of drink, which the film-maker Sohrab Modi had incorporated in his film. His other film Divorce was equally timely. Just then the All-India Women's Conference was agitating for Hindu women's right to divorce. Garg (2005) mentions how a contemporary critic had commended Soharab Modi for having chosen 'such a vital issue instead of conventional romance'. This is evidence enough of the growing commitment of the filmmaker of that era to the dire requirement of his time for enlightenment and social reform.

It was, notably, around this time that one of the great contemporary classic, *Aurat* (1940) was directed by Mehboob. This women-centric film was inspired by Pearl Buck's novel *Mother*. The film reveals the struggle of the women protagonist, Radha, who is abandoned by her husband. She fights against her poverty, the famine, the lecherous money-lender, and bring up her sons single-handedly. The film reveals the strength of the woman, her quest for dignified life and her ultimate sacrifice (she kills her wayward son, Birju) in order the honour of the daughter of the lecherous money-lender. The film was a huge success. The same filmmaker in his remake of the film *Aurat* into an epic cinema, *Mother India* (1957), repeated history by creating a portrayal of the ideal Indian woman.

In fine, it appears that many great filmmakers, visionaries worked tirelessly to create social awareness and bring about social change through the medium of cinema. Interestingly, most issues handled by them were contemporary and politically relevant. Several films had a progressive agenda, especially for the women protagonists, and the issues related to caste and gender were sensitively probed and effectively projected. In hindsight, it is possible to see the risks that a few films must have weathered whether in terms of financial gains, social reaction or even political censure. This makes the contribution of cinema to social reform an invaluable catalyst of its own time.



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