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Re-creating Tradition. “Filmi Reality” and Politics in India*

Abstract

Film is the most important and most influential medium in contemporary India. Social and political activities occurring in India rely on a kind of convention that is generally accepted and followed. These activities, both on the micro and the macro-scale are largely determined by the patterns formed by film, the most popular mass medium within the range of the general public.

Indian film, in both the convention adopted and attitudes propagated, draws in its form and contents upon deeply-rooted traditions, reinforcing the traditional social patterns by means of modern devices. Thus its social role is that of preserving the status quo and, essentially, of opposing modernising trends and impulses. The present text, while by no means claiming to be an exhaustive discussion of the subject, intends to show some of the most important elements through which Indian film forms and strengthens social attitudes, as well as serves political purposes.

On July 7, 1886, in *The Times of India*, issued in Bombay, there appeared an announcement of the first film show in India. Those gathered in the Watsons Hotel were to witness the “miracle of the century”, “the Lumiere brothers’ moving pictures”.

At the beginning of 1913, in the Coronation Theatre, also in Bombay, the first Indian feature film, *Rajah Harischandra*, was shown, made by the pioneer of the Indian cinematography, Dhundiraj Govind Phalke.

About two decades later, in 1931, Ardeshir Irani released the first Indian sound film in Hindi, entitled *Alam Ara (The Beauty of the World)*, and the Madan and Brothers company established the first film studio that was to produce sound movies. By 1933, 75 sound films in Hindi had already been produced in India. There began an unprecedented expansion of motion pictures, which has turned from a technical curiosity and entertainment for a small group of the wealthy into the most appealing mass medium that today shapes

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social and political attitudes, as well as behavioural patterns of a major part of society in this country of a billion plus people.

It is film which is to a considerable extent responsible for the persistence of the traditional social and political system in India, since it is one of its mainstays. It confirms and reinforces the traditional psychological attitudes on which the social structure actually rests.

Social and political activities in India rely on a kind of convention that is generally accepted and followed. These activities, both on the micro- and on the macro-scale (e.g. in the family, joint family included, in caste communities, in the linguistically, religiously or administratively regional communities) are determined by the patterns formed by film, the most popular mass medium within the range of the general public.

Indian film, in both the convention adopted and attitudes propagated, draws in its form and content upon deeply-rooted traditions, reinforcing the traditional social patterns by means of modern devices. Thus its social role is that of preserving the status quo and, essentially, of opposing the modernising trends and impulses. I wish to emphasise that this statement is not to be treated as an evaluative one; I am not in the least sure that modernisation is always more valuable than traditionalism, or that an informal, traditional social structure is by its very nature worse than a formalised, modern one. The present text, while by no means claiming to be an exhaustive discussion of the subject, intends to show some of the most important elements through which Indian film strengthens and forms social attitudes, as well as serves political purposes.

Since film can be said to exert an influence only when the means employed are large enough to secure a desirable reaction, it seems prerequisite to present the scope of the cinema's effect on Indian society.

India is at present at the top of film production in the world. In 2003, 877 feature films were released in India as well as 1177 short films; in comparison only about 500 films were produced in the USA.¹ Movie tickets are readily available and considered the cheapest in the world. Roughly 15 million people go to the movies everyday in India's 13.000 cinemas.² The film culture is propagated by hundreds of film magazines in all the major languages of the country.

Television has become a major medium in India in the past decade. TV sets are readily available and affordable for all but the poorest. In some remote areas such as the village close to Keylong, the capital of Lahaul Spiti which I visited, people would go without running water, sanitation or electricity but a large satellite antenna is a must for the community center, to serve generator-powered TV.

Illegal film copies constitute a serious problem for producers, distributors and cinema owners. It often happens that a film appears on a pirate cassette or DVD even before it has reached the cinema network. From the point of view of the range of social influence we are here concerned with, the "video centres" play a substantial role since they provide a possibility of seeing the most popular hits for a fraction of the price of a cinema ticket. Moreover, these centres are often in places where few cinemas are to be found or where cinemas on the road seldom come.

The film business attracts a large amount of "black money" coming from incomes that are not reported and thus not taxed, which means that there is a big illegal capital (that of smugglers, mafia, etc.) engaged in it. Being in films is glamorous. Gulshan Rai, a prominent Bombay producer, noted: "I asked a smuggler why he wastes his money on films when gold is a much better investment. He said that when people ask him what he does, he likes to be able to say that he is in films."³ The relation between the underworld and film production is all the more interesting as film affects the political attitudes of the society, and Indians themselves assess a large number of members of legislative assemblies (MLA) as having criminal dossiers, that is to say, as having some connection with the world of the crime (Kothari, Vishranathan 1985: 26). At the same time the ideas propagated by the social-crime story film that is gaining increasing popularity are by some authors regarded as "glorifying crime" (Purohit 1983: 13).

Film producers, aware of the huge risk they undertake upon setting out to shoot a film (since a great many pictures do not repay the costs of their production), try by any means to satisfy social demands and preferences. Hence they would rather avoid innovation in either subject matter or form by reiterating over and over again the old, well-tested models appealing to the average movie-goer, for the large part traditionally oriented as regards social attitudes and worldview.

The extent to which cinema influences Indian citizens is indicated by the fact that everyday 15 million of them see a film. In this respect books and newspapers are no competition whatsoever. Film may, therefore, be considered as the only mass medium reaching the average man (Ramachandran, Rukmini 1985: 369). Nehru's opinion about film and its influence, voiced as early as 1955 is worth noting in this context: "I think it is perfectly correct to say that the influence of films in India is greater than the influence of newspapers and books all combined." (Ray 1956: 13)

Territorially, Indian film can be divided into the Southern and the Northern varieties, the division coinciding, for that matter, with the racial, linguistic, cultural and political division of the country. The North is dominated by Hindi film, almost the entire production for this region comes from Mumbai. In the South, the predominant films are those produced locally and in local languages – in Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, and Kannada. Despite the fact that Mumbai is still considered to be the centre of film production in India, the film industry of the southern part of the country, centred in Chennai, has for at least 10 years been the greatest as regards the number of film studios, capital investment, profit, and the staff employed. In the years 1931-1976 over 1500 films in Tamil were produced in the South. In Tamil Nadu itself there is no single village that is outside the range of the influence exerted by movies; the same can be said to apply to Andhra Pradesh (cf. Hardgrave Jr. 1976).

I would distinguish four categories of Indian film: religious-mythological, social, crime-story (the last two often merging into one), and artistic. The last-mentioned type is of no interest for our present discussion, since its influence is minimal.

³ *The Economist*, 20-26.09.1986.

Indian film is highly schematic. Barnouw and Krishnaswamy define the typical plot as "a star, six songs and three dances". The story is of minor importance, for film is idol- or star-oriented (Barnouw, Krishnaswamy 1980: 155). In V. Purohit's opinion every Indian film consists of a number of invariable and indispensable elements, such as songs, dances, fight, pursuit, romantic interludes, supernatural and comical sequences etc. "Thus the average box-office hit ... is made up of 32 to 48 elements. No story-writer or even script-writer is strictly necessary. It is merely a question of combining 30 to 40 pre-determined, standardised sure-fire units..."⁴

This kind of aesthetic is only partly conditioned by the economic factor discussed earlier. In its form, and largely also in its content, Indian film draws upon familiar and generally accepted canons. As Lutze observes, "the unbiased critic will be prepared to accept most of the striking features of Hindi film aesthetics as 20th century variations on corresponding phenomena in traditional aesthetics" (Pfleiderer, Lutze 1985: 7). Lutze mentions the following elements among these striking features: the overacting (which traditionally was an important trait of declamatory art); a binary dramaturgy of sharp black-or-white contrast which leaves no place for doubt as to who is good and who is bad, what is proper and what is not; the presence of such traditional components as singing, dancing and comic interludes. Another characteristic feature is to appeal primarily to the emotions, and only secondarily to rational perception (Pfleiderer, Lutze 1985: 9).⁵

The expectations of the Indian movie-goer are also quite different from those of his Western counterpart. To the latter, a large number of schematic films, based on ready-made formulae, with iterative, only slightly modified plots, may be surprising. But in Lutze's view the aesthetics of Indian film relies not on cognition, but on re-cognition – the fan knows what to expect, he is *im Bilde*, that is to say, in a sense he finds himself in a plot that is familiar to him and develops along predictable lines. Hence the Hindi film, according to Lutze, is typical of the aesthetics of identity (Pfleiderer, Lutze 1985: 13).

All the described distinctive features of both the film itself and its audience result in the portrayal of only those behavioural patterns which are regarded as proper and acceptable by the masses, who for the most part are traditional in their attitudes, and regulated by state censorship.

Generally, Indian film, by promoting such models as the extended family, submission to elders, the wife's subordination to her mother-in-law and husband, and children's subordination to parents, by stressing the superior role of the mother and the authority of the guru, by propagating the traditional attitude to religion as well as other traditional Indian patterns, strengthens the social status quo. Typically, it lacks any rebellious traits; in Spratt's view this absence of rebellious tendencies is due to the narcissist nature of

⁴ V. Purohit, *Profile of the Hindi Hit Movie 1951-1984* (mimeograph), p. 17.

⁵ See also M.K. Byrski's extensive analysis of the parallels between Indian film and the Indian theatrical tradition (Byrski 1980). See also the same author's *Mit i historia – próba zestawienia w dziedzinie teorii indyjskiej sztuki widowiskowej* [Myth and History: An Attempt at Defining Parallels in the Indian Theory of Visual Art]. Warszawa, 1980 (unpublished).

the Indian, whose personality is marked by conformity and conservatism in social and religious, as well as in the artistic spheres of his activity (Spratt 1966: 355).

This is true of both the South-Indian and the North-Indian film, although the two do differ in one respect. The southern variety (mostly Tamil), has to a large extent become politicised, assuming certain non-conservative features; these, however, are quite in conformity with the local Tamil political tendencies represented by the DMK and later AIADMK political parties dominant in the South and drawing on the vast reservoir of charisma of M.G. Ramachandran (MGR), the foremost actor-politician of South India. South-Indian film puts a considerable emphasis on the racial, linguistic and caste distinctiveness of the Dravidian population, developing and consolidating the sense of Dravidian identity by opposing it to the Aryan-Brahmanic invaders from the North. In a sense this has been instrumental in emancipation processes in the traditionally unprivileged population, even though one can hardly get the impression that MGR's screenplays, for all their novel elements, are particularly revolutionary. Yet they are noteworthy, and it seems that V. Purohit understates their role when he sees the message of Indian commercial film as follows: "All is well with the world. The rulers are nice and kind and helpful, though they have temporary difficulties. The problems of life are unreal. One must accept the status quo. To protest and to rebel is not only futile but is nonsensical." (Purohit: 12) Compared to northern film production, MGR's pictures might be regarded as rebellious; within the southern context, however, they are strongly marked by conformity, in both social and political terms, being – just like northern films – part of a well-established system.

The discussed models are propagated through a number of methods and means. W.H. Morris-Jones, writing about modern India's political language after 1947, distinguishes its three characteristic idioms: modern, traditional and saintly (Morris-Jones 1971: 275). Interestingly enough, Indian film combines the three types to form a unique hybrid, perfectly fit for the function it is to perform, its idiom being modern, traditional, and saintly at the same time. What is modern is the cinemascope technique: Indian film makers have mastered all the tricks of modern coloured feature movies, and are fully capable of creating an unreal world in a most realistic way. It is the contents of these 4-hour projections which are dominated by traditional symbols and patterns. An element that especially comes to the fore among the methods and devices applied is the star, the prominent role of one man endowed with unique qualities. In other words, Indian film makes use of the stock idea of the guru, the teacher. It is to be noted in this context that according to the Indian code of conduct, *Manusmriti* (dated c. 200 BC – 200 AD), the guru occupies a very special social position, being referred to as father, who by giving the Vedas to his disciples is like a father giving life. And it is this other life, given with *Gayatri*, which is the true, immortal life (*Manusmriti* 1985: 64-67). The guru's role is, then, a cardinal one, and Carstairs defines him as "the second father". Moreover, "[t]he guru was seen as a figure possessing magical powers, imparting not only knowledge, but also more tangible blessings (...). Towards this beneficent figure one could feel and express a rare warmth of affection and trust." (Carstairs 1957: 45)

The best examples of this guru model in Indian film are two superstars: MGR (1917-1987) and N.T. Ramarao (NTR; 1923-1996). What is particularly to be stressed is the fact that they have supernatural qualities, so characteristic of a guru, who can do what an ordinary mortal cannot. The two are supermen both in physical and moral terms; they are not only the most nimble and the most skillful, the best fighters and shooters, but are also marked by rigid and inflexible moral principles, absolute honesty, complete devotion and affection for their friends and love for their mothers, they always protect the poor, weak and wronged, and fight against all evil. In films with social undertones the star plays the role of liberator, who as an “angry young man” is engaged, all alone, in a crusade against the forces of darkness, the crusade being naturally successful and bringing freedom and happiness to the masses. Sometimes he is successful in real life as well. The most popular actor in Hindi film – Amitabh Bachchan – in the 1985 general election got the upper hand of his rival, a well-known politician N.H. Bahaguna, to take his seat in the parliament only on account of charisma gained through cinema. It is to be supposed, then, that the poll reflected an interesting process of identifying fictive reality with the actual, or perhaps even of transforming the fictive into the actual. An important element of traditional Indian aesthetics as manifested in the theatre is, in Byrski’s view, departicularisation of the spectacle (1980: 114). As the same device employed on the screen does not allow for a precise identification of reality, film begins to live its own life, thereby creating its own reality, all the more acceptable for its lack of the specific. Kakkar repeatedly notes Indians’ frequent shifting from the fictive to actual reality and back again, and their inclinations to primary thinking (1978: 130, 207). This probably also stems from the Indian conception of the Unity of the Universe and their having some trouble with the quantitative perception of the actual passage of time.⁶ Nakamura observes: “The imagination of Indians ignores the natural limitations of time and space and as they do not fully realize the distinctions between realities and dreams they continue to seek after their dreams within the bounds of reality.” (1960: 129)

The one to go the farthest in this direction was NTR, the leader of the Telugu Desam Party. The popularity and charisma he enjoyed was comparable only to that of MGR, and like the latter he has succeeded in taking advantage of his position in his political career.

NTR has made about 400 films, in his peak period making one every three weeks. His popularity resulted mainly from his playing the parts of Indian gods, especially of Rama and Krishna. In the course of time his audience has made him so closely identified with those deities that it is difficult to say whether they viewed NTR as playing the part of e.g. Krishna or as his avatar on earth. Is it, then, for NTR or for Krishna’s incarnation that votes were given in a general election? Here again we have to do with the problem of the intermingling of reality and fiction, so characteristic of the Indian worldview.

⁶ H. Nakamura points to the fact that in the Hindustani language the same word (*kal*) has two meanings: that of “yesterday” and that of “tomorrow”. The proper meaning of these terms is inferred from the context. For the same reason Indians have never practised any precise dating of their historical works. Nakamura makes it explicit, however, that it is by no means to be treated as an argument for Indians’ having no conception of time (1960: 54-55).

All this is strengthened by rumours saying that NTR had a vision in which the god told him to engage in politics in order to serve the Telugu nation. By his costume (saffron-coloured robes), pronouncing himself a sannyasin who devoted all his efforts to the people, by presenting himself on gigantic election posters as Krishna or Rama, NTR is deliberately forming this powerful image.

The nimbus of the supernatural, which he created about himself was generally accepted in Andhra Pradesh. It is hard to tell whether he was simply cynical or perhaps believed in what he said, although the latter seemed more likely, since he was himself part of a system in which his figure was acceptable. Anyhow, in small towns and villages, before any Ramarao film show on religious subjects people would crack coconuts, and photos representing him as a deity were to be found in many home altars. In Padumaru village there is even a temple dedicated to Ramarao.

Although NTR went the farthest in creating supernatural figures, he was not the only one to do so. Worship of MGR has been manifested in a less explicit way, and at first it had some anti-religious and atheistic undertones, since religion was identified with the Brahmins, and thereby with the ethnically alien inhabitants of the northern regions of the country. After some time, however, the worship of MGR, though basically atheistic in character, has assumed a certain religious tone, for MGR is treated as such a powerful and unique person that he might as well be described as a superguru or even an incarnation of a deity. Panegyric verses on the Beloved Great Revolutionary, published in Tamil Nadu, show that this is not an overstatement.⁷

Indians' attitude towards Indira Gandhi could also be viewed as related to the supernatural, particularly after the 1971 victorious war with Pakistan (cf. Carras 1980: XVII, 9, 42,50), when she was generally identified with the goddess Kali. Yet these aspects are never rendered explicit; a language of symbols, as generally understood in a given cultural group, is used without ever being translated into a modern political idiom.

Film is in India such a powerful medium that it can not only transform an actor into a god, but also create a new deity, as was the case with the picture "Jai Santoshi Ma"; an interesting analysis of this film is to be found in an article by V. Das (1981).

Another significant aspect of Indian film is its emphasis on the principle of trusteeship and the submission of many to one, mostly to the main character. Whether in a family, or in a broader context, the saviour, the man (or the god) who delivers the masses, that is, the inhabitants of a village or a town, is a superman, a single hero. The delivered are usually treated as a nonsubjective background, having no will of their own, no possibility to act, and compliantly yielding to oppression. It is to be noted, however, that the deliverance brought by the saviour-hero consists not in any revolutionary acts, but solely in reconstructing the traditional structure. The changes he introduces merely restore the equilibrium that has been disturbed by some evil agents, whether human or supernatural.

⁷ *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, 13.07.1986.

The escape from reality into the world of film illusion and, consequently, the increased and excessive influence, or even power Indian film exerts on society may perhaps be accounted for, at least partly, by the growing anomy of Indian society. In the traditional Indian system the degree of anomy must have been quite low, since an individual's goals and the means employed for their attainment were dependent on his belonging to a definite caste, and thus easy to define. The situation had already begun to change in the colonial period as a result of all that is described as modernisation, in particular in economic and social terms. Film allows an Indian to escape the unpleasant realities of everyday life in the face of which he feels helpless and at a loss, and which make him seek an unreal world of illusion, a dream world that offers him, at least for a few hours a day, a desired substitute. As far as an individual is concerned, this practice is, in my view, a positive one, for the psychic catharsis provided through it seems to be natural. On the other hand, the mass scale of the phenomenon is detrimental to the evolution of the system rather than conducive to it.

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