

Impressions of Progressivism in Hindi Cinema

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Abstract

In the present time, cinema has transformed into an interactive medium that educates the audience on a range of social issues. The films possess a particularly potent ubiquity in human society. The films have a significant impact on how people think about topics such as racism, gender inequality, discrimination, and other related issues. The aim of this paper is to cultivate a critical comprehension of the development of film traditions about social issues in Bharat culture. It examines the revolutionary nature of Hindi cinema and how it has evolved into a social reform movement, making the films reflect the core ideas of a movement, as films are a reflection of several historical periods' political and cultural viewpoints. The paper will also look at how Hindi cinema evolved and became progressive in nature.

Keywords: Hindi cinema, Hindi films, progressive, social movement, social reform, social change

Discussion

The soul and spirit of any functioning society lie in its social transformation. Society is well-nigh doomed without social change. M.N Srinivas states in his book *Social Change in Modern Bharat* (1966) that the notion of social development in contemporary Bharat is broad and intricate, requiring the long-term cooperation of numerous academics from a variety of disciplines, including economic, social and cultural history, law, politics, education, sociology, and religion. It will need to account for variations in language, geography, and other factors. Therefore, several artistic mediums, such as theatre, film, and literature, are some of the most effective social change

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agents. Among them, Hindi cinema has established itself as one of the most powerful agents of social change in Bharat, ranking alongside literature written in many other regional languages and English. The progressive perspective holds that political activity may advance human civilizations. Strengthening human race is the stated purpose of the progressive movement, which is purportedly founded on developments in science, social structure, and economic expansion. The leaders of the progressive era worked on a number of interconnected issues, including women's rights, labour rights, economic reform, and the welfare of the impoverished and similar issues. Hindi cinema was so greatly impacted by the progressive views that it in its growing years, it began to address issues faced by a common man.

In the late 1910s, Bharat saw its first motion picture, "Raja Harish Chandra", which was directed by the late Dhundiraj Govind Phalke, better known as Dada Saheb Phalke. In addition, he is regarded as the "Father of Bharatiya Cinema". Despite the fact that the film was silent, he had no idea that he was creating a work of art whose sound would be heard all over the world. His efforts paved the way for the ascent of other filmmakers in the nation. Bharat filmmakers refer to the period from the 1940s to the 1960s following the end of the British Raj as "The Golden Era". During this period, Bengali filmmakers such as Ritwik Ghatak, Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, and several others were the forerunners and significant contributors of the parallel cinema movement. Hindi cinema benefitted greatly from the patronage of numerous social activists and intellectuals who fostered and advocated the films with a "message". The main social and moral issues that dominated the progressive era included the themes of child labour, Human trafficking, corruption, poverty, birth control, prostitution, women's suffrage, and alike. Contemporary cinema emerged during such a period of social change. These films had a wide range of tones: some were realistic in their approach, while others handled their subjects with humour or pathos, and some turned intricate social issues into intimate dramas. The slapstick comedy provided an effective platform for social criticism and the empathetic portrayal of the impoverished. They were blunt in criticizing the affluent.

According to academicians, some films that belong to the nineteenth century heavily borrowed themes, characters, and routines from tragedy, black comedy, and other such popular entertainment. Cliches and societal biases serve as the foundation for stock characters. They used to embody particular stereotypes, say, the obedient servant, the cruel stepmother, the villainous dictator, etc. But, during the mid-twentieth century, two enormous advancements in Hindi cinema were made possible, i.e., the establishment of the Film and Television Institute of Bharat (FTII) in 1960, the Film Finance Corporation (FFC) in 1960 (also known as NDFC which was formed in 1975), and the National Film Archives of Bharat in 1964. It further sets the groundwork for revolutionary changes in cinema. As a result, alternative cinema emerged with the help of FFC. In 1968, the FFC decided to start lending money to upcoming directors who could make compelling films on small budgets. Filmmakers began to incorporate social concerns like poverty, inequality, and discrimination into their works. This fulfilled the major goals of the progressive movement to guarantee the inclusion of all disadvantaged communities in Bharat society. Famous Bharat actors like Prithviraj Kapoor, Raj Kapoor, K.A. Abbas, Devika Rani and Nargis, to name a few, used to go on cultural delegations abroad. The presence of representatives from the film industry on these missions was crucial for foreign diplomatic ties since it increased curiosity about Hindi films in countries like Egypt and Russia. The production designers, helpers, spot boys, and stylists also got a chance to explore the international culture. These actors proposed modifications at the level of institutions.

In fact, Hindi cinema was hugely affected by the Great Depression (1929-1939), World War II (1939-1945), the Bharat independence movement, and the carnage of the Partition during these turbulent decades of the twentieth century. Besides, many of the early Hindi filmmakers handled difficult societal themes or used the war for Bharat independence as a background for their films, despite the fact that the majority of these works were blatantly escapist. Yet, Mehboob Khan's *Mother Bharat* (1957) is considered to be one of the cinematic odes to the developing Bharat, since it was instrumental in helping Hindi cinema achieve yet another international milestone. It was the first Bharat film to be nominated for an Oscar in the Best Foreign Language Film

category. The mainstream commercial Hindi film industry was ably portrayed by the filmmaker. In *Mother Bharat*, he carefully fused the two Bharat epics that served as models for nationalism, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. The central “mother” metaphor of the film acts as a catalyst for both rebellion and compliance at the same time. It was also a common theme across various media. The cinematic “mother” motif connects the land’s soil and the body of the female protagonist, Radha. Other examples of this motif are the perfect integrity of Sita in the Ramayana, the captivating beauty of Radha in the Mahabharata, the abundant wealth of Lakshmi, the power of Kali, the Durga character from destruction stories, and the final success tale of female peasantry. Only on the material and spiritual edges of the mother centre could the male characters in the film truly live and discover their purpose in life. The integration of the feminine form with the national land has been repeatedly demonstrated since the opening sequence. Radha’s physiological changes over time are clearly brought to the viewer’s attention, much like the soil that is subjected to the different seasons of Spring, Summer, Autumn, and Winter. The story basically highlights Bharat’s transition from an abusive system of feudalism to an era of liberty and freedom. The film also discusses the Green Revolution, in which the introduction of technology, including the use of high-yielding variety (HYV) seeds, mechanized farm equipment, irrigation systems, pesticides, and fertilizers, transformed Bharat agriculture into a contemporary industrial system during the 1960s. This film has also contributed to the evolving the Hindi Cinema.

According to K. Moti Gokul sing and Wimal Dissanayake, cinema is an art. Cinema both shapes and reflects culture. In their book titled *Bharat Popular Cinema: A Narrative of Cultural Change* (1998), they survey the nine decades of Bharat cinema and analyse its profound impact on Bharat and the people living abroad. Along with its distinct features and economic calculations, they also discuss the industry status of Bharat film. It has supported the rights of minorities and women, as well as modernization, urbanization, westernization, and new lifestyles. It has also fostered a feeling of pan-Bharatism and secularization. According to them, six factors have significantly influenced the development of Bharat cinema. They are:

1. The two epics – Ramayana and Mahabharata
2. Classical Bharat Theatre
3. The Folk-Theatre
4. The Parsi Theatre of the 19th Century
5. Hollywood
6. Musical Television

In this book, they also distinguish between popular and artistic cinema, stating that while art films are more realistic and drawn from Neo-Realistic techniques, popular films are enjoyed by a wider audience. Popular films are often melodic, extremely dramatic, and have moral lessons. Art-house films, on the other hand, have a distinct theme, style, and method. Artistically produced films are primarily shown at international film festivals. Further, Bharat art-house films follow a different path, attempting to examine the intricacy of psychological drive, diverse multiple experiences, and, most importantly, a societal vision. Other genres associated with Bharat cinema, according to them, are mythological films, which consist of imaginative retellings of historic tales; Films that depict various manifestations of oneness with divinity; Romantic films, Stunt films, historical dramas with elaborate sets and outfits, social documentaries that examine social concerns and issues, and family melodramas that examine conflicts and turbulence within the family unit.

All aspects of a region's culture and economic issues in society related to human institutions are portrayed in films. In addition to providing amusement, it also significantly contributes to changing the systems while upholding the core principles. It also fosters discussion, changes policies, and engages communities around important social concerns. Through widely accepted narratives, they alter people's perceptions and introduce fresh angles and aspects. The challenges and concerns that individuals discuss are in some way related to the films that have been released recently. The development, application, and study of new techniques have all been extensive processes throughout the history of cinema. They frequently touch on topics that are underrepresented in other media outlets. The classification of Bharat films varies based on the language, subject, and target audience and the location in

which they are developed. A film is said to have a purpose when we claim it “means something”. To put it another way, the film makes a statement about a certain topic and provides an explanation, either overt or covert, of it.

Also contributing to the expansion of Hindi cinema in the modern age was the Bharat People’s Theatre Association (IPTA) founded in 1943. The tagline of the IPTA is “People’s Theatre Stars the People”. The eminent physicist Homi J. Bhabha proposed the term People’s Theatre, drawing inspiration from Romain Rolland’s book on the subject, which is titled *The Peoples Theatre: Revolutionizing the Stage for Social Change*. It gave film a wealth of innovative ideas that helped expand the definition of “new age cinema”. In the past, nationalism and the freedom movement were closely associated with the feelings of Bharat citizens. Yet, IPTA’s goal was to inspire a widespread cultural uprising against injustice and socioeconomic inequality.

Many artists, writers and actors were associated with IPTA. Some of them include theatre personalities like Prithviraj Kapoor, Utpal Dutt and Habib Tanvir; writers like Mulk Raj Anand, Ismat Chughtai and Bhisham Sahni; poets like Sahir Ludhianvi, Shailendra, Kaifi Azmi; filmmakers like Ritwik Ghatak, Khwaja Ahmad Abbas, Chetan Anand; actors like Balraj Sahni, Harindranath Chatterjee, A.K. Hangal, Deena Pathak; musicians like Pt. Ravi Shankar, Salil Chowdhury and alike. While not officially belonging to IPTA, Raj Kapoor, Saddat Hasan Manto, V. Shantaram, and Dev Anand were all strongly involved with it on significant levels. The group was founded in 1942 against the backdrop of the Second World War, the 1943 Bengal famine, starving deaths in Bharat, colonial rulers’ persecution following the Quit Bharat Movement, and fascist nations’ aggression against the Soviet Union. Artists who presented their ideas through film performed a great job. For their work to appear professional on film, they took care to adhere to aesthetics. Its first initiatives were street plays that Bengal Cultural Squad member Binoy Roy put on to educate people about the artificial famine that struck Bengal in 1942. Pt. Ravi Shankar’s musical arrangement of Iqbal’s well-known poem “Sare jahan se Achha” is among Ipta’s earlier compositions. In an editorial piece for *The Wire*, Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay discusses the function of artists in society. He states that:

“Those artists who felt the need to be part of the political process and play a role in Bharat’s independence movement, chose to use creativity to strengthen and popularise nationalism. IPTA gave formal shape to this sentiment, arguing in favour of the need for artists to stop limiting themselves to ‘art for art’s sake’. Be in cinema, theatre, literature or non-performing arts, this was globally the period of social realism, when it was felt that art and culture could not remain alienated from life, but must mirror it.”

Hindi cinema has changed in the post-reform era due to a number of forces coming together. Cinema has also become progressive in the post-liberalization period, since, Bharats, including NRIs too, had to adapt to a quickly evolving social structure following the 1991 liberalization of the Bharat economy, since shifting economic conditions had an impact on cultural standards. The film succeeded in its function as a social commentator and storyteller in this instance as well, profoundly altering how contemporary Bharats perceive their place in the world. This period also has an impact on the nature of supply and demand for Hindi films. Prior to liberalization, Bollywood produced most of its films with two recurring themes, primarily catering to the illiterate. After liberalization, this situation began to progressively shift. Arvind Panagariya in his article titled “Bollywood in the post-reform era” states that:

“Several factors have combined to reshape the movie industry in the post-reform era. First, import liberalisation and end to foreign exchange control have given the industry access to state-of-the-art equipment and talent as well as freedom to shoot films anywhere in the world. Second, official recognition to the sector as an industry under Industrial Development Bank of Bharat Act 1964 in 2000 has opened the doors to legitimate sources of finance. Third, with increased prosperity, the audience at home has come to be dominated by urban young middle-class Bharats who are westernised to varying degrees. Simultaneously, the overseas audience of the industry has been rapidly expanding.”

The word Bollywood, rather than Hindi cinema, Bombay cinema, Bharat popular films, etc., is almost universally accepted, which is an indication of more significant social changes occurring in Bharat. The term Bollywood, is

contemplated to challenge Hollywood's hegemony and acknowledges the debt Mumbai filmmakers owe the studio for their creative ideas. Bollywood is well recognized for its repeated remakes and reformulations of Hollywood films. Moreover, Media outlets now have access to a variety of Hindi and regional language channels as well as international entertainment content, including the newest Hollywood blockbusters, according to the government's new "open skies policy." With the introduction of foreign television in 1991, the Bharat media landscape underwent a radical transformation. CNN and Star TV, both based in Hong Kong and owned by News Corporation, began transmitting into Bharat via the ASIAST-1 satellite. In 1998, the government gave Bollywood "industry status," which made it eligible for tax breaks, custom duties on cinematographic film being completely waived, and credit and infrastructure subsidies that were accessible to other industries. Single-screen cinemas started to give way to multiplexes at the same time that regulatory changes were liberalizing the sector, particularly in the major cities of Hyderabad, Chennai, Mumbai, Delhi, Bangalore, Kolkata, and Hyderabad. Besides, a significant portion of certain websites were devoted to the film's promotion. There was the dissemination of thousands of new media products, like CDs, print posters, music cassettes, and signage. Music from the popular websites became a sensation among the public. Television and radio had heavy marketing campaigns. Also, this diaspora has grown to be a significant market for Mumbai-based film producers.

To conclude, it can be said that Hindi cinema has emerged as one of the most favoured and effective forms of entertainment and communication. It has become a medium of expression, and the stories it tells are derived from societies—not just from where society is and what it is doing right now, but also from where society has been. Hindi films themselves have evolved throughout time, from colourless theatres to colour-filled theatres today, from numerous reels to a single showreel, and from no graphics to animation. While the Hindi film and its innovations occasionally lag behind society, they also occasionally take the lead in it. Today, film has become a movement that encourages social change. The fundamental principles of a movement are mirrored in the films made during that time. They reflect the political and

cultural perspectives of different eras. Nevertheless, as previously mentioned, film practitioners introduced progressive ideas that aided in subsequent societal improvements. Not only have they negated the common misconceptions about the marginalized as being submissive and subservient. However, they also painted a positive picture of them, demonstrating their aspirations and their capacity for equality and social dignity. A spark of revolt through their persistent opposition and protests, as well as films that highlighted injustice based on class, tribe, and gender, are additional sources of inspiration for progressive views. Hindi cinema has influenced the atmosphere of the time by supporting political and social reforms, government reforms, and the advancement of Bharat society. Because of its more sophisticated, useful, and modern portrayal, it differs slightly from the literature. One can study multiple Bharat's through Hindi cinema. Through Hindi cinema, films have demonstrated over the years not only the gritty realism of genuine, independent film but also authentic film with a touch of fantasy and imagination. All these movements facilitate understanding the modernity of Hindi films. Not just in Bharat but in other parts of the world, Hindi cinema has become important for shaping culture and bringing up current issues, as it has connected vast areas across several continents and created hybridized communities with a strong national identity. Hindi cinema emerges as a major cultural force that helps create a global consciousness among Bharat audiences today, who strive to be global citizens in the same way that local cultures are created globally.

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