Indian Cinema and Social Responsibility

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Since its beginning in India with the filra 'Raja Harishchandra' (1913), the cinema has remained the most important medium of mass communication. In its ability to combine entertainment with communication of ideas, it leaves the other media far behind in reach and appeal. Also, like literature, it has mirrored different times and has left an impact on successive generations. Any work of art reflects the conditions of the society in which it is born, and the hopes and aspirations, the frustrations and the contradictions present in any given social order. Cinema is no exception.

There are different views regarding cinema. The producers and financiers consider it a lucrative business. For the actors and actresses it is a means to earn money as well as satisfy their craving for glamour. The director and other artists look at it as yet another form of art. To some it is an audio-visual translation of literature and its message, if any. For the Government, cinema is a potential area of employment and revenue. But for a majority of film-goers, it is a cheap and interesting form of entertainment and pastime. Whatever it may mean to different people, cinema is generally regarded as an art form meant to entertain the people by presenting before them motion pictures on the screen incorporating a gamut of elements – a story, dance, song, thrill, comedy and pathos.

However, one cannot be oblivious of the fact that the wide mass appeal of the cinema has invested it with a great deal of social influence. The nature of its influence – good or bad – naturally depends upon the social awareness of the people involved in it, such as, the film-makers, the artists, the audience and the government. Should cinema as an art form be required to have social responsibility ? Social responsibility involves behaving in a manner that does not impair the values of society, does not lead to disintegration of society or cause it to become degraded in any way. Cinema may be socially responsible by depicting reality. At the same time, with Sts power of influence – and here we are accepting the view that the audio-visual medium has the power to influence the viewer – it could easily gather support for progressive changes even while castigating social evils.

Most of the early Indian films like 'Achhoot Kanya', 'Godan', 'Awara', etc. pursued their themes with social responsibility. Business or profit motive was certainly there–one cannot deny that nor can one object to it. But these films did not lose sight of the needs of society at large. They tried to promote nationalism, communal harmony, mutual cooperation and social solidarity. Films like 'Paigaam' strove to mitigate class-conflicts, while others attacked evil social practices like caste exclusiveness, untouchability, child marriage, etc.

But, over the years, Indian cinema has lost, touch with social responsibility and has become a slave to the 'box office syndrome'. Now crass commercial considerations cloud film-making. It is all a question of hits and flops at the box office. 'Right' ingredients are jammed, necessarily or unnecessarily, in the films to make a hit without thinking that these ingredients–sex, violence, etc. – are causing great injury to the social fabric and the people. At least, this is the trend in commercial or feature films. To cap it all, film personalities like Mahesh Bhatt and Nana Patekar have repeatedly asserted that their object is not to reform society.

The low aesthetic quality of today's films is directly proportional to the large number of unscrupulous, fly-by-night producers who are interested merely in profit-making without any concern for the society. The financier who comes forward to back the production of a high-budget commercial film pleads that if he cannot be sure of . handsome returns on his investment, he would rather turn to something else; why risk his money on a dubious venture? Worse are the distributors who will not touch a film if it does not have the 'right' ingredients. The economics of production have also sounded the death-knell for the 'art' films. But the people concerned must remember that many films like 'Hoop Ki Rani Choron Ka Raja' with costly sets, top stars, sex, violence have flopped while the films like Hum Main Rahi Pyar Ke' with low budget, light comedy, sonorous songs and without the 'right' ingredients can do good business.

The Indian cinema, deeply influenced by the stage, began with scripts based on mythological and historical plots. Gradually the themes came from novels, plays and stories of the leading Indian litterateurs who wanted either to rid the society of its evils or to reinforce healthy norms and values. This tradition continued for a considerable time. Then the pious and progressive messages of the books ('Boi' is significantly the Bangla word used both for books and films)

gradually made a silent exit. Cheap scripts have now taken over, perennially plagued by plagiarism. Variety is lacking. Double meaning dialogues are another common feature; at times, it is explicitly vulgar.

An audience's right to entertainment is quite just. But the disgusting fact is that a majority of the audience today demands cheap entertainment afforded by the display of violence, sex and obscenity in films. The public has no interest in realistic 'art' movies and is only attracted by the big names: something the low-budget movies cannot indulge in. The Government also does not seem to be truly concerned about the affairs of the cinema, notwithstanding the ritualistic award-giving ceremonies, film festivals and tax concessions for pious sentiments such as secularism and patriotism. For the Censor Board, kissing is obscene but rapes, gruesome killing and vulgar dialogues do not deserve the scissors.

The overall result is that a majority of films today are juvenile stuff devoid of any social purpose, relevance or significance. The hero of a typical Indian film generally does not have to do anything for a living. His sole occupation in life appears to be winning the heart of his 'dream-girl' and fighting with the world for her sake. Similarly, the heroines do little except singing, dancing and crying with the hero. An effect of this is that a majority of the youth outside the screen are turning into incurable effeminate romanticists. This attitude forces the youth to turn their eyes from the hard realities arid essential duties in life. Such youth cause harm to themselves as well as to the society.

Today, the portrayal of women in Indian films has touched the nadir. The number of .films in which heroines have been required to play stellar roles can be counted on the fingertips. She is an atrociously made-up furniture piece required to dance, sing, expose and vanish. Revenge being the leitmotif of most films, she is frequently raped, and the hero vows to take revenge. This reinforces the feelings of girls and women that they are weak, unimportant and the world of males is after their body and vanity. A rape has become almost mandatory in most films and this is picturised in such a manner that instead of generating pathos the scene produces sexual excitement in the watcher. This perverse depiction of women as glamorous props and objects of titillation and of rape as an exciting and adventurous act is considered in no small way to be responsible for the increasing atrocities against women.

We have always had genre-based movies abounding in nauseating stereotypes like the long-suffering wife and .nether, the corrupt and lecherous politician, the avaricious Thakur and Bania, a week-kneed judiciary and a thoroughly corrupt and inept police. This trend is now filling the social psyche with prejudices towards certain sections of the society and with cynical disbelief in- the entire system.

The stunning luxuries of the filmi villains and their varied methods of collecting wealth are today encouraging people to make fast money by hook or by crook. This is, consequently, eroding the social norms and values which are generally established in a society after great industry and pain. When films glamorise violence, the impressionable minds in the audience feel tempted to imitate it in real life. Some fall prey to criminal tendencies and get increasingly brutalized, while the social psyche in general gets desensitised to the violent acts as they see them repeatedly. It cannot be denied that violence has a natural appeal for exuberant but immature minds. However, the heavy dose of violence dished out to them in the garb of entertainment pollutes young minds and sows seeds of chaos and anomie in public life.

Furthermore, the extravagant and sophisticated life styles shown in the films, and the mercurial rise of the hero from rags to riches, have greatly heightened the aspirations of all and sundry, creating a wide gap between such aspirations and the extent of their fulfillment Hence, the great frustrations pervasive in society.

The cinema Has, thus, vitiated the social ambience in recent years though, maybe, unintentionally. Can we, and for how long, allow this subversion of society to go on unchecked?

The Constitution has provided for the freedom of vocation and expression, but, at the same time, the film-maker owes it to society to ensure that he doe? not pander to prurient tastes and thereby poison the social psyche in a bid to earn more. He surely owes it to himself that he pack his creations with sufficient mass appeal to bring in a reasonable return on the investment made without including stuff to subvert young minds. Freedom of vocation, expression, conscience or belief is acceptable but the stability and health of a society cannot be ignored. In any case, cinema must take cognizance of human collectivity and its associate values. One does not ask for 'social reforms' from cinema, but it should at least eschew depriving the society o what it already has.

Just throwing homilies at the film-makers or the film-watchers will not work. Instead, we will have to act. The best means of creating social awareness arc responsibility among the film-makers is to form a discriminating and well-informed public opinion. In this respect, the role of a film-critic becomes important. He can teach his readership, though limited, how to discriminate between the good and the bad films, The most important criterion on which he can base judgement is the social relevance of what is exposed to view in the films. But the film-critic can also sometimes be prone to inducements. The Government can set examples by itself sponsoring films which have healthy entertainment, mass appeal and commercial viability. The approach of NFDC can be reoriented with the inclusion and hiring of more experts and artists, both national and international. The present Censor Board can be supplemented by a committee of writers and artists who can pronounce prudently en whether a film has been made with social responsibility.

In a country like India with a .high percentage of illiteracy and poverty, cinema has an important role to play. It has unqualified potential to inform, educate and condition people's minds. According to Elia Kazan the famous American film director, "Cinema is the most humanising piece of expression that we have in the world today. It is the hope of the world, where people are shown in all their humanity... Through it you are made aware of the brotherhood of man." Today Indian cinema is under siege. But adversity has often catalysed creativity. So, this is probably a transitory phase, and Indian cinema will soon return to its social moorings.

Reference Books

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