

INDIAN POPULAR CULTURE

Lecture16

Indian Cinema- History

Welcome everyone. So last week we discussed comics and Indian narratives in of popular culture. Today we will be discussing visual narrative films and films basically will be catering to the Indian audience beginning from 1913 when Dada Saheb Palke directed the film called Raja Harish Chandra. His inspiration has been foreign films especially The Life of Christ, which he watched in the Coronation Theatre, which led him to make this film.

Before leading on to the emergence of Indian cinema, we will be I'll just give you a reference to where we will be beginning and what we will be covering in this lecture today. We will be talking about the emergence of Indian cinema, and we'll be moving with, the timeframes that have come in place, like the new wave, the silent era, parallel cinema, and then we'll move on to the global cinema. and then lastly, we'll be talking about contemporary cinema. So, to begin with the emergence of Indian cinema, Indian cinema was recognized internationally only in 1955 with the release of Pather Panchali by Satyajit Ray.

He is a very renowned parallel cinema director coming from Bengal but before that, we have few lists of films that were directed by Indian directors in the realm of Indian cinema even before the emergence of Dada Saheb Phalke's work, we have the Lumiere brothers who came to Bombay in 1896 and six silent short films were first ever in India were shown at Watson Hotel in Bombay. This played a key role in the life of the Indian directors of those times. But why Dada Saheb Falke's Harish Chandra is seen as the pioneer or he is seen as the pioneer of Indian cinema is because that was the first full-length feature film.

Hira Lal Sen directed Flower of Persia in 1898. But it was a short film, and short films are not taken into consideration therefore Hira Lal Sen could not be called as the pioneer of Indian cinema What happened in the silent era was the films

were made without dialogues and music. In the orchestra behind the screen, there was music that was played adjacent to the film or with the video.

The silent era is contested as Shri Pundalik by Dada Saheb Torne, which was released one year before Dada Saheb Falke's Raja Harishchandra in 1912, could have been the pioneer film. But again, the discourse says, or the contestation says that it was not a full-length feature film and therefore, it is out of the category of the first pioneer film in India. Ashish Rajadhaksha took an interview with Dada Saheb Phalke and he very confidently said, I suppose I began the film industry in this country.

He uttered the famous words. "Yes, I began the Indian film industry in India in the year 1912". The film took to complete one year and in 1913 the film was released and therefore the contestation with the dates 1912 and 1913.

He was first inspired to watch the film The Life of Christ which was released in 1906 but came to India very late, almost in the 1900s. What happened in the film that Dada Saheb Phalke watched, was mesmerized by seeing the gods being visible in the films this was his inspiration. India is such a culturally rich country with its mythology and folk. He wanted to bring in the gods, the Indian gods to cinema and therefore the inspiration for the film Raja Harish Chandra. He brought a mighty mythological character in this film. Initially, with the lack of funds, Dada Saheb Phalke set up his studio office in his kitchen adding story to the narrative of how this legendary film was made. The debate of Swadeshi which has been addressed in the Indian cinema often sees Swadeshi becoming politically popular and modern.

The word modernity in the Indian context will be dealt with later on. But since we are discussing what Swadeshi meant in the larger, aspect of Indian cinema, the idea of the term 'Indian cinema', emerged from Swadeshi, which was a term used during Indian independence. Rajadhaksha has given us statistics that there were 1400 films made during the silent era. But as we know, that's many of the data. We do not have it right now. Fewer than 36 are only left with us and that too in fragments. Therefore, a reading of the films made in the silent era is not basically possible because of the fragmentation. Like the Elizabethan theatre, when Shakespeare was making his plays, we know that the enactment of the roles of females were basically done by men. The same thing happened with the

Indian cinema. Initially, the lack of female actors led or gave opportunities to Anglo and Jewish actresses like Gabby Hill and Sulochana, whose original name is Ruby Mayers, and she has acted in multiple films.

This brings us to a realization that what we term globalization was happening in the silent era as well. But again, it has been contested with Himanshu Rai's association with the USSR and Soviet Union films that we acknowledge nowadays. One prime example is Ali Baba and Chalis Chor. These ladies took over the Indian screen and we saw almost zero to very little roles that Indian female actresses were enacting.

Another few renowned features of the Indian cinema or Indian industry, other than Dada Sahib Falke in that era, were Hiralal Sen, S.N. Patankar, and Madan Theatres as significant as Falke because these were the people who were handling the camera and made it possible for what we saw in the silent era, the films that we have watched. , the term Indian cinema, why is it so important? and discourses and debates have been going on regarding what is Indian. , when we talk about the term Indian, it brings us to the Swadeshi movement.

What was happening in the Swadeshi movement or what the word Swadeshi meant in reality? It was support for indigenous produce. If you are discarding foreign goods, you are implementing Swadeshi. If you are ditching the foreign clothes, you are in a way, participating in the Indian freedom struggle.

So from there, the term Swadeshi, which in English could mean Indian, was taken in. But the spirit was of Mahatma Gandhi. We know Mahatma Gandhi would later define Swadeshi as that spirit in us that restricts us from using and servicing our immediate surroundings. Whatever is available to us in our surroundings, the usage is what was integrated with Swadeshi. From there, the term Indian or Swadeshi films has come up. The debate as of now, is what about the regional cinema? It has nothing to do with Hindi cinema alone. The term has come from the freedom struggle.

We have a few other films that came in and around the 1920s. and one such film was produced by the Kohinoor studios, one of the major studios of the time, which produced Bhakt Vidur or it is also called Sant Vidur. The film Bhakt Vidur was about Vidur, who is again a mythological character from Mahabharata and this film is politically charged. In one of the scenes in this film, we see Bhakt

Vidhur, appearing as Mr. Gandhi, who's wearing a Gandhi cap and Khadar shirt. The release of the film, in the 1920s when the independence struggle was going on catered to both the ideas; the idea of independence and the idea of culture, which is the mythological cinema. Kohinoor Theatre and Imperial Theatre by Adeshar Irani spent time and money manufacturing India's first generation of proper movie stars.

These were the two theatres or production houses of those times that brought in what we now call as stars of those times. Apart from the Hindi films that were made on the idea of mythology, some films were made in other regional languages in this era of silent films. The first tells us about the other films that were being made and were commercial hits since we are talking about popular cinema. While discussing popular cinema, we also get the notion of what is popular. The discourse on popular and popular culture has been already covered in the module ahead and therefore we can relate it to what popular means. Popular has many such definitions like mass culture. In terms of numbers, we can say that Indian cinema is associated with popular culture from the mass culture. A film by Sampath called Gule Bakavali was released in 1924, and this was the first truly national commercial hit in India.

We saw the emergence of silent stars like Zubeda and Khalil. They were the first real movie stars of that time. and with that, we also had a few other regional cinemas coming, again on the theme of mythology. One such film that came was Keechaka Vadham. Keechak is a character from Mahabharata. His assassination is portrayed in a very dramatized way and it was the first Tamil film which was released in 1916. Then we have Bilwamangal which is a Bengali silent film released in 1919 and this film again is about a saint, the life of a saint called Bilwamangal. The third, which is the Telugu film Bhishma Pratigna. Again, Bhishma is a character from Mahabharata, a very mighty character.

The life of Bhishma Pitama and the Kauravas and the Pandavas revolving around it is portrayed in a Telugu film, which was released in 1921. Regional cinema marked the beginning of talkie films and that too in 1931. What are talkie films or what is a talkie film? A talkie film is where you have dialogue. From the silent era to the talkie films in 1931, we see that these films not only had dialogues but songs too. There was a popular film, Alamara, which had seven songs, it was released in 1931 by Adeshar Irani and produced by again Imperial

Film Company. Then came Indra Bhasha, Indra Bhasha had 71 songs and in the same year, 1931, we see three regional language films also making their mark in talkie films.

The first film was a Bengali film called Jamai Shashti. The second film was a Telugu film called Bhakta Prahlad and a Tamil film called Kalidas. All these films, again, are dealing with a similar theme of mythology and Indian culture. Indian cinema from the 1930s to 1950s came up with a mixed kind of films.

But these films tell us about the films that were being made during this period. For example, the film "Achhoot Kanya". So the name itself signifies that it is talking about untouchability. Again, another film called "Aurat" talks about that it is talking about women and women's emancipation. Mehboob Khan's other film, "Watan", talks about the idea of the nation. So we see that all kinds of films were getting made and it had still not moved out from the genre of mythology because Damle and Fateh Lal had made a film called Santukaram which is based on the Sant. In the 1930s decades again attempted color pictures and color films in 1937. The first-ever color film to get its release was Kisan Kanya and after that, a plethora of films poured over in this decade.

These were not limited to Hindi language films, but different language films were released in this decade. There were Gujarati films like "Narasinh Mehta", which is also widely discussed under the mythology theme. Then we have "Sita Bihaha" in Udia. And then we have "Sheila" in Punjabi. The movie "Wrath" that was released in was about to get released in 1930 was banned by the British Raj because it depicted Indian leaders.

Since it was still not an independent nation, it could be seen as sedition and therefore this film was banned. It also gives a hint of the idea of censorship, which came later in the industry. 1936 film called Karma had a bold kissing scene and that again shows that Indian cinema was making its mark as a global platform as the terms used in modernism. The films that were released before 1947 in a capsule, we are calling it reformist social. We see film scholars like Ashish Rajadhakshan and M.K. Raghavendran, Madhav Prasad, writing about the introduction of Indian cinema. and one of the scholar's books, Introduction to Bollywood, that is M.K. Raghavendra, has distributed the cinema in categories

and in timelines. Reformist social before 1947 was influenced by certain movements.

One such movement was the Brahmo Samaj that came up. Then came Raja Ram Mohan Roy and then Swami Vivekananda, who was teaching religious and social reforms. and then Dayanand Saraswati talking about education. So all these people collectively influenced the kind of films that were being made. So Raja Ram Mohan Roy came with the abolition of Sati and Brahmo Samaj were talking about one God.

These things were encapsulated in the ideas of the film that were being made. before 1947. So there is V. Shantaram's "Duniya Na Mane" and "Admi" also talk about similar themes. and then we have Mahbub Khan's Aurat which we just discussed. It was remade by Mehboob Khan and was renamed as Mother India which was critically acclaimed globally. This theme almost left the 1940s or late 1940s due to several reasons. One such reason was perhaps because of the Japanese invasion of Burma. You see the effects of the surrounding demography impact international relations. and that is how these films almost started leaving the screen.

Then the annexation of Singapore is again another international relations issue, which impacted directly the kind of films that were being made in India. and we have Mr. Gandhi's denial of the Cripps mission, again adding in to the reason. and lastly, the Quit India movement. These were four of the reasons why this theme left 1947. Lahore cinema before independence, which is now in Pakistan was still part and parcel of the Indian map and therefore, the idea of Anarkali was first conceptualized in a romantic play, which was written in 1922 by a young Lahore-based playwright called Imtiaz Ali Taj. From there, we see the inception of Anarkali in various books in cinema, in theatre and so forth. Roughly five years after the play was staged, we see the announcement of the big-budget screen adaptation called The Loves of the Mughal Prince. Again, another, important integration of Anarkali is seen in a film called Anarkali with the main superstar Sulochana as the leading lady. Again, from taking inspiration from this origin K. Asif's epic Mughal-E-Azam in 1960 and then the adaptation in Telugu in 1955, in Malayalam in 1966 and again in Telugu in 1978 with N.T. Ramarao's Akbar, Salim and Anarkali. We see how Anarkali, the subject has influenced so many

regional languages as well as superstars like Sulochana and N.T. Ramarao is part of this magnum opus.

The Second World War and the arrival of realism. With the arrival of the world wars, the change and shift in themes was evident in the Indian cinema as well. and one of them was the arrival of realism. So all this time, other than a few films, such as Achhoot Kanya, we often did not see realism themes that did not leave a mark on cinema or the audience. This was a time when we saw the arrival. 1935, the Government of India Act was passed, giving India provincial autonomy. So in parts, we got independence in the year 1935.

In 1940, Britain announced its official film propaganda policy. We see how censorship is getting in the film industry. When we talk about the state control of art cinema and culture, we are also talking about cultural studies. We are also talking about Baudu and the Marxist effect on popular culture, where we are also referring to hegemony. We saw a new entity, a state-approved cinema coming into existence. and in that era, in that time, in that second world war phase or with the arrival of realism, we can see that there were films like Dharthi Ke Lal, which again cater to the larger idea of independence. and then we have Chetan Anand's Neecha Nagar, and again, we see Uday Shankar's dance epic Kalpana, which was released in 1946. We see the first significant arrival of social realism in India with these films.

Moving on from World War, from social realism to post-independence and partition films. So we are not just talking about the partition films that were made during the partition, but we are also extending it to the partition films that were made post-independence. and what were the themes of the partitions? What were the effects of partitions which can be acknowledged in the films? How it has been integrated largely?

In 1951, there was a film called Awara. Awara is about a son who, by circumstances was kidnapped by a goon and then this goon brings him up as a goon his father who was a judge always used to think that upbringing really matters so if whatever the father is, the son becomes that. It is a conflict between a son and a father relationship which this film talks about, which was the harsh reality of the time as well. It has dealt with other social issues like the judiciary coming into play, the downtrodden, the underprivileged, the classness has also

been discussed in this film. 1955 Mother India is an important film where Nargis Dutt plays the mother of Sunil Dutt. Largely, this film also integrates a theme that has been discussed by M.K. Raghavendra, where they show a time frame in the Indian cinema where there were films that were talking about

Weak men and strong women. and this one film also reflects that. So in this film, after the calamities that hit the family, the husband decides to leave the family one day. Just leave the family and go away. It is Nargis who brings the family together. But in that phase of taking care of everyone, she's the embodiment of the nation also, the mother India. and in doing that, she sees that one of the sons, Sunil Dutt, goes astray. He becomes a decoy. and in the end, he is abducting a lady, and, in the process, she shoots his son. So how the nation is fighting against the discrepancies that are, coming up in society is also remarkable to watch. and then we have Anokhi Ada where we see Gandhi and Nehru coming together. It's the imagery that has been used, not exactly Gandhi and Nehru.

Bimal Roy's Do Bigha Zameen, again, is bang, on social realism. So this film is about, Do Bigha, which is, being taken over by the landlord who wishes to give it to the industrialist for building an industry. and therefore, the protagonist fights for this piece of land and the landlord somehow manipulates it. and, he has to go to Calcutta to work so that he can pay his debt in that process, he loses his money and almost loses his wife and son then he comes back and it is seen that it's a social commentary on the kind of life the feudal system and industrial revolution all together this film also is important as it was based on Tagore's poem with the same Bengali name, Dui Bigha Jomine. and we see how Bimal Roy has portrayed the characters in reality. There is another Bengali film, also called The Uprooted tells its own story of the Bengal famine, which happened in 1943. This film, again, brings in social realism quite evidently. and then we have Andaman Kaithi, which was released in 1952. It tells about independence and partition through the voice of a nationalist trade union leader who is in jail. and it is a Tamil film with superstar M.G. Ramachandran. A Tamil film called Plight of the Poor which was released in 1950 was adapted from Victor Hugo's Less Miserable and is about a petty thief who is arrested by a policeman who is Indian, and he works for the colonial administration.

This policeman is in dilemma; what is right and what is wrong? Should he hand over this thief who is a petty thief? to the administration or as an Indian, he should give him a warning and leave.