

An interrogation into the history of colonial Indian cinema

Aparna S.

Assistant Professor, Department of History, VTM NSS College
Dhanuvachapuram, Thiruvananthapuram.

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ABSTRACT

Among the popular art forms, film has a unique position. The transformation from colonial to post-colonial world is well reflected in the changing concepts regarding the making of a film. Colonial Indian cinema reveals the imperialist perspectives though Indian film had its own development with a distinct existence.

Keywords: *empire cinema, imperial gaze, allegories, colonial nostalgia.*

Indian colonial cinema consists of two categories. Along with Indian films exist foreign films mainly those of Britain and Hollywood known as 'empire cinemas'. These two types of films had their own historical role to play in the long period of colonialism. The term 'empire cinema' is to be defined. "Empire cinema is a term now accepted for both the British as well as Hollywood Cinema made mainly during the 1930s and 1940s which projected a certain vision of the empire in relation to its subjects", (PremChaudry : 2001:1). As in any other colonial arts, the Empire films reflected the dichotomy of colonial self/ colonized other. Empire films such as 'The lives of a Bengal lancer' (1935), 'The charge of the light brigade' (1936), 'The Drum' (1938), 'Gungadin' (1939) etc. radiated the idea that the British entrusted guardianship to the colonized by staying in the colonies. "This establishes the crucial interconnection of colonial politics and popular culture not only as it shaped mass opinion in the imperial center, but also in its quite different impact on the popular consciousness of the colonized." (Ibid: 2).

The ideology behind the Empire films is not confined to the White man's burden alone. Instead, these films constitute a conglomerate of ideologies, as the British perspectives regarding India was full of contraventions and instabilities. Interpretation of the visual, is quite uncertain, as it attains new versions in new circumstances. As Janet Staiger points out; "It is not the correct reading of films that is important but the range of possible readings and reading processes at historical moments and their relation or lack of relation to group of historical spectators that is important". (Janet Staiger in PremChaudry: 2001: 8).

The British concept regarding the spectatorship of Indians is to be discussed. The British spectators considered themselves as civilized. "What they were suggesting was that Indians would fail to perceive any subversive meaning because they lacked the mental capacity to view an image, receive its message and relate it to their concrete reality". (PremChoudry: 2001: 18).

As said before, the imperial films, with possibilities of various interpretations, served conflicting purposes. It is this interpretative potentiality that widens the scope of visual images. "In fact, the empire films emerged as serving the contradictory interest of both the producers-cum-western audience, on the one hand and the Indian audience, on the other, by stimulating their feelings for and identification with the 'nation'. In a very crucial way the ideological thrust of imperialism demanded by the former was reversed by the latter to produce oppositional meaning". (Ibid:11).

Gradually, the British resorted to the implementation of strict censorship. The national movement has become a major mobilizing factor in Indian life. Government of India became aware of the political disagreement generated out of the empire films. "There was no doubt regarding the basic thrust of the empire films, which portrayed the colonial rule as moral, positive and civilizing. Any fundamental criticism of the films would have meant a critique of the very nature of colonialism itself". (Ibid:22). As cinema was born in the lap of imperialism, the colonizer's perspectives reflected in the film was natural.

The changing world politics has influenced the colonial film industry. It is said that 'the British state underwent complex negotiations to render its regime legitimate and effective in the face of anti-colonial nationalism, domestic dissent and ascending US global power. In this political landscape Indian film makers rebuffed imperial state initiatives while fashioning a regionally hegemonic film industry and wresting a domestic audience from Hollywood's control". (PriyaJaikumar: 2006:3). Film industry in India was thus freed from foreign grip, and it developed as a cultural force in the Indian soil.

The development of Indian film industry was outside the 'imperial gaze'. It is because of this separate existence, that it could cultivate indigenous culture abruptly. However, the presence of colonialism has determined Indian cinema in one way or another. PriyaJaikumar is of the opinion that "the development

of the Indian film industry despite the absence of state assistance- almost outside the comprehension and purview of the imperial state foreshadowed its post-colonial future".(Ibid:20).

It was Marius Suster a delegate of lumiere brothers who offered the first cinematographic show in Bombay conducted at Watson's Hotel. The economic importance and internal facilities made the colonial city of Bombay, the focal point of film production.

The pioneer of Indian cinema was DandhirajGovindPhalke. The first silent feature film made in India was Raja Harishchandra (1913) by Phalke. Hindu gods and goddesses were first introduced in the screen as a part of choosing the familiar subject of Indians. "While many people approached it as a sacred experience, the Indian elite who had already been at the vanguard of demand for home rule, saw the possibility for imagined community' that mythological cinema represented" (Vamsi Juluri:2013:59). Phalke's perception of the film making was that it was a nationalist venture. He thought of indigenous support to film as an important step to the path of Home rule. Through his mythological film he cleared the way for many other genres of cinema including devotional historical and social.

The era of sound film was set in motion by the release of AlamAra (1931) which was a blow to foreign film industry. The language of the film was Hindustani which was a mixture of Hindi and Urdu. The studio age was opened, in 1920's and 30's making films which became very popular like that of KisanKanya (1937) and AmritManthan (1934). When the war profiteers during Second World War concealed their unlicensed income in film production, there came high rise in prices which cannot be met by studio and this led to the rise of independent producers.

Though there was an opinion that Indian films were technically and aesthetically inferior to Western films, they constituted the best defense against the latter. Western films tried to spread an alien culture, while Swadeshi and boycott movements were at its peak. Great leaders like Tagore, Nehru and Tilak, supported film as an agent to instigate the programmes of nationalism. At the same time, "It is paradoxical that by the early 1920's Gandhi whose indigenous methods of political mobilization had elevated him to India's undisputed leader of the national movement could envisage no role for cinema as an instrument of political intervention" (Lalit Joshi in Manju Jain (ed): 2009: 24).

Along with the interest in national ideals, the films also exhibited social issues the best example being AchyutKanya (1936) by Fran Osten. Though women made their presence in the screen, the patriarchal norms dominated the screen. Hatred against westernization presented villains and vamps as westernized, whereas Indian culture was treated as the source of values.

The colonized subjects were more often concerned about their identities and that was reflected in the films. "By the time the cinema came into the hands of Indian elite, the social need to imagine construct and define group and individual identities has assumed a paramount political importance at various levels of Indian society" (AnirudhDeshpande: 2009:72). The films often had to depend on the use of allegories to depict the search for identities as colonial state stood in the way with censorship issues.

When Mughal rule was presented by colonial masters, as a dark period, Indian colonial films responded by eulogizing Mughal culture. "The cinematic recourse to Mughal greatness was a way of discovering a pre-colonial 'secular' pan Indian nation-state. It was an edited and carefully crafted three hour short cut to a legacy denied to the modern Indian nation by colonialism"(Ibid: 87).

Thus empire films and Indian films, illustrated the various dimensions of colonial history. Regarding Indian films "The makers of these films-which had explicit political and ideological messages – were consciously opposing colonial construction of Indian history" (Ibid: 85). The opposition through the popular medium, like film, left deep imprints in the mind of the colonized, later to become the part of colonial nostalgia.