

SOCIO- ECONOMIC IDEAS OF LEADERS OF THE NATIONAL MOVEMENT: IN THE CONTEXT OF INDIAN CINEMA

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Abstract

This paper talks about the Indian Cinema and the socio-economic ideas of the leaders of India's struggle for independence. A number of leaders of the national movement, in their own way and style, contributed to the burgeoning call for India's freedom. Sometimes, they also raised concerns regarding the field of cinema and censorship. Their interventions, in this regard, proved to be helpful in not only placing the issues at official levels but also raising the consciousness of the masses. Some national leaders were aware about the potential and potency of cinema. An attempt would be made to study the interventions made by various leaders of the national movement in the field of cinema and censorship of films. The objective of this paper is to explore the role of some national leaders in viewing swadeshi films, the use of cinema as a medium of propaganda during India's struggle for independence and also issues concerning censorship of films. In this context, role and contribution of leaders like Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Sardar Vallabh Bhai Patel, Lala Lajpat Rai, S. Satyamurti, Mahatma Gandhi, Sarojini Naidu etc. will be examined.

Index terms: Cinema, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Lala Lajpat Rai, Vallabh Bhai Patel, Mahatma Gandhi, National Movement

Introduction

India's struggle for independence was the result of the exploitative and discriminatory colonial policies in every sphere. The national movement witnessed a huge participation by the ordinary masses. A number of leaders of the national movement, in their own way and style, contributed to the burgeoning call for India's freedom. Sometimes, they also raised concerns regarding the field of cinema and censorship. Their interventions, in this regard, proved to be helpful in not only placing the issues at official levels but also raising the consciousness of the masses. An attempt would be made to study the interventions made by

the various leaders associated with the national movement in the field of cinema and censorship. Some of the national leaders were also aware about the potential of cinema. The objective of this paper is to explore the role of some national movement leaders who were concerned with cinema and the issues concerning censorship of films. The role and contribution of leaders like Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Sardar Vallabh Bhai Patel, Lala Lajpat Rai, S. Satyamurti, Mahatma Gandhi etc. will be examined.

Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Rabindranath Tagore

The first national political figure to show an interest in films was Bal Gangadhar Tilak, the extremist spearhead of the Indian National Congress. He encouraged the growth of local filmmaking. He even hailed the first swadeshi movie, *Raja Harishchandra* (1913), in his journal 'Kesari' (meaning Lion).¹ He suggested establishing a film business with Dada Saheb Phalke, and his daily, 'Kesari', was the first Marathi publication to include cinema criticism.² 'Kesari' consistently published reviews of Phalke's films and backed him in his subsequent endeavours. Tilak was a supporter of Indian cinema and its early directors from the industry's beginnings in the early 1900s until his death in 1920.

Rabindranath Tagore's short tales *Manbhanjan* (1923), *Balidan* (1927), *Bicharak* (1929), *Dalia* (1930), *Giribala* (1930), and *Naukadubi* (1932) were adapted for the screen. In addition to playing an elderly monk, Rabindranath purportedly tried his hand at directing *Natir Puja* (1932).³ Even before the turn of the century, in 1900, Tagore had already put his rendition of 'Vande Mataram' on a phonograph disc.⁴

Lala Lajpat Rai

When the colonial administration began enforcing censorship across all forms of media in 1922, Lala Lajpat Rai fought to have cinema kept out of the censors' purview so that it might be used as a tool of free expression.⁵ It was perhaps due to his interest in cinema as a means of disseminating information including Political Education for which he had given his critical observations.⁶ In 1922, he argued that it is our belief that freedom of speech and writing is birthright of ourselves. He further said that there can only be one restriction to it and it is this that by freedom one may not intrude upon the natural rights of others and one may not do anything against ethics.⁷

Hon'ble Mr. J. Crerar, the Home member, moved the following resolution in the Legislative Assembly on Sep 14, 1927:

"This Assembly recommends that the Governor-General in Council appoint a committee to inquire into and report on the system of film censorship in India, and to consider whether any steps may be taken to promote the exhibition of films produced in the British Empire in general, and the production of Indian films in particular."⁸

Regarding the Censorship of Cinematograph Films, Lala Lajpat Rai argued in Central Legislative Assembly on 14 Sept. 1927 that:

As a responsible citizen, it is my responsibility to voice strong objection to the subtle, sneaky ways in which the notion of British Imperial Preferences is being pushed. This is a really unsettling practise, in my opinion. I think the point of this resolution is to provide some cover for British filmmakers.⁹

He went on to say that British support to India's film sector was a big lie. He urged that no films except those produced in India should be exhibited in India at all – (Emphasis on *Swadeshi*).¹⁰

He also questioned the rationale behind the Imperial Preferences in these words:

I do not see any reason why the British Empire should have the preference, and why only films produced in the British Empire should be exhibited in India at all. I can see no basis for this resolution except the anxiety of the government to protect and encourage British-produced films.¹¹

In addition, he believed that Europeans had a lot of apprehensions because of the demeaning depictions of European culture in films that were being exported to India. He asked - could it be that none of the claims made in those videos are true? Also, if they accurately portray people's daily lives, why should anybody object to show them in India?¹²

Lala Lajpat Rai criticized British designs and argued that 'it seemed to him that film studios throughout Europe and the United States were working together as part of a larger plot to demonize Asia via the medium of films.' Several films seen by Lala Lajpat Rai in England and elsewhere depicted the most obscene and degrading aspects of Asian culture, such as 'the nauseous details of a Rajah's life or a Nabob's harem,' and their sole purpose was to incite hatred and bigotry 'towards Asians in general and Indians in particular.' He also said that it's possible that when pitted against their American counterparts, British films struggle to attract audiences and box office cash. As a result, Lala Lajpat Rai had serious reservations about adopting that resolution unless and until all references to the 'British Empire Preferences' were removed. He also drew attention to a flaw in the amendment, and that was the fact that the Honourable Mover neglected to include the phrase "manufactured in India." Thus, Rai said that the Indian film industry receives no support from his amendment.¹³

Lala Lajpat Rai said that the Honourable Home Member also communicated regarding some Conference in England which discussed this subject and where India was properly

represented.¹⁴ He said that this was how India was being duped into agreeing to plans that would benefit the Empire at large but would be disastrous for his country.¹⁵ Every conference that India attends, the government always manages to place one or two persons to represent India in an unofficial capacity. He noted that although the religious affiliation of that representative may vary (Hindu or Muslim), the personality traits are consistent.¹⁶

Lala Lajpat Rai wanted to let the Honourable Home Member know that the gentleman he wanted to appoint as Chairman of the Committee (Mr. T. Rangachariar) did not "inspire any enthusiasm" among Nationalist groups and was not likely to serve the interests of the people of the country.¹⁷ Even if he was a decent person and a capable man, Rai was worried that the government would always side with him.¹⁸

Lala Lajpat Rai recalled that it was in the Assembly that a resolution requesting for the appointment of a Cinema Committee was first moved by Hon'ble Home Member but it could not be voted upon that day and government made no effort to revive the issue there.¹⁹ The governments did something cleverer by getting the resolution passed by the Council of State and ensued to appoint a Committee. This Committee's expenses cost the Indian tax-payers' an amount of Rupees One Lakh Ninety Three Thousand Nine Hundred (1, 93, 900).²⁰ He pointed out that it was an issue for the Assembly to deliberate whether it should agree to a curtailment of its exclusive right to vote finances by such type of secretive dealing on the part of government.²¹ He considered the Report as an interesting document and expressed delight that the Committee had unanimously rejected the proposal to give preference to Empire - produced films.²²

Mr. T. Rangachariar, in The Report of the Indian Cinematograph Committee (ICC) - 1927-28 remarked that with reference to exhibition of British films under Imperial Preferences, if Indian audience misinterpreted and misconstrued American cinema situations as of European civilization especially British civilization it was because they considered both American and European civilizations as the same. If showing too many Hollywood films was harmful for British interests, then showing too many films from other western countries was equally harmful.²³

Since India's film industry was still in its infancy in the 1920s and 1930s, the Indian Cinematograph Committee (ICC) believed it was crucial to safeguard it, direct it, and

promote it. The ICC also believed that supporting India's homegrown film industry was in the country's best interest.²⁴

Lala Lajpat Rai remembered that during the debate on the resolution for the appointment of the Cinematograph Committee in the Assembly, he made some comments about the proposed Chairman which were not considered as courteous.²⁵ He expressed his view that from the Indian point of view it was not a bad report. Lajpat Rai was humble enough to acknowledge that his misgivings turned out to be unjustified.²⁶ He also said that he was glad for being mistaken and consequently unwaveringly withdrew what he said about Mr. T. Rangachariar earlier.²⁷

J.L. Nehru and S. Satyamurty

Jawaharlal Nehru did not show his enthusiasm for Indian cinema very publicly. He went to the movies and sent a fan letter to Devika Rani (the film's heroine) requesting for an interview to talk about *Achhut Kanya* (1936), but she never responded.²⁸ Although Nehru was not a huge fan of the film industry, he conveyed his greetings to the Indian Motion Pictures Congress that was held in Bombay that year. He stated that the level of effort put in so far did not meet his expectations at all and argued that there is no denying the power of film as an educational tool; indeed, it has become an integral aspect of contemporary life. Nehru stated that it is time for the film industry to start thinking about quality and making high class films with educational and social values.²⁹

S. Satyamurty stood out as an outlier among Congress leaders who attempted to utilize films as a tool of propaganda for a nationalist cause. Cinema, he said, will play a major part in society, and with the widespread illiteracy that exists, that impact was certain to be substantial. Before the 1934 municipal elections in Madras, he produced a film to sway the electorate and had it shown in several theatres.³⁰ His goal for the film industry was to find common ground with its producers, directors and the country's political leaders.³¹ To some extent, he described the role that films played in India's independence movement. On April 15, 1939, he created the South Indian Film Chamber of Commerce (SIFCC), of which he served as the first President. It served as an umbrella group to protect the commercial interests of the film industry, including producers, distributors, studio owners, and theatre owners. In 1937, Satyamurty made another propaganda film in Madras before the elections for the Provincial Legislature. But it failed to pass certification.³² He also used his clout, both within the Congress and the sphere of cinema, to produce a number of films in South Indian

languages. Many filmmakers and playwrights who made films advocating India's fight for liberation received his financial and moral backing. Encouraged by such measures, K. Subramanyam made *Seva Sadan* (1938, Tamil), *Thyaga Bhoomi* (1939, Tamil), and *Manasamrakshanam* (1945, Tamil), during his period. Some of these films were produced at a time when freedom struggle was gearing itself to defy the mighty British and to initiate their final assault in the form of 'Do or Die' in the Quit India Movement of 1942.

Mahatma Gandhi

It's odd that Gandhi, the subject of many films whose subject matter included his life and philosophy, hated filmmaking so much. In 1927, Gandhi was asked his opinion on the status of Indian film by the Indian Cinematograph Committee, which sent him a questionnaire. Gandhi replied that even if he was so inclined, he wouldn't be qualified to reply to the survey since he never set foot in a movie theatre. He also said that the harm it had caused and continued to do was obvious, even to an outsider and it was still unclear how much benefit it had really done.³³

On another occasion, in 1938, Gandhi was asked to contribute a statement for an official souvenir to commemorate the Silver Jubilee of Indian cinema. A succinct response came from Gandhi's secretary that usually, Gandhi only sends communications on very rare occasions, and then only for causes whose moral superiority is never in question. He doesn't care much about films and probably won't say anything positive about the film business.³⁴

In an open letter to Gandhi published in 1939, K.A. Abbas argued that the national struggle might benefit from both the entertainment value of films and the power of films as an instrument for social change. Although Gandhi read this letter, it had no effect on him. Some of the content of the letter is rephrased below for educative value:

K. A. Abbas refers to him as my dear Bapu and presents cinema for Gandhi's inspection and approval. Abbas was shocked and saddened to see films mentioned in (what seemed to him) rather dismissive terms in two recent remarks of Gandhi. Gandhi classified films as one of the "evils" he avoided "for fear of losing caste," along with gambling, sutta, horse-racing, etc. It would not have been essential to worry about these claims if they had been made by anybody else. But that was not the situation with Gandhi. Given his prominence in India and globe, even the most innocuous of his opinions will be taken seriously by millions. Abbas writes that it would be safe to assume that many traditionalists and puritans will feel even more strongly that films are bad for society after reading his comments. Cinema, they would add, must be rife with evil if Mahatma disapproves of it. And we would let one of the greatest "useful inventions" ever be thrown away, or even worse, left to be misused by depraved masses. Abbas wanted to stress that, despite the problematic nature of certain (or most) films; the cinema should not be condemned since it was an art form, a means of expression. Books should not be criticized

for they also include pornographic writings. It doesn't make great innovations of wireless communication, radio, and aeroplane any less wonderful even as unscrupulous people have misused and exploited even virtuous institutions like religion and patriotism. Abbas talked about the social and educational initiatives that were implemented via films in other nations for Gandhi's knowledge. Academics... The Media... Anti-Crime....General Awareness... Political Facts... In addition, Abbas writes that Gandhi must not be aware that some patriotic individuals were working on a film chronicling Gandhi's own illustrious life story. Abbas feels that the national movement led by Gandhi had a profoundly positive impact on the "purification" and revitalization of Indian films. Gandhi restored the national pride, and with it came a wave of new artistic energy that had been reflected in films that were both more entertaining and more relevant to contemporary society. To portray Gandhi as "leading the Nation" in a film is not, in Abbas's opinion, an impertinence outside the pale of cinematic expression. It is hoped that more morally upstanding individuals would enter the market, transforming the industry from a tamasha into a tool for societal benefit. But if Gandhi and other influential men think films are as bad as gambling and alcohol, they may be deterred from entering film industry. Abbas argued that Gandhi had a magnificent spirit and he will not tolerate bigotry in heart. He requests Gandhi to pay a little attention to cinema, which was not as worthless as it seemed, and grant it a tolerant grin. In deepest respect and warmest regards, Ahmad Abbas K.³⁵

Gandhi's dislike of films caused unease among some of his most influential backers in the motion picture business. Filmindia's former editor, Baburao Patel, once penned about Gandhi that Daridra Narayan's defender should come down to see us so that we may attempt to persuade him, or be persuaded. We, the film industry employees can't possibly be any worse than the impoverished untouchables for whom the old Mahatma's heart pains. And if he believes we are, that's much more of a cause for him to come to our aid.³⁶ Aside from that time, Baburao Patel also penned that the prophet of truth, Gandhi, considers films to be bad but yet has never seen any of our productions. Until he lives through it, he will never know the truth. Is the film Achhut (1940) where Gandhi plans to start?³⁷

The legendary director Baburao Painter requested that Chandulal Shah wait outside Gandhi's home with the film cans in order to get the latter's benedictions for the film industry.³⁸ In light of the fact that Gandhi viewed one film ever, Vijay Bhatt's *Ram Rajya* (1943), it's hard to believe that their letters and appeals had any effect on him.³⁹ Filmmakers and documentarians persisted in portraying Gandhi and his views despite his abhorrence. When the British realized that how popular Gandhi was becoming, they attempted to stifle any media outlets that gave him publicity. Scenes and conversations that resembled Gandhi, his ideology, or his activity were cut by British censors. Home Member J.A.T. Horne argued in 1944, in response to the showing of a film about Gandhi's release from jail, that filmmakers should avoid creating a hero of Gandhi. This would include avoiding showing him often.⁴⁰

He shouldn't get more screen time than any of the other photographs of Indian events and leaders.⁴¹ The film's writing was to be more moderate and impartial in the future, and historical figures like Gandhi and others shouldn't be given too much screen time.⁴² The movie and its accompanying commentary were "calculated to excite extreme sympathy" for Gandhi, as stated in a letter written by Additional Secretary R. Tottenham on May 22, 1944 and it also implied criticism of the government for keeping Gandhi in captivity for so long.⁴³ The British government was worried about both the foreign distribution of Gandhi-themed films and their local screenings in India.

After receiving a letter from New York's Documentary Films Ltd., Madras in 1944, the Intelligence Bureau's Home Department responded with instructions on how to export two different versions of a film (about Gandhi) to the United States. The Madras CID has conveyed that the film "Gandhi" is full of Congress propaganda and that both the English and Indian versions are inappropriate for international distribution.⁴⁴ The colonial government's stern censoring of films not only reveals its disdain for freedom, independence, and self-determination as late as 1944, but also exhibits its fear of Gandhi's appeal.

Sardar Vallabh Bhai Patel

Brandichi Batli / Brandy Ki Botal (Marathi, Hindi, 1939), directed by Master Winayak, was the first time when Vallabh Bhai Patel was mentioned in the connection with the cinema industry. The film was about a movement to ban the sale and use of alcoholic beverages.⁴⁵ Patel voiced his support for the cause of prohibition and a ban on alcoholic beverages in a taped address for the film. This monologue was used as the movie's prologue. Patel also facilitated the distribution of a pirated film about Subhash Chandra Bose and the Azad Hind Fauj (INA) through the Bombay port.⁴⁶ The film was shown at the Regal cinema in Connaught Place, New Delhi, in front of participants of the national movement.⁴⁷ Following the conclusion of the film at the event, the participants decided to expand the documentary by adding new footage and material before distributing it throughout India.⁴⁸ Netaji Subhash (1947), a documentary on Subhas Chandra Bose's life, was made possible thanks to the efforts of producer Vallabh Bhai Patel and the support of the Indian Motion Pictures' Producers' Association (IMPPA). The documentary featured the smuggled material.⁴⁹ It can also be mentioned that Subhash Chandra Bose believed in the propaganda value of films and prearranged documentary reporting of the accomplishments of Indian National army (Azad Hind Fauj).⁵⁰ In 1940, Patel also attended the premiere of Chandulal Shah's film *Acchut*,

where he delivered a speech on the significance of cinema in a nation's existence and the need to harness the medium's vast potential for the sake of the country.⁵¹

Women Leaders - Sarojini Naidu & Rameshwari Nehru

The women leaders of the Indian national movement also played an important role in marching shoulder to shoulder with the men. In an interview with Baburao Patel, Sarojini Naidu said that Cinema has the power to dispel superstition, to improve people's rationality and knowledge, and to provide enjoyable diversion for those who may benefit. The finest usage of the cinema is shown in certain recent American short films...The Indian film industry, if it is to prove its worth and achieve its goals, must base its future plans on solid foundations, and we can all provide a hand in making that happen. She also said that she keeps her affection and faith in films and Mahatma should be left alone to follow his own path. She further argued that she was not some kind of orientalism obscurantist. In her view, integrating the best of both Eastern and Western thought was important. She hoped that India could take advantage of the best of Western culture while preserving her ancient spiritual traditions. Movies were an optimist force in her worldview.⁵²

Another prominent women leader, Rameshwari Nehru, expressed her view in Gandhi's weekly *Harijan* in these words:

I beg to add a word in support of the appeal made by a correspondent for the restraint over the modern talkies by our National Government, published in the *Harijan* of January 5, 1947. I am not a frequent visitor of cinema pictures, but the little I have seen of them has convinced me that whatever she (the writer of the letter) has said about the evil effects of these pictures on the morals of young men and women is perfectly true. The cinema habit is in fact growing and the real danger lies in the fact that it is penetrating the villages...I would say that these pictures are big boulders in the path of the nation's moral progress and the strength of the mighty elephants is certainly needed for their removal... The danger springs from the fact that the production of cinema picture lies in the hands of money- making men who, with a few exceptions, run the industry with the profit motive... There is a great deal of talk of nationalization these days. In my opinion nationalization of the cinema industry is needed more than anything else. In any case, strict control by the government is essential...⁵³

One common criticism levelled at national leaders is that they failed to properly use the power of film as a propaganda tool for achieving liberty of India. Unfortunately, they didn't see that Indian film was really creating its own manifestation of nationalism, reflecting political and ideological ambitions of the people and the country's demand for independence and liberty.⁵⁴ In order to fight back against the government's efforts to exert more control over raw materials, taxes, and censorship, the film industry desperately needed political backing.⁵⁵ The national leadership was unable to address the filmmakers' demands for action

on the concerns raised by them. Furthermore, despite the ongoing censorship of Indian films with political undertones, certain leaders still failed to understand and respect the film industry's preoccupation with politics.⁵⁶

In defence of the national leaders, one can argue that whatever contribution concerning cinema was made by the national leaders shall be acknowledged and appreciated as they were also not well-versed in the cinematic medium and lacked understanding of its potentiality as an instrument of propaganda during the colonial rule. The leaders imbibed and reflected the ideals of the national movement and wanted to adhere to those ideals and to use cinema for the cause of national movement was not in their scheme of things.

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