ABSTRACT

Ph.D. Thesis - “Neorealism in Indian cinema: 1944-69” - By Manoj Sharma
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Cinema should be considered as raw material for history-writing as it affects the social life at a comprehensive scale and documents audio-visual reality. These images also reflect the typical characteristics of socio-cultural-political structure of that era, the conflict of the classes, structures of domination and subordination, aesthetic sense and cultural level of various sections of society, their socio-political awareness and the systematic developmental process of perception and understanding of history in its entirety. An attempt has been made to read history on the celluloid, to study neorealism as a link between cinema and history and to view celluloid projections in their historical context.

Our focus is on neorealism which strived for re-orientation of cinema-expression of everyday reality, recording events within their historical fold and focusing on the class/people who have never before received the attention of cinema. In other words, its purpose was to deglamorise film and to make it a relevant, purposeful and socially useful form of communication. The main characteristics of neorealist cinema were authentic settings, natural dialogues, non-professional actors, naturalistic lighting and simple direction. In Italy, under Fascist rule the kind of cinema that was being created was detached from reality and aimed at promoting an ultra-nationalist propaganda. It was a movement against the artificiality of the pre-war and Fascist cinema. It can also be construed as an attempt to make cinema more meaningful to the audience.

It can be argued that if neorealism in Italy emerged out of opposition to Fascist and escapist cinema which was away from reality then Indian neorealist cinema was also rooted in the milieu of colonial oppression and post-colonial apathy of the elected Indian government towards the contemporary issues of caste and class discrimination, patriarchal set up, social oppression, economic inequality, bourgeois domination and increasing antipathy towards democratic traditions. The centralization of the government authority and unbridled exercise of its power left a large section of society discontented. After the independence, the dreams and aspirations of the large section of society remained unfulfilled.
The achievement of independence was seen to be as panacea by many but shattering of the hopes in the later years gave a blow to their aspirations. Moreover, the resonances of Italian neorealist cinema which was a reaction against the Fascist forces could also be seen in cinema influenced by the colonial oppression in large part of Asia and Africa and the post–colonial apathy of the power-wielders of the state in India. To control the undesirable films the state retaliated with the time honoured privilege of censorship.

The vision of a Utopian society (desirable society and citizenry) with strong focus on what ‘should be’ and not ‘what is’ was the focus of realism in Indian cinema. In post-colonial India, it may be worthwhile to analyze the image construction of the nation-state and its contradictions because the images were supposed to be positive and optimistic whereas the neorealist portrayal viewed them as negative and pessimistic. An attempt to study the forging of national identity in popular Indian cinema has been made. The linkages between the culture promoted by films and Hindu nationalism have also been shown. It also diminishes the position of women in the patriarchal set up of the Indian society. There is a tendency to homogenize the nation and its portrayal. The depiction of upper caste patriarchal dominant Hindu world view with focus on economic mobility is seen in large number of films.

Neorealism’s techniques and concerns were rooted in Indian reality which had poverty, inequality, unemployment, caste and class conflict, regional and religious divide, patriarchal oppression and overarching authority of the state, colonial as well as post-colonial, which were felt by Indian filmmakers. They borrowed from its stylistics and also tried to adapt and modify to suit their own styles. It also provided a progressive look to their films. The contribution of PWA and IPTA in the various stages was substantial. It led to a purposeful cinema contributing to the socio-economic, political and cultural concerns of the society. The period after independence was characterized by a broader ideological investment in cinema of social justice connected with the image of the new state. The idiom of ‘development’ promoted by the state brought long term damages to environment and socio– polity, which far outshone the indefinable short term benefits. The substitute to this is a cinema committed to the ideals of social struggle. Satyajit Ray, Guru Dutt, Mrinal Sen, Ritwik Ghatak and Bimal Roy were committed to this kind of cinema. Ritwik Ghatak dealt with as partition as his focal theme, and certainly looked at the consequence of this splitting up on the
dislocations and displacement of families. Ritwik dealt with social realities - social oppression, exploitation and struggle.

The combination of new media, transnational corporations and consumerism makes the situation critical for large sections of disadvantaged communities in developing countries. The capitalist forces in the era of globalization, liberalization and privatization are potent enough with their ammunition of advertising in construction of a lifestyle as model for others. The Coca-colonization and Mac-donaldization of different regions of the world is a ploy to homogenize the tastes and hegemonize their imperial aspirations. The key development of the 1990s has been the speedy ascendancy of a global commercial television system dominated almost solely by world’s leading media firms. Globalization rests upon the pillars of modernization built during the initial decades of Indian independence.