Hindi Popular Cinema: Reading of the Representative Register of India's Pre-Liberalization Social History and its Prevalent Discourse since Post-Independence Period

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Abstract

This paper seeks to critically review extant literature and argue to show how the discursivity of the nation is amenable to the mainstream cinematic expression and thus privileging it to emerge as a veritable register of India's popularly reclaimed social history as the excess that eludes and exceeds state authenticated symbolic representation of the nation under the auspices of the pre-liberalization postcolonial modernist state regime. At a post-modernist turn the collapse of totalizing meta-narratives of the state has generated interest to explore the relevance of popular narratives as representative temporal templates of nation and its discourse.

Keywords: State, nation, cinema, discourse, popular, history

Introduction

The production of official state sponsored historical accounts are informed by state 's official narrative deploying a more harnessed archival information. These narratives are strategically conservative and serves to reinforce the state ideology. The state authorized, sponsored and supported historical accounts are packaged as foundational incontestable sites of knowledge, truth and legitimacy around questions of national identity, the nation-state and its past. The reconstruction past and the memory over which the state commands a legitimacy often emerge as a centralized totalizing, metanarrative. This dominant unicentric state historiography exteriorizes outlying domain through state discourses. (Toggia, 2013) Nation's and nation's history are reproduced, represented, performed, spatialized and materialized through popular culture and is mediated in our everyday life. National identity is revealed to be inherent in the things we often consider as mundane, banal or are taken for granted routine experiences-from landscape to eating habits to tourism, cinema and music. Hollywood blockbusters may provide veritable contexts for the ongoing and often contested process of identity ormation (Edensor,2020) Historical writing has been connected to the process of nation -building since late eighteenth century across Europe following the democratic revolution. The professionalization and objectivization of historical writing to produce a rationalised discourse of scientific history within established institutionalised academia and university systems were largely attempts to construct and reaffirm the beleaguered principle of the sovereign state while reaffirming and legitimizing certain political systems. The writing of such history excluded popular expression. Legitimising this as a modernist project and a civilizing mission popular, alternative and

oppositional narratives were undermined (Berger, et.al 20-22, 26-7) The master narrative of modernity deeply influenced post-colonial India;s history writing under the continuing epistemic influence of European state defined history and modernity. The modernist canon is being interrogated by postmodern realities that reveals the fractured and fragmented realities that escapes totalising discourse of legitimate history. Pluralizing conceptions of reality is a significant rupture at a postmodernist time. (Jabbar,200916-19,32-5)

This paper seeks to locate the analysis of India;s pre-liberalization history since independence within frames of extant literature of discourse analysis.

The advent of the global and the collapse of statist metanarratives of neatly catalogued, disciplined and archived historical accounts unleashes the popular , the peripheral and unofficial accounts to gain credence. Scholarship of popular culture particularly popular films have reclaimed this departure to read the discursivity of nation and its narrative resonance in films- chronicling the social history within the filmic texts, albeit steeped and embedded in a popular idiom and visual vocabulary.

Central to the consideration of popular Hindi cinematic texts as social history is Stuart Hall's idea of 'representation'. Stuat Hall's idea of culture as representation and how through the language of representation meaning is produced(Hall, 1997,p.1-2)Cinematic language or cinema as a mode of representation ,albeit couched in a popular commercial idiom, may be conceived as a privileged medium 'to stand for or represent to other people our concepts, ideas and feelings'(ibid)Shared meanings of a shared cultural space, viz. nation is relayed or represented through films representing a specific spatio-temporal context. Looking at representation from the semiotic view point reveals meanings signified within a system of conventions, that is shared historically and culturally within the universe of the nation ,as a discursive entity, and Hall's understanding of representation as a readable signifying system drawing from Barthes allow us to see how the nation is reproducible, readable and meaningful within the shared code of nation cultural universe(here, the popular Hindi film texts)What is also equally significant to Hall's understanding is Foucault's understanding of power and discourse, and how discourse provides a language for talking about a way of representing the knowledge about a particular society at a particular time or a historical moment(ibid.p.44-49) Cinematic texts located within the discourse of the nation privileges reading of these texts as representations of nation's social history – contingently produced and inscribed by its spatio-temporal discourse..

Nation being a discursive construct produced by culture and history, it is the historical narratives that constitute the chief architect of that discourse. While significant historical and socio-political events of the nation find documentation and recognition in what is recognised as "manifest history" its the articulation in cinematic texts, with the exception of those that are historical, is mostly indirect. Hence, Jameson's idea of allegorical representation allow us to reach upon the idea of films as popular texts where the history of the nation is inscribed and the historical contingencies and events find an elliptical textuation or an allegorical manifestation. They function as narrative re-configurations of time. History however, is itself a contentious matter and under post-modernist scrutiny for its grand master narratives of historical progress, historical paradigms and historiography premised upon secular, imperious Western chronology implicit in officially anchored sources that eschew unofficial resource like folklore, legends, myths, ballads , rumours, history from below and so on. The recent drive towards revision of history text-books, expanding of archival sources and historiographic methods might act as good openings towards recognition of popular films as part of these changes (Virdi,2003, ibid. p.16-17).

Genres and texts are not static structures of social meanings and both production and reception of texts especially popular mass-media texts are historically shaped and through them the history or the histories of society unfolds. Genres and texts being located in time allow us to use this diachronic angle to supplement our analysis of their synchronic structures. Texts and genres are not only situated in social time but also as a register of passing time. Time being a semiotic element in many genres, working both syntagmatic ally and paradigmatically, is deployed as a sign as well as in the structuring of signs. Time acts as a metonym that affects the meanings in the text, and the way signs are arranged within the texts. Time is a structural and meaningful component of texts operating along its syntagmatic and paradigmatic aspects. This whole process of representing time in texts is called narration. A narrative is the text structured by the sequence of events it represents. (Thwaites, et al. 2002. p.117-118) Such is the historical relevance of texts as important cultural and historical documents that to read the social history of a period's institution one read literature, poetic writings, prose fictions and even pornographic texts besides philosophical, historical and religious writings.(Milner, 2002)

The immense flexibility of the Indian cinematic form functioning as a grand syntagmatic can be seen to produce instantiated aesthetic engagement with the historical growth of the nation state.(Mishra, 2002, p.viii-ix   ) As a public discourse, as a textual site, Hindi films intersect with the history of the nation and the issues that concern it.. As already said how cinematic texts involves a hegemonic struggle between ideological discourses, one can locate how within films different ideological impulses representing various lobbies seek to represent the social history of the nation. Issues like gender, representation of man and woman, heterosexual romance, family are the various important elements of popular Hindi cinema and are important issues in the representation of the nation's social history. It is along the topos of the film that one can also read the cultural politics involved in such popular representation of the nation's history and how certain representational forms are privileged over others. An intensive genealogical study of concentrated periods of film history, argues Virdi, yields a homology between the text and the context in which the film is produced. (Virdi, ibid.24; 205; 211)

Also, the very episodic nature endemic to the structure of popular Hindi cinematic text, allow for simulating a comprehensive world view and incorporate the most recent and contemporary trends and happenings within the Indian society, give shape to the latest objects of daily living including fashion, technology and modernity. (Saari, 2009.p. 11)

Hindi films like all other forms of cultural production are a product of a certain social, political, economic and historical context. In post- independence India, Hindi film making can be broadly categorised into three main eras which correspond to the three key moments of the nation which shaped the social and political context of life in India. Each era has generated certain narratives, conflicts, protagonists and antagonists typical to the concerns of that period or emblematic of the wider socio-political forces and concerns of that epoch. Within the prolific scope of Hindi films one can trace the influence of a given period in the films in terms of its defining trends and characteristic conventions typical of its times. These trends though pre-dominant in an era are not exclusive enough to preclude others.

Also relevant to the understanding of cinematic text is the political dynamics and the political element of the text and therefore we seek to draw from Jameson's idea viz. "political unconscious" Jameson [1981] in his book 'The Political Unconscious', as a classic account of 'narrative' as a key formal element in Marxian analysis that seeks to synthesize Marxist and Freudian perspectives into a powerful critical methodology, provides an important theoretical framework to arrive at a symptomatic reading of the text to gain an access to the unconscious reality. The assertion of a political unconscious proposes that we

undertake an analysis of texts whereby everything is "in the last analysis" political. This enables an exploration of multiple paths that lead to the unmasking of cultural artifacts as socially symbolic acts.

The first era was marked by the early years of freedom marked by Nehruvian vision of optimism of nation-building and its agenda of planning and economic development. The second phase was marked by the widespread social and political unrest and growing dissatisfaction with the state authorities that finally culminated in the declaration of Emergency by the Prime Minister in 1975. The films of this era differed significantly from the earlier era in the male protagonist as the anti-hero representing the crisis of his times. The third era or the contemporary begun with the process of India's policy of economic liberalization, and also the emergence of Hindu religious –nationalism within the mainstream of Indian politics. (Ganti, 2004. p.23-24)

Treating films as socio-historical texts necessitates looking at these texts as ideological representations of a period. The designation of ideologies as "systems of representation" acknowledges their essentially discursive and semiotic character and as per Stuart Hall's position the systems of representations are the systems of meanings through which we represent the world to ourselves and one another. It concedes that the ideological knowledge is the result of specific practices involved in production of meaning. (Hall, 1996, p.23) Borrowing Hall's idea of 'representation", allow us to argue Hindi films as the discursive semiotic domain of ideological representation are inscribed with meanings through which we can make sense of the time and the context in which it is situated historically, materially, politically and socially. The filmic narratives of the nation located within this discursive domain also can be seen to lend itself to be sites of constructing the heroes as ideological representation or embodied representations of this nation And so a hero like Raj Kapoor is seen to embody the socialist tryst of the nation under the influence of Nehru and Amitabh Bachchan embodies the anti-establishment force rebelling against the authoritarian state forces. Cultural forms like cinema as already stated is a contested terrain of ideologies seeking hegemony. The resurgence of cultural nationalism and revival of the same in cinematic texts can be read as cultural forms that appear to be 'tribal returns' reflecting counter-movement of globalisation towards greater homogenisation. And on the other hand, a nation seeks re-invention by disengaging from territory and makes it serve as a covenant term for imagining it as a collectivity.

This history captured within the popular text of Hindi cinema as chronicled by scholars of popular culture runs parallel to the statist, officially recognised history which does not recognise the classic melodramatic phase of the silent era as early beginnings of Bollywood or ancestors to what became the industry of Hindi cinema. The state's attempt to discipline the film industry also involved its intervention in the domain of historiography by allowing the 'official history' to accommodate the1950s Hindi cinema. The official historiographic devices of the state remained contested as the industry refused to accept this kind of history and its omissions at the behest of the state. (Rajadhyaksha, 2009,p 77-78; 82)

The controversial claim that is crucial to the Hindi mainstream film as a repository of national cultural values and nation's history certainly has its roots in years preceding independence of India from colonial rule. Ironically, the official statist historiography's erasure of the early pre-independence years tantamount to a sheer failure or reticence to acknowledge how commercial films was able to simulate the conditions of a national market or an audience prior to the formation of independent, sovereign Indian republican state. Notably the nationalist imagining and integrative role was performed by the commercial film industry at Bombay (now Mumbai) ostensibly sans state-support. Hindi film's role as of constituting a national cinema public comprising the spectator-citizen went on much beyond the state's recognition (ibid, p.83)

Positing popular stars as a representation of the global moment necessitates a certain brief retrospectively understanding of how the various commentaries on the social history of the nation identify parallels in the rise of certain epochal traits within film narratives. Considering the early years of independence ie the 1950s, the problems of migration to cities, unemployment, rise in urban crime, exploitation of the poor comprising peasants, urban middle class by exploitative money lenders, rural landlords, corrupt businessmen, idealistic middle-class heroes characterised Hindi mainstream films. The hero suffered social and economic injustice, though the state represented as benevolent arbitrar of justice and progress symbolised the optimism of nation-building. Conflict in these films mostly emerged from family dynamics, generational gap, or tradition and conservatism opposing modernity. This was also the period that witnessed the rise of patriotic films in the wake of independence from the colonial rule and subsequent wars with Pakistan and China. The statist discourse on 'national integration' had its valorisation in films that too upheld the pan-Indian identity over diversities. (Ganti, 2004, 29-30). The decades of 50s and 60s reflected eminently the Nehruvian vision of socialism and his nation-building agenda that envisaged the construction of dams and factories. (Bhugra,2006,p.87)These decades are particularly significant because cinema veered away from the depiction of wondrous miracles and incredible stunts to an emphasis on realism. The unequivocal commitment to urban development, modernity and industrialisation and modernisation unleashed variety of problems that became central to filmic plots. (Jacob2010, p.89)

The decade of 70s sought to displace the earlier spirit of hope and optimism that characterised early years of independence. The euphoria of independence begun to wane,(Virdi 2003, p.41 Ganti, 2004 p.30) If films like Upkaar exhorted the nation's citizen-soldier peasant to the national cause, the Machiavellian strategies of Indira Gandhi's authoritarian rule to remain in power and the declaration of National Emergency in 1975, unleashed a cynicism that encompassed films projected on the nation's screen. The impact of 1965 war, the cost of the war against Pakistan in 1971 leading to the creation of Bangladesh,t he burden of refugee relief on state funds, acute droughts and chronic food shortages in 1972 and 1973, peasant rebellion , student unrest, sharp rise in commodity prices and spiralling inflation, world energy oil crisis in 1973, the protracted All-India Railway workers' strike, Jaya Prakash Narayan's anti-corruption movement, among others cumulatively was building a popular opposition against the state (Virdi 2003, ibid, p. 108, Ganti ibid p.30). In addition to this was the crisis within the Congress party that led the state. In 1969 the party splited and breakdown in the body politic set off similar reactions in the broad social fabric. For the first time the 'monolithic power' of the hegemonic Congress party came under challenge in successive defeats in various state-elections. Criminalisation and use of violence in politics became common. (Saari,2009 ibid, p.116) There was massive civic disenchantment due to these problems and extensive state interventions in the state economy counterproductively created opportunities for corruption, smuggling, black marketing and widened social disparities. (Virdi,2003 p.227)

The state's attempt to control these crises through violence failed The deepening political and economic problems led to political protests and demonstrations as people took to streets. The state to curb them increased its disciplining force and perpetrated violence. The state authoritarian culminated in the declaration of Emergency curtailing all democratic rights and suspension of civil liberties guaranteed constitutionally. Media, activists and intellectuals were rigidly controlled, censored, arbitrarily subjected to detentions etc.. Coercive state measures of sterilisation and demolition of poor urban settlements in the name of population control and 'beautification' had an unpopular backlash. Despite several populist measures to curb corruption, bring in fiscal and agricultural reform, social welfare policies, nationalization failed to restore people's faith in developmental agenda of the state.(Ganti,2004 ibid p31)

These developments had a resounding influence upon films. Change in the political culture, wars, conflicts gave rise to a different consciousness in films. Melodramatic sentimentalism was replaced by violence as the 'new lingua franca' of popular Hindi films. And despite an official ban on it during Emergency, censorship was circumvented through sleight of hand in discrete ways. Violence, discontent seemed to express the popular sentiment much against the authoritarian yet anxious state. The outlaw emerged as the crusader-hero, who delivered justice. The collapsing state legitimacy saw the rise of such saviours who battled for justice. (Saari, ibid.p.116-118). According to Saari, the beginnings of violence in the 1970s on screen of commercial Hindi films represent 'The sociology of the modern Indian state'. This paradigm shift wherein all ingredients of the basic formula became subsidiary to the predominance of violence represented the audience collective psyche. The film 'Johny Mera Naam' of Dev Anand and Vinod Khanna's 'Mera Gaon Mera Desh' were forerunners to the trend that opened up cinematic possibilities to portray organised crime(Saari 2009,ibid,p. 113-114) saw a culmination in the cult films based on violence revenge and protest viz. Sholay, Deewar, and Zanjeer. Starring Amitabh Bachchan, he came to personify the genre of the 'angry young man'. The success of these films are attributable to the deep crisis that afflicted urban India in the form of urban crime, corruption, sectarian politics, price rises etc. The arrival of a marketable violence departed from romanticisms that reigned earlier decades. Political turmoil and social upheavals evidently had its repercussions in films. And against the backdrop of Emergency, one can posit the rise of Amitabh Bachchan-almost as a cinematic parallel to Indira Gandhi's political authoritarianism. Bound to his times, Bachchan came to represent the decadence that had set in. By the seventies, the contradictions of socialist path of development were evidently sharper. Bachchan as the protagonist the angst-ridden rebellious marginalised hero, the wronged and exploited man was the cinematic prototype of the 'Indian self' who assumed agency to amend the social, political and economic crisis faced by the nation. (Bhugra, 2006, p.88-89)

In the body politic of the nation, these films showcased working class disenchantment mostly, as a subaltern figure-coal miner, dock worker, porter, slum dweller, factory worker etc.The Bachchan figure, embodying violence and vendetta against the corrupt men like industrialists, mafia don, capitalist bosses challenges from his downtrodden location or rises to the top to vindicate past humiliation. Structurally these narratives re-visited the socialist realism of Raj Kapoor's films and its sense of suffering and disenchantment. Unlike Kapoor's characterisation of an idealist, earnest unemployed youth, Bachchan , an urban ghetto product barely concealed his simmering rage beneath a self-assured melancholic persona. In addition to his star power, the screen plays inscribed by a trenchant critic resonated powerfully with a disillusioned post-Emergency nation. (Virdi, ibid, p.107)

One of the most significant changes in Hindi films emerged in the turbulent era of the 70s, where the action of the vigilante, outlaw brought in a complete change in heroic persona. His immediate predecessor, the reigning super star Rajesh Khanna, achieved success by playing the soft, vulnerable, middle class, romantic roles. The hero popularised by Bachchan, a disaffected, cynical, violent man was far removed from family utopia. Films in this period shifted focus to the state, the society, public spaces, streets etc. In contrast to the catharsis provided through 'happy endings' of earlier era the 70s saw a melancholic twist in the films through grey characterisation and tragic consequences of the anti-hero of the 70s. (Saari ibid,p. 120-123)

The 1980s was marked by an unimaginable fiscal deficit and spiralling inter-national debt. This was also the decade when Indira Gandhi was re-elected and even assassinated. De-stabilizing separatist movements took roots in this period in various states like Punjab, Kashmir and Assam. Parochialism in politics

supplanted the idealism of independence. (Bhugra, ibid, p.90)   Popular films re-iterated the sentiments the fear of the terrorist in films like Karma.(Virdi, ibid. p.110) Cast within revenge narratives, the decade explored the theme of avenging women, who had to protect themselves, as their men had paradoxically turned impotent and less virile. Locating the oppressed viz, the woman within a sub-ordinated position, the narrative authority of films secured an interpellation-based identification with the protagonist. (Bhugra, 2006.p.90-91). The 1980s can also be seen to bear the antecedents of reforms and can be said to be the decade of India's 'take off' during which the country grew almost twice as fast as an average rich industrial nation and almost thrice as fast as the typical poor developing country. This sustained growth had its correlates in policy reforms, capital efficiency, technological improvements, consumer spending, migrant remittances, state's disbursements and certain reforms in the budget of the Rajiv Gandhi government that adumbrated deregulation. This era known as the 'Rajiv Effect' though had a limited impact (Corbridge, 2001. p.181)

However, certain changes in this decade had the premonition of the market despite the prevalent temper of violence and revenge that persisted since the seventies. One was the increased access of the middle class to the privacy of watching films at home in-home video players and did not have to share the public space of cinema halls with the urban lumpen class The second was two very successful romantic films 'Quayamat Se Quayamat Tak' and 'Maine Pyaar Kiya' that had two very younger heroes in the same of the 'Angry Young Man' mould. Third, the proliferation of cable and satellite T.V. and the engagement of the urban middle class with it and also the two televised epics 'Ramayana' and the 'Mahabharata' that was highly popular served to re-kindle Hindu cultural nationalism. (Bhugra ibid. p.91).

Liberalization of the economy and concomitant globalization since the 1990s registered unprecedented changes in political and cultural economy of films as was transpired by a declined regulative control of the state over the market. These changes signalled the receding control of the post-colonial modernist state over nationalist representative modes and discourse and ceded more scope to the popular trans nationalized representations of the imagined nation to emerge more pervasively. What was thus rendered by the retreatist state in the post-globalization period was more restricted in the post-independence context. The state as a sole monopolising guardian of nation-building enterprise left little space for the popular mass expressions of the discursive nation. The time antecedent to the advent of the global thus reflects the sheer resilience of the popular site to mirror the social history of the nation.

,The nation residing in the popular site is independent of state trappings. Historically speaking early Indian cinema that began during colonial period imagined the nation antecedent to the formation of the independent sovereign state. As indigenous nationalist enterprise early films circumvented censorship rules of the colonial rulers. (Gopal et.al 2010, Jacob 2010, 83,85-7.)

After independence only a small segment of the popular narrative content qualified for symbolic representation under aegis of state apparatus. The state sought to closely administer representations of national authenticity and identity excluding alternative agencies to display the reproducible form of nations history or imagery. (Rajadhyaksha, 2009, 203-4). This explains the anxiety among South Asian states to evolve symbols and institutions to cope with cross-border ethnic affinities on one hand and manage ethnic pluralities internally with a view to build a state-centric nation. Irrespective of the nature of political systems the ex-colonial nation states in South Asia asserted nationhood as cultural embodiment of the state.. (Phadnis,2001, p.31, 33, 247)

Looking at the history of nation-formation in India, Balibar identifies what is described as 'nationalization of society'(Balibar,1991. p. 92) that took place under the aegis of a 'national bourgeoisie'(ibid. p.90). The

initial years of independence was marked by a socialist policy of state intervention, a welfare state and mixed economy that explains how national formation took place through state apparatus held by the national bourgeoisie, the nationalist leaders. The nationalization through state intervention, argues Balibar sought to ensure the relative stability of state formation and resolve the conflictual issues faced in order to produce a consensus of the national state. The contradiction of capitalism was brought in even when the nation making was not completed, and consequently the social inequalities of class etc. made the institution of the national social-state, ie. the state, to intervene in the very reproduction of the economy, and particularly in the formation of individuals, in family structures, the structure of public health, and more generally in the whole space of private life. This subordinated individuals of all classes to their status as citizens, to the fact of being 'nationals' (ibid, 92)

In this state-driven agenda to build a nationhood within a modernist framework there was little or no scope for the mass produced popular films and this section seek to explore the trajectory of the relationship of the Indian nation-state with Popular Hindi films. The industry for long was unable to translate its cultural value into a viable financial plan largely due to the apathy of the state.(Rajadhyaksha, 2009, p.75) which at times have been even antagonistic towards it. It warrants a separate study to explore this relationship between the state and the Hindi film industry and film production but it needs to said that this relationship of antagonism and ambivalence between the state and the film industry especially prior to liberal reforms,, kept the popular resonance and nationalist imagination of cinematic narrative exteriorised to the state legitimated symbolism and representations of the nation. .

Conclusion

The interesting scholarship on Hindi popular cinema reveals it as a popular site of competing discourses of the performative nation and its social history The temporality of cinematic texts and their narratives are thus to be seen as valuable socio-historical documents of the nation – a rich source of its unofficial history. Treating these popular texts as social history of the nation interestingly parallels the political and economic history of India. The representation of the nation's history is not subject to any determinate mechanism as nationalism is a contested and conflictual terrain on which competing power blocs compete for hegemony. Nation being discursive is reconstituted in historical projects. The formation of nations thus remains dynamic in this sense and cannot be seen as fixed entities. Rival power blocs compete for hegemony over the process of formation of the nation. In this conflict of hegemonies, varying political ideologies, cultural practices and organised social forces arise with quite different understanding of the nation's historical past and what it is to become in the future. Unlike in advanced capitalist countries where the formations are more stable in the post-colonial states it is rendered more complex by a colonial past of domination. (see, Ahmed, 2007) The representation of the nation's social history in filmic texts takes place within a fluid matrix of competing discourses seeking hegemony. Various ideological impulses are contained within the cinematic address though it is the dominant most strongly seek to represent the nation within the text.

The domain of the popular represents the 'left over of official narratives' (Radhakrishnan, 2010, p. 26) and in this sense may be seen as a document of a nation's 'unofficial history. As an expression of the excess beyond rational political discourse (ibid) eluding the rational political discourse, Hindi films serve to be important popular sites of ideological power-struggles relevant to read and reconstitute the nation, and the forces that shape its history albeit in the domain of the popular.

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