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The Study Of Narratives During The Silent Era (1913- 1931) Cinema In India

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Abstract

The directors of the silent era took subject matters for their films from three main sources they were The Ramayana, Mahabharata, and the Sanskrit plays. Religious gods and goddess were the ultimate points for the common men and women where they would go for the blessings for their happy and peaceful life. The legendary heroes like Ram, Krishna, Bhism, Vidur, and Harishchandra etc were the role model for them. The reverence for the heavenly deities was deep and abiding for the people of India.

Key Word: cinema, silent movies, gesture, facial expression etc.

As we know that Cinema is different from the other forms of art. It is an art supported with mechanical tools. In the process of the articulation of this art there are three centres of semantic units they are the real author, director of the film, and the camera man with sophisticated equipment's. The last category comes under the purview of machine and technology. Since the beginning of the 20th century, cinema has emerged as an influential medium of information, entertainment, news dissemination, education and historical memory. The social importance of culture and identity in the modern world has opened new vistas for the study of cinema. Cinema is not only a powerful means of communication but also a mirror of society, a cultural agent of change and subject-matter and source of history. My plan in this paper is to highlight the forms and the contents of Indian cinema during the silent era.

It is true that during colonial times many filmmakers were not able to express explicitly their political concerns and aspirations because of the obnoxious and politically inspired censorship policy of the British government in India. But it should be kept in mind that the language of a motion picture is not restricted to dialogues alone; it is also about action, gestures, sentiments and symbolism that need to be taken into account. Most often these symbols are part and parcel of a certain social and historical context that they generate emotions and excite a large number of masses at the same time. These symbols play an important role in creating 'appropriate emotional response or climate among the audience.'

Fabrics of Silent Era Indian Cinema

The silent movie era marks the delineation of mythological and historical contents in a very vivid and categorical manner. It was the time when India was fighting her freedom struggle against the British Empire. The entire world was politically preparing unknowingly for a devastating war because most of the nations had strong desire for the exhibition of their technological and mechanical development. Gandhi, who later on led the war of independence, was engaged in South Africa where he was fighting for the cause of truth, non- violence and passive resistance. Due to frequent feminine and epidemic occurrences the major population of northern India was suffering from poverty and hunger. The restless young generation was aimless. It was the time when the British government was playing with religious card by adopting divide

and rule policy. In such a milieu Dada Saheb Phalke produced a silent film entitled 'Raja Harish Chandra' in 1913. The narrative discourse of this film was taken from the Hindu mythology in which the king in his dream transferred his kingdom to the Sage Vishwamitra in the form of alms. There were many endophoric and exophoric episodes which ran through the story. The tragic end of the story leaves an enchanting impression sacrifice and high-level morality on the first flock of Indian audience. It was a wonderful experience for them. In this way, we find that the first silent movie was more eloquent than any talkie films released after 1931.

The directors of the silent era took subject matters for their films from three main sources they were The Ramayana, Mahabharata, and the Sanskrit plays. Religious gods and goddess were the ultimate points for the common men and women where they would go for the blessings for their happy and peaceful life. The legendary heroes like Ram, Krishna, Bhism, Vidur, Harishchandra etc were the role model for them. The reverence for the heavenly deities was deep and abiding. When these gods and goddesses appeared on the screen in flesh and blood from the cold pages of scriptures and epics and performed miracles, the illiterate spectators actually prostrated themselves believing these screen gods to be real. What was true of God was equally true of godmen. These were the latter-day saints and devotees like Tulsidas, Surdas, Tukaram and many others all across the country. These holy men and women were not only endowed with the power to perform miracles but their life and teachings had a profound influence on the masses and were held in great reverence.

Dada sahib Phalke had to face many problems in finding the female characters for his films because of conservative culture and limited scope of exposure. Women were confined to the four walls of house. The majority of population did not know the world around them. The percentage of literacy was very low. People were suffering from poverty. So much so women of that era were not allowed to come on the public platform. Consequently, the directors had to search lady like male characters or rather girlish lads for the female roles. However, Phalke knew the hugeness and impressions of this content very well. Therefore, he took the narrative contents for his films from the religious background. Undoubtedly, the objective of any art is to entertain and instruct the masses. Therefore, the silent movies touched the mind-set of the people and reminded them of their cultural and moral heritage. It was not only Raja Harishchandra but many films produced from 1913 to 1931 had religious theme. Some of them are Kaliya Mardan, Vishwa Mohini, Ravan Badh, Sati Savitri, Draupadi, Prem Sanyas etc.

The historical records show that from 1913 to 1931 the total number of silent movies made was approximately 1700. Many of these movies have already been lost, including the country's first sound movie, Alam Ara from 1931, directed by Ardeshir Irani. I have collected a short list of some of the silent Movies from the National Film Archives of India. They are Pithache Panje (1913), Lanka Dahan, Srikrishna Janam(1917), Tukaram, Sinhasta Mela (1921), Brick Laying (1922), Sukanya Savitri (1923), Prem Sanyas (1925), Siraz (1928) Pitru Prem (1925), Prapanch Pash (1929), Amir Khan, Martand Verma, Banga Darshan, Jamai Babu (1931).

The narratives discussed in the religious scriptures have been carrier of Indian culture and history sometimes in the form of oral archive and sometimes in the form of written records. The point of time Dada Saheb Phalke started the cinematographic representation of Indian myths had no theoretical and technological discourse. It was only the big camera imported from the west that was writing the history of Indian cinema. There was one more important reason for selecting religious themes for the silent movies that we were governed by the British rule. We had a lot of restrictions thrust upon us. We were not so free to choose the topics of our own choice. With religion the English had no problems because religion for them was a kind of opium that they applied as policy for rule in India after the first war of Independence. That is why they did not interfere in it.

The familiarity with the mythological tales, religious devotion towards gods, goddesses, saints and faith in divinity for performing miracles to provide solutions of problems in life all contributed to the popularity of this genre. Moreover, strict censorship norms for the films of socio-political nature by the imperialist government and fear of loss of capital among the producers discouraged them to depart from mythologies and venture into other themes. The popularity of the early mythological, aesthetically crude as they might have been, was a manifestation of the growing national consciousness. These popular legends of the gods

and goddesses, familiar even to the commonest and poorest Indian, provided an oblique affirmation of the national sentiments against the threatened domination of an alien culture. The life story of Raja Harishchandra was parallel to the philosophy of Satyagraha; to endure suffering with belief in the final victory of good over evil. The popularity of mythological films also had an unexpected impact. The women of Indian middle class were permitted to go to cinema screenings in groups to see the mythological films and soak in the bhakti experience.

After the film 'Raja Harishchandra' more than 27 silent Indian films were released in India which dramatically rose to a staggering 207 by 1931. Cinema as a medium gained popularity across India's population and its many economic sections since tickets were made affordable to the common man at a low price (4 nanas or 25 paise) and audiences thronged to cinema halls as this affordable medium of entertainment. The content of Indian commercial cinema was increasingly tailored to appeal to these masses with young Indian producers incorporating elements of India's social life and culture into cinema & others brought with them ideas from across the world. Indian cinema however has very few traces of its silent films, all but a few of its earliest film reels still intact, and its early stars all but forgotten. We have completed 100 years of Indian cinema let us celebrate its glory by discussing its prominent silent films and stars.

Conclusion

We have almost forgotten the heroes and heroines of the Indian silent era movies. Everybody knows Charlie Chaplain. He was a wonderful actor for the film industry of the silent era of the West. How many of us know our actors and actresses of our silent film industry? The silent film had substantial potential to unify the nation due to its non-verbal communication. Pictures, gestures, facial expressions, body language, indication and sign demonstration were considerably impressive. Had it not been there I am sure the flock after flock cinemagoers would not have signalled their presence in the cinema halls. There have been later tributes to the silent film era of India. In 1987 when the silent film era was considered to be long dead, Sangeetha Srinivasa Rao directed "Pushpak"-a silent movie with dark humour. It narrates the story of an unemployed man who abducts a drunken millionaire and uses his wealth to impress a girl he loves. With an unexpected ending, this movie was well received by critics as it had many unconventional ideas and techniques. Unfortunately, none of these silent film stars are remembered anymore, except Devika Rani, Ashok Kumar & Prithvi raj Kapoor, all of whom came much later. Notice how most of the prominent silent film stars were women in a time when they were supposed to be confined to their houses, while male stars only achieved a small percentage of their popularity. In fact, Silent film era paved a strong foundation for the Indian film industry. It started its journey from religious narrative and now the contemporary issues are also getting space in it. Ultimately, we can say that the silent era of India cinema is a cultural heritage we must cherish it for the generation to come.

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