

THE ROLE OF THE FILM IN SOCIAL PROGRESS

Invited to contribute an article on the role of film in social progress, I am led to ponder over the connotations of the word "social" in the title. We had a socially conscious cinema of sorts in the early thirties and forties (the early films of Shantaram and those from New Theatres come to mind) but, as I have argued elsewhere, it was an alienated cinema with its roots and its inspiration drawn chiefly from the West. Consequently it had little or no impact and, with the departure of the British from India, just withered up. Its place has been taken by the self-styled art cinema with its burden of social consciousness — a Western inheritance! That its primary duty is to render truth and beauty without sacrificing the one to the other is often forgotten by its over-zealous partisans who have, of late, abandoned both truth and beauty and taken to offering facile solutions for deep social problems. More generally speaking art films with their largely neo-realistic format have often offered for their elite consumers an *escape into poverty* just as commercial films have offered an *escape into affluence* for the masses. So basically both are products of the same exploitative system. Neither cinema is capable of changing our perception of social reality. And it is only when our perception of social reality is undistorted by ideology that social change is possible.

Perception of social reality is hindered rather than promoted by pat and simple solutions. The problematic of the film is dissolved by offering fairy-tale and fanciful solutions. I will give three contemporary examples choosing a Malayalam, a Kannada and a Hindi film — all by distinguished film makers and all of which fail for the same reasons. The truth is that the plots of all three films (perhaps not the Kannada film) are solution-engendering because all three have a charismatic central protagonist with whom empathic identification (of the kind which blots out the rest of the social field) is freely encouraged.

The charismatic central protagonist besteds our all too silver screens like a veritable Colossus, although, of late, he has assumed, like our traditional Gods, various forms. Mostly he is a sensitive intellectual (Gangacharan in Ray's *Ashani Sanket*, Praneshachar in Pattabhi Rama Reddy's *Samskara*, the number is virtually legion) at some remove from the other characters and the action as well, who falls into a dilemma. Sometime the central character is a bare, neatly disembodied consciousness (the young protagonist of Girish Karnad's *Kaadu*) or an armchair philosopher who surveys the world around him and feels a Buddha-like melancholy. Such a one is Raghavan Nair in Ramu Kariat's *Nellu* who is stationed for a large part of the movie in front of a table, woodenly writing his diary in a manner that betrays a lack not only of a literary but a histrionic sense as well. I learn that, by the end, he is a changed man in the Vatsala Novel. This would constitute social change in our sense here — an intellectual lives among simple hill people and becomes finally one of them but, in the film, he merely turns into a wordy preacher. Perched on his vacuous middle-class superiority and surveying the landscape, periodically, in blankets of swollen prose, Raghavan Nair of the hollow laugh seems a complete stranger in his own land. And, indeed, like some visiting American anthropologist he details his observations of the Adivasis for our benefit (and oh! how banal they are) and serves as a thinly disguised subrogate for the author. His brand of religiosity (although a professed atheist he has travelled to Kasi, to Badrinath, to Rameswaram!) is just a cover for his spectatorial attitude to life and indeed for most part he is magisterially aloof from everything. Just how much he has learnt from life among the Adivasis we know at the end when he literally foists the Adiyar girl, Mara, on to the wholly unsuspecting Savithri Warariyar. This is known as passing the buck. But the film presents this as a supreme act of goodness and kindness!

I have concentrated on Kariat's *Nellu* to show how a potentially great theme gets subverted by the presence of a charismatic central character. Raghavan Nair is even given

a Shane-like send off from Thirunelli. As he makes his way out of the village, past all those nice green fields, Mara and Savithri Warariyar may look wistfully at the departing figure but we feel more than a little relief. This send-up of middle class mores is more than evident in the five love affairs that fairly litter the film. Enough to make you think, in these permissive days, of Wynad as a vast love-in! There is to start with, the creeping but infructuous lust of widow Savithri for narrator Raghavan Nair. This is strictly for those above forty. I have no quarrel on this score (being above forty myself!); but why underline it so heavily? Then we have Kurumatti and Mallan. Kanakadurga's *machan* seduction of a half-asleep Mallan must be pure male fantasy. What was she doing with that dragonfly on the morning after? Her subsequent song, when she is on the ramp-age again, is enough to make you blush to the roots of your pubic hair! And then there is Tappal Nanu and Javini and Mallan and Mara (ah! Henry Miller!) and Safiya and her young man. Does *Nellu*, then, with its middle-class narrator and middle-class preoccupations, promote social progress and present the plight of the Adiyars of Wynad? No, it promotes itself! Kariat's *Nellu* is mostly chaff and gr(o)in.

To take another example, this time a recent film from Karnataka on virtually the same theme: the plight of Untouchables working in the coffee estates near Chikmagalur. The film (based on a 1930's novel by Dr. Shivrama Karanth inspired clearly by the Gandhian idealism of those days) presents the story of the disintegration of an 'Untouchable' family through the eyes of Choma, the central protagonist, who wants a small plot of land to cultivate from the Brahmin Sankappaiah. Despite the patent sincerity of its director, B. V. Karanth, the film essentially fails because it arouses New Left expectation with its land-for-the-tiller theme without being able to live up to them. This is chiefly because of its obsession with religion and a pronounced Brahmin bias both in the novelist (who is also credited with the screenplay) and in the director. And so, the film, in spite of a brilliant performance by the central character

(played by Vasudev Rao in a manner which boldly invites comparison with P. J. Anthony's Velichapad in *Nirmālyam*), is pathetic rather than tragic like *Nirmālyam*. This is because the film depicts the plight of one man rather than that of the oppressed Untouchables. And this, in spite of the pseudo-universalisation sought by endowing Choma with a 'dudi' (drum). Choma never becomes his drum, he remains apart from it. And it is the drum, devoid of all human substance, that we are left with at the end of the film. The film presents Choma's tribalism under the same Hindu umbrella as that of the Brahmin landlord, Sankapaih, and only the odium of untouchability is faintly attacked. This should please Jan Sanghites in the audience but what has this to do with class oppression? Christianity, generally, is the whipping boy for Choma's misfortunes and he dies a martyr not of the politically oppressed Harijan community but of sacred Hinduism. Better a dead landless Hindu than a live land-owning Christian seems to be the message of the film. If the film had merely presented the social and political subjection of the Harijans (the film is set in pre-Independent India) without sentimentalising and glamourising the plight of Choma it would have served its purpose better. Once again a charismatic central protagonist is the undoing of the film.

A final example will be a recent Hindi film: Shyam Benegal's much-tooted *Nishānt*. Here, too, we have a charismatic central character, the bespectacled schoolteacher, played by Girish Karnad, who arrives in the film on a tranquil morning heralded by the most melodious background score. Not only is he given every kind of directorial latitude to lodge himself firmly in our souls, he is even permitted to metamorphose, by the end of the film, into a near mythological figure a Rāma to boot! Alongside, Amrish Puri with his *machismo* and hard liquor, is a latter-day Rāvaṇa and the planned invasion of his palatial mansion by the turbulent hordes (led by Rāma-Girish of course) is a veritable replay of the *yuddhakāṇḍa* in the *Rāmāyaṇa*. I know how Shyam Benegal will defend himself but, then, why does he

deliberately plant the *Rāmāyana* reference himself in the film? The sentimental song which is preludial to the final (ritual) slaughter of Vishvam and Sushila, the grief-stricken priest sitting disconsolately amidst the bloody carnage at the end and, especially, the blood-stained heroics of Karnad running to rescue his wife (worthy of a Manoj Kumar surely!) — all these take one's mind away from the central issues of the film. They sentimentalise the conflict between feudal landlordism and the landless peasantry (the film devotes precisely one small scene to this issue) by glamourising and upstaging the plight of the petty bourgeois schoolteacher. Just look at Karnad's house: the frilled pillow-covers, the excellent counterpane on the bed and the sexual tease between man and wife no doubt specially for the benefit of jaded urban appetites (the virile Amrish Puri for the women and the svelte Shabana for the men). So bourgeois is the film that Shabana is made to yield to her adulterous lover only when he comes in with a whip. Shyam Benegal's decadence has to drag in Nietzsche as well!

Nishānt fails essentially because a charismatic character (dumb teacher turning firebrand) is the social placebo turning social praxis into empty ritual. The myth of the all-powerful individual, who has Gods behind him, has taken the place of cool, detached social analysis.

I said at the beginning of this essay that the inclusion of a charismatic central protagonist is solution-engendering. Let me now add that film, if it is to be an instrument of social progress or change, must not offer gift-wrapped solutions for social problems. Thus Mara in *Nellu* being adopted by Savithri is no solution to the plight of the Adiyars of Wynad. Nor is Salim Mirza's joining the student demonstrators in *Garm Havā* a solution to the problems of Muslims living in post-Independence India. The only role the film-maker can play in using film as a vehicle of social progress is by highlighting certain social problems (the odium of Untouchability or the plight of Adivasis or the dilemma of Muslims in India) without necessarily offering capsule, instant vitamin-enriched solutions to these vexing

problems. In saying this I draw strength from a famous letter of Engels to Minna Kautsky in November 1885: "I am by no means an opponent of tendentious programmatic poetry (*Tendenzpoesie*) as such. The father of tragedy, Aeschylus, and the father of comedy, Aristophanes, were both strong *Tendenzpoeten* no less than Dante and Covvantes; and it is the finest element in Schiller's *Kable und Liebe* that it is the first German political *Tendenzdrama*. The modern Russians and Norwegians, who produce excellent novels are all *Tendenzdichter*. *But I believe that they must spring forth form this.*"

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