



Socio – Economic Perspectives: Films Of Bimal Roy:

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Synopsis

Cinema not only holds a unique place in the society but also is an immense force which by the subtlety of its nature shapes the opinion of millions in course of its business of providing entertainment. Moreover, it is a reflection of socio-economic, political and cultural realities of a society. Viewed in this context, the films of Bimal Roy portrayed some of the important issues relevant in the society. The films of Bimal Roy portrayed some of the important issues relevant in the society. His films raised the issues of untouchability, struggle of capital and labour, position of women in society, economic inequality, social oppression, poverty and unemployment. A careful analysis of some of his films like Udayer Pathey (1944), Humrahi (1945), Do Bigha Zamin (1953) Parineeta (1953), Biraj Bahu (1954), Naukri (1954) Devdas (1955), Sujata (1959), Parakh (1960) and Bandini (1963) suggests that his approach was towards creating a meaningful cinema. His treatment of the films was realistic in nature. Moreover his films radiated hope and optimism. The portrayal of women in his films is also an important aspect of study which has been discussed. His techniques in the filmmaking have also been examined. Our objective would be to study socio-economic perspectives in his films in the changing political and cultural milieu of those times.

Index Terms: Bimal Roy, Udayer Pathey, Do Bigha Zamin, Women's portrayal.

Introduction

Cinema not only holds a unique place in the society but also is an immense force which by the subtlety of its nature shapes the opinion of millions in course of its business of providing entertainment. Moreover, it is a reflection of socio-economic, political and cultural realities of a society. Viewed in this context, the films of Bimal Roy portrayed some of the important issues relevant in the society. His films raised the issues of untouchability, struggle of capital and labour, position of women in society, economic inequality, social oppression, poverty and unemployment. A careful analysis of some of his films like Udayer Pathey (1944), Humrahi (1945), Do Bigha Zamin (1953) Parineeta (1953), Biraj Bahu (1954), Naukri (1954) Devdas (1955), Sujata (1959), Parakh (1960) and Bandini (1963) suggests that his approach was towards creating a meaningful cinema. His treatment of the films was realistic in nature. Moreover his films radiated

hope and optimism. Our objective would be to study socio-economic perspectives in his films in the changing political and cultural milieu of those times.

Cinema is necessarily an establishment of modernity. This is because it is produced by a “machine engaged in the mechanical reproduction of images, and so has an impact on the way traditions of representations are refracted through its mechanisms.”¹ As a modern and developed technological medium, the influence and reach of cinema can be seen in many spheres of everyday life. The arrival of cable television and widespread viewing of Compact Discs (CDs) and Digital Video Discs (DVDs) at homes have increased its reach among the masses.

Ideas Concerning Nation - Building

The films of pre-independence era possessed ‘dreams of new nationhood’² and portrayed ideas of modernity and exhibited progressive ideas in their depictions. They strongly portrayed religious tolerance, equality and liberal outlook. Viewed in this context, Udayer Pathey (1944, Bengali) and Humrahi (1945) project the protagonist as a nationalist hero who is liberal and democratic in his attitude and approach.³ The dialogues of the films became very popular and were mentioned in intellectual groups.⁴ Moreover, the film appealed to the youth who could relate themselves with the idealist protagonist of the film.

Udayer Pathey (1944, Bengali) dealt with the life of the working class - its oppression by the capitalist class.⁵ The film centres around Anup Kumar Lekhak (Radhya Mohan Bhattacharya) who earns his livelihood by ghost-writing speeches for a wealthy businessman.⁶ Anup is also intensely involved with the condition of factory workers. He not only provides them support in every possible way but also organizes them when they are exploited by the rich businessman.⁷ The protagonist challenges the capitalists with dignity and honour and became an ideal for the young generation of that period.⁸ Bimal Roy shot his film on ‘actual locations and used unglamorous, non-professional actors’⁹ The depiction of the life and struggle of the working class and the role of middle class intelligentsia was so real that it could strike immediate and natural relations with the audience.¹⁰

It was also for the first time that cinematic love was placed on an intellectual level where female protagonist’s heart is won by the male protagonist when she reads his novel on the conditions of the working class.¹¹ The film became so successful that it ran houseful for a year at ‘Chitra Cinema’ in Calcutta.¹² It also won all the Bengal Film Journalists’ Award (BFJA) of that year.

Humrahi¹³ (1945) scripted, photographed and directed by Bimal Roy resulted in “One of the most progressive films of that period, with an intellectual approach and solution to the eternal problems of the haves versus have-nots, capitalist versus labour, materialism versus idealism.”¹⁴ The film stirred the social conscience about the gross social and economic inequity prevalent at that time.¹⁵ The film was strikingly honest and realistic - shot with non professional actors and on actual locations¹⁶ - it exhibited a freshness in the style and treatment of the theme. The protagonist displays a stance of confrontation against caste, class and creed and wins applause of the youth of the nation.¹⁷ Anup was

committed in his words, thoughts and ideals to the cause of working class and displayed an aspiration to bring out a change in the unjust social order.

Nabendu Ghose, noted screenplay writer said that Bimal Roy:

Introduced the reality that is the main characteristic of his age - the conflict of classes - the clash of the exploiter and the exploited, of the capitalist and the worker.¹⁸

Another highlight of the film was the Rabindranath Tagore's song Jana Gana Mana which later became the National Anthem of India. In both these films Bimal Roy is trying to provide a solution to this conflict by suggesting cooperation between the classes.

An intimate understanding between the attitudes in cinema and the objectives of national leadership can be located in the years before Second World War and immediately after independence.¹⁹ There is a thrust by filmmakers in their cinema to help the political leadership in their agenda of nation-making.²⁰ The films of Bimal Roy were not pessimist rather they radiated hope and optimism. After independence, when the whole society was severely shaken such positive depictions must have provided a ray of hope to millions of people. Udayer Pathey (1944), Humrahi (1945), Do Bigha Zamin (1953), Parineeta (1953), Sujata (1959) and Bandini (1963) end on a positive note.

Partition Violence

Bimal Roy was a product of a period which also witnessed partition of India. His films reflect quest for human values and enrichment which were needed during the sordid events of partition. Rootlessness and dispossession as themes are portrayed recurrently in Bimal Roy's films - Udayer Pathey when he shifted to Calcutta and Do Bigha Zamin, Parineeta, Devdas when he migrated to Bombay.²¹ His films were also about migration and social injustice.²² The chief constituents of partition of India were rape; abduction and killing.²³ A large number of women were abducted during partition violence. There are no exact figures in term of official estimates but it is assumed that around ten lakhs abductions took place.²⁴ Most of these women were never recovered by their families. Apart from inhuman treatment meted out to women during partition riots, the psychological scars left on their minds remain almost totally neglected.²⁵ A significant section of population were now refugees²⁶ in their homeland. The partition had not only resulted in loss of property, relatives and respect but also in the loss of their identity. Penderal Moon estimates that by March 1948, four and half million Hindus and six million Muslims had become refugees.²⁷ The recovery programme for abducted women started by the Government of India was officially closed in the year 1957.²⁸ With this ended, the hopes and aspirations of many people who were searching for their lost and abducted kinsfolk.

After partition of India, the socio-economic structure of Indian society was severely shaken by hunger, poverty and unemployment. The Indians were trying to cope with the dilemmas emanating from the demands of a new state - modern and traditional values, industrialization and poverty, democratic and authoritarian principles, affluence and hunger accompanied with the frustrations resulting from unemployment and a sense of worthlessness.²⁹ Moreover, the partition in 1947 filled them with a sense of alienation in their own land.

Issue of Development

In this period of socio-economic upheaval, the question of development more specifically economic development was the uppermost after the independence. The establishment of Planning Commission on 15th March 1950 with Nehru himself as its chairperson was another important step in that direction. The launching of First Five Year Plan in 1951 aimed at resolving the immediate crisis situation following the end of the Second World War.³⁰ The Second Five Year Plan based on Nehru-Mahalanobis model aimed at rapid development of heavy capital industries in India, chiefly in the public sector.³¹ At the same time, labour intensive small and cottage industries for the production of consumer goods was also promoted.³² The thrust on capital goods would help in solving the actual problem of unemployment. Mahalanobis argued that “Unemployment is chronic because of (the unavailability of) capital goods³³ and it occurs “only when means of production become idle”.³⁴ The state claimed that it would create more employment opportunities and would alleviate poverty. But bureaucratic and political corruption and inefficiency coupled with “tyranny of caste-based social relationships of domination and subordination, communalism³⁵ and violation of fundamental rights of weaker sections served the interests of dominant sections of society and the desired goal could not be achieved.³⁶

Differences in Class

In India, the first-ever international film festival was held in the year 1952. A large number of foreign films were exhibited including *Bicycle Thieves* (1948) of Vittorio De Sica which influenced Bimal Roy to such an extent that he made one of the most impressive films of its times ‘*Do Bigha Zamin*’ (1953). It was a saga of an impoverished peasant’s passion to earn sufficient money to retrieve his mortgaged land from the clutches of a moneylender by pulling rickshaw on the streets of Calcutta. His family suffers a lot of hardship during this period. Though he is unable to save his land but the film ends on a hopeful note when they are shown moving towards a rising sun, thereby signifying a new beginning. The film was based on a story named *Rikshawala* written by Salil Chowdhary.³⁷ In its treatment, it was closer to *Bicycle Thieves* (1948) of Vittorio De Sica. The film was realistic in its treatment and was a break from the conventional clichés of the cinema. It portrayed the poverty and starvation under which a large section of population of India lived. The vivid portrayal of rural indebtedness and the growing menace of the debt - trap could not go unnoticed by any cinegoer.³⁸ The menacing nexus between the moneylender, zamindar and the industrialist in perpetuating depeasantisation has been successfully depicted.

Bimal Roy’s films also depicted the existing class differences in the society. *Parineeta* (1953) raised this issue by draping it in a love story. Similarly *Devdas*³⁹ (1955) was also one of the films which talked about class differences in the society. Bimal Roy portrays the zamindari class and its false sense of pride in a derogatory manner in this film. The protagonist Devdas (Dilip Kumar) is a weak character who fails to marry his childhood

friend Parvati (Suchitra Sen) due to the pressure of his family. The family was opposed to the marriage because Parvati's family was not their equals in the social hierarchy.

Naukri (1954) raised the issue of unemployment which was one of the most important social issues plaguing the youth of that generation. In other words, Naukri portrayed joblessness as a threatening cloud looming above the Indian middle class.⁴⁰

An important aspect of Bimal Roy's films was that they portrayed the rural background in an authentic manner. Do Bigha Zamin (1955) Biraj Bahu (1954), Devdas (1955), Madhumati (1958) have been able to depict the rural India realistically. Moreover, his camera captures the grinding poverty in which millions of Indians lived. While analyzing Do Bigha Zamin (1955) a foreign critic commented:

The Calcutta slum life shown here is poverty of the desperate, lower-depths kind that Dickens found in London a century ago. In his handling of it Bimal Roy the director sometimes has almost Dickensian touch using pathos directly and unaffectedly, finding humour and kindness among pickpockets and street urchins and mocking the pomposity and thoughtlessness of the wealthy... With this understanding of poverty and its sympathy for those who have to spend their lives in its shadow, this is an outstanding Indian contribution to the cinema of common humanity.⁴¹

Apart from the reality of atmosphere or conduct or psychology, he depicted another reality, that is, the conflict of classes.⁴² Nabendu Ghose, noted film writer commented:

This realism to use Maxim Gorky's words, socialist realism, was for the first time depicted on the screen by Bimal Roy in Udayar Pathey and its Hindi version Humrahi. This realism was further highlighted in a more raw fashion in Do Bigha Zamin.⁴³

Portrayal of Women

The position of women in society has also been an important concern in the films of Bimal Roy. The emancipation of women was one of the important components of socio-religious reform movements of 19th century India. These movements were largely initiated by western-educated upper caste men. Moreover, the Gandhian mass movement saw larger participation of women in freedom struggle. After independence, the Constitution of India enforced the principle of equality for all citizens. Moreover, the trends of modernization and social change were bringing a new set of questions with regards to position of women in society.⁴⁴

The portrayal of women in Bimal Roy's films is 'heroic' in nature. The women are shown as more determined than their male counterparts. In Devdas (1955), Parvati (Suchitra Sen) goes against social norms by falling in love with Devdas. Paro and Chandramukhi in Devdas and Kalyani in Bandini (1963) are the female protagonists who are not fearful of proclaiming their love and make bold choices to chart an unclear destiny.⁴⁵ Moreover, one night she enters Devdas' room asking him to marry her, she even risks her honour by entering Devdas' room at night. Similarly in Parineeta (1953) Lalita (Meena Kumari) maintains a dignified silence about her secret marriage to Shekhar (Ashok Kumar). Her resoluteness can be seen from the fact that despite pressure from her family she doesn't marry Girin who even helped her family economically.⁴⁶

Bhawna Somaaya comments:

Parineeta is a story about silence and commitment, about freedom of choice. Commitment calls for strength, to have somebody as dependent on you and not abuse that affection. It calls for strength to retain composure under duress.⁴⁷

Earlier, in Udayar Pathey (1944) and its Hindi version Humarhi rich businessman's sister Gopa (Binata Roy) takes a resolute stand in favour of the protagonist Anup whose manuscript had been misappropriated by his rich businessman brother and who got it published in his name.⁴⁸ Moreover, when Anup is attacked by the goons of the businessman, Gopa supports Anup and his liberal thinking rather than high-handed attitude of his brother.⁴⁹ Ultimately, she leaves her home for the working class male protagonist and exhibits courage and determination.⁵⁰ In Bandini (1963), Kalyani (Nutan) had to make a choice between a young prison doctor (played by Dharmendra) and a nationalist leader (played by Ashok Kumar) who had broken his promise of marrying her and who was also being held responsible by her for her imprisonment. Yet she displays emotional integrity by choosing the latter, who is sick now, rejecting the social status and security of being a doctor's wife.⁵¹

Sujata (1959) tackles the issues of untouchability and caste system. An orphaned Harijan Girl Sujata (Nutan) is reared in a high caste household as a companion to the daughter Rama (Shashikala) of the house. Bimal Roy depicts that the adoption of Sujata by the engineer's family demonstrates the predicaments of the middle class – in a quandary between the good intents and the fright of flouting society's unfair rules, in order to protect their privileged status.⁵² Sujata (Nutan) is presented as 'daughter like' to visitors to differentiate her from biological daughter Rama (Shashikala).⁵³ The prospective bridegroom, Adhir (Sunil Dutt), for Rama wants to marry Sujata which creates tension in the family. The mother of Rama admonishes Sujata. The mother accidentally falls from the staircase and gets hurt. Sujata donates her blood to save mother and the caste issue is resolved. Maithili Rao commented:

The act of her blood saving her mother's life may be a cliché in its sentimental symbolism. It also expresses Roy's credo as a person and filmmaker - realism fused with romantic idealism, faith in the redemptive power of goodness and love to win against obdurate orthodoxy and irrational prejudice.⁵⁴

In Sujata Nutan is vivacious and worldly wise and her self-worth is obvious in the way she manages her routine. Other woman characters are also important in the narrative - Lalita Pawar and her transformation, Shashikala who demonstrates no hierarchy and most importantly Sulochana whose consent is essential for Sujata.⁵⁵ The film was a commercial success and it was exempted from the Entertainment Tax in Bombay state.⁵⁶ In Do Bigha Zamin Nirupa Roy portrays the audacity to travel into unfamiliar terrain in search of her husband and son. ⁵⁷ Biraj Bahu (1954) based on Sarat Chandra's novel deals with traditional family bonds and marital trust.⁵⁸ Biraj exhibits sense of responsibility when she goes out to work to financially support the family. In Madhumati the female protagonist pursues revenge on her own as a ghost instead of depending on the male protagonist to grant her justice.⁵⁹ In Bandini Kalyani (Nutan) is a companion of her widowed father. She nurtures him, rebukes him and shares his poetry as well. She is educated and is able to take own decisions - when Bikash (Ashok Kumar) is sick she

allows him to stay overnight at their house.⁶⁰ Kalyani's sin is finally expiated when she decides to accompany the older, horribly sick Bikash who is too embarrassed to seek forgiveness.⁶¹ Mantra Mugdha (1949) is a satire on a woman's bizarre interpretation of faithful servility to her husband.⁶² It depicts the pointless social customs.

Other Themes

Bimal Roy's cinema has social themes as its chief focus.⁶³ Parakh explores the growing corruption and degeneration of ethical values.⁶⁴ In this atmosphere of deterioration and hypocrisy, Seema (Sadhna) is the self-righteous daughter of the honest postmaster. Parakh concentrates on probity and righteousness as norms of living.⁶⁵

Anjagarh (1948) based on Subodh Ghose's story Fossil focuses on the rapidly fluctuating social values of the period in the midst of enormous feudal degeneration.⁶⁶ The film used potent visual symbols and depicted scenic locale. It was one of the first films to be shot almost completely outdoors in Chotanagpur.⁶⁷ It depicted in an allegorical manner a mute protest against foreign colonial repression and indigenous dictatorship. Some other problems like bonded labour and lack of personal freedom were also portrayed.⁶⁸

Pahela Admi (1950) is viewed as one of the most realistic portrayal of the Indian National Army (INA) of Subhash Chandra Bose on the Indian celluloid.⁶⁹ Do Bigha Zamin, Devdas, Sujata, Bandini reflect that his quest was for a permanent answer to the frequent human disasters of social inequalities in a declining superstitious society.⁷⁰ Do Bigha Zamin became popular at the international level. It was covered by the foreign press and one of the film critics remarked:

The Indian Two Acres of Land... is concerned with rural poverty in India...Realism blends naturally with emotion and the whole influence of De Sica's Shoeshine and Bicycle Thieves is apparent. ⁷¹

Most of his films are consciously concerned with reforms or with social morality of one kind or another; he was not an escapist in any sense of the term. The family was the social unit through which were dealt issues like economic inequality and social oppression.⁷²

Techniques

P.C. Barua, Debaki Bose and Nitin Bose exhibited confidence in Bimal Roy as a cameraman with an extraordinary instinctive visual sense.⁷³ The cinematography of Barua's Devdas and Mukti were some of his initial cinematographic accomplishments. The outdoor cinematography in Mukti in the forests of Assam evoked great acclaim.⁷⁴ He was awarded the best cinematography trophy for a Tamil film Nalla Thangal.⁷⁵

In terms of experimentation, Bimal Roy believed in doing something technically stimulating. One instance related to the shooting of the song Chander Hashi by Tagore in Udayer Pathey with nuzol spray – the moonlight effect – no one thought of it that a light spray of nuzol oil would create that misty mood - he attempted it and executed it brilliantly.⁷⁶

He had developed a close, recurrent relation with the camera, a relation which catapulted him to be an unparalleled master of the visual art in his future years.⁷⁷ He had nearly a mysterious sixth sense about camera position.⁷⁸ In terms of technique, Bimal Roy's work

was pioneer in source of light photography that is, taking special care to show where the source of light has to light up a set or place - whether it is day or night.⁷⁹ This adds an element of reality to his photography and his films.⁸⁰ Rinki Bhattacharya mentions in her work:

Lighting was the foremost creator of moods in his work- this was to be more vibrant in his three last works – Parakh, Sujata and Bandini. But wherever the narrative grew nostalgic or throbbed with inner crisis, whether in anguish or ecstasy, the mood was caught in delicate chiaroscuro patterns of black, grey and dove white. His language was painted in every possible shade of grey and white and black- one never thought of colour even in a pastoral romance like Madhumati or missed it.⁸¹

His location shootings with a mobile Arriflex camera in Do Bigha Zamin (1953) were also done to impart an authentic flavour to his film.⁸² This light camera transformed the whole notion of filmmaking. As a technician, Bimal Roy realized the prospects of this camera and used it comprehensively.⁸³

Rinki Bhattacharya commented:

He approached his themes with visual dignity and restrained histrionics...He expressed more through visual gestures than through words...to achieve perfection as visualized by this visualizer, his artistes and his technicians strove beyond themselves. Thus some of the well - known artistes (and technicians) may have acted well elsewhere, but for him they gave the performances of their lifetime.⁸⁴

One can say that through his techniques of cinematography, an eye for detail, the choice of his themes and their portrayals, he maintained a closer relationship with reality. However, it must be kept in mind that the depiction of reality is not unmediated; camera, story and artifice mediate between reality and its portrayal.⁸⁵

Thus, we can say that the films of Bimal Roy portray various socio-economic issues in such a manner that they raise the consciousness of the masses. His quest for purposeful cinema is highlighted in the themes of his films which deal with issues like struggle between exploiter and exploited, capital and labour, economic inequality, social oppression, poverty and position of women in society. Moreover in his films, we encounter various characters, situations and themes in an interaction with modernity and democratic ideas which supported liberty, equality and liberal outlook.

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