Secularism and Indian Cinema

by Shyam Bengal

The Archives on Contemporary History, School of Social Sciences, organized the Eleventh P.C. Joshi Memorial Lecture on 18th April 2005.The renowned film maker Shyam Bengal was invited to deliver a lecture on the theme of "Secularism and Indian Cinema". What follows is an extract from this memorial lecture:

Shyam Bengal began by saying that he was looking at secularism and nationalism in Indian cinema from a film maker's point of view. His lecture was mainly concerned with the portraying of religious minorities in Indian cinema, particularly the post independent cinema. The lecture focused upon the ways in which the religious differences were represented, managed and contained in Indian cinema.

"It was assumed that Hindi film makers were more representative of India as compared to the cinema in other Indian Languages. Hindu-self come to assume itself as representative Indian-self. Indian national personality cannot be easily defined; since it does not have any specific profile". He quoted Peter Sellar's observation in "The Party". In India we do not think who we are, we know who we are.

This statement pointed to the fact that most of the Indians were secure in their identity. The fact that we have civilizational identity as Indians is the source of our strength and enables us to accommodate diverse and contradictory elements. At any moment, we choose one or another of our multiple identities depending upon the need of the situation. Ours is a society of complex mosaic of various ethnic communities, classes and sects; all these communities were the building blocs of Indian society. In such a society tolerance of diversity meant also the tolerance of a whole lot of inequities, oppression of caste system and perpetual subjugation of women. Accordingly, all these belief systems did not mean that an individual was free to choose. Each individual was bound by the customs and traditions of the community that he she was born in. Secularism in India has always swung like a pendulum favouring the rights of communities at

times, and rights of individuals other times. While accommodation and tolerance are qualities that are often considered necessary for the polity to be secular. Based on pluralistic philosophy, Indian nationalism claimed to represent everybody in the country irrespective of caste or creed. This comprehensive nationalism was taken to be synonymous with secularism. Thus to define oneself as an Indian was also to be secular at the sametime. The national movement was based on the platform of anti-colonial and anti-imperialist agenda; also the natationalist leadership was equally concerned about the need to reform the traditional society, although this related primarily to Hindu society. To legitimise its claim to represent the entire country, Indian nationalism sought the adherence of all the castes and religious groups. Yet sections of the Muslims remained unconvinced of the Congress claim that it truly represented their interests, and ultimately, this led to the formation of Pakistan.

Cinema as a new medium of entertainment started in the early 20th century when Indian national movement has begun to influence its imagination. To begin with, cinema was restricted to metropolitan cities. From its very beginning, Indian film makers had to compete with the American and British Cinema and thus, they saw themselves engaged in a nationalistic project. In the next two decades films were made which underlined need to carry on reforms in Hindu society. By 1930's, when sound came, Indian cinema had already become a major medium of entertainment. This was also the time when INC had resolved to make Hindustani as the national language of India. Thus films in Hindustani could represent themselves as the "India" films. These films originated in Bombay and Calcutta where the commonly spoken language was neither Hindi nor Urdu. These films used the language which could be easily understood across the board throughout India.

The real problem for Hindustani cinema lay in handling subjects of contemporary nature. Making a film in Hindustani meant the construction of environment and culture which would be acceptable all over the country. Clearly this invented national culture was a construct that ignored great deal of diversities that were part of India. Characters were represented in a generalized and

standardized way that would not identify them with any recognisable features. They were either urban or rural, rich or poor or identified by social class to which they belonged. Mostly , they were either upper class or middle class and north Indian. They only had first names so as to avoid the mention of a particular caste. The only other identification was their religion. Cinema represented India in much the same way, the national movement represented and identified Indians i.e. by communities, Hindus and Muslims. Regional films could make a greater claim on realism as they were rooted in local cultures. Many such films would be remade in Hindustani by transforming them in a manner so that they were accessible to audiences across the country. Stories they told were like parables rather than realistic narratives. Even today, this continues to be a part of Indian cinema. But this lack of realism does not bother the Indian audiences, because they are used to looking at cinema this way. The audiences do not object to an imaginary environment of films and the way the events take place, rather they want to partake of it, enjoy it. Does cinema has to be a representation of any kind reality ? This is the question I often ask myself. When a film maker makes a realistic film, the audiences turns around and ask the question: why have you made a documentary?

The representation of real world is not always supposed to entertain the Indian audiences. They want to be transported completely into another world. That is the mode which the popular Indian cinema has created for itself. The films thus made legitimized traditionally accepted social values that restored the sanctity of the family and its primacy over the individual. Indian Cinema represented what was a normative ideal and not what actually existed in society. 'Hindu family social' formed the twin of 'Muslim family social.' The genre of 'Muslim social' represented flattering image of the Muslim community as cultivated and essentially feudal, extolling virtues of friendship, loyalty add family honour. Hindu and Muslim as brothers became a dominant motif in several Hindustani films after Independence. Films like Parosi (1946) and Hamrahi (1944) echoed the theme of twins. The separatist politics of Muslim

League never found a voice in popular Hindustani cinema. Indeed, often found ideological opposition in the cinema of 1950s. In <u>Dewar</u> Partition was shown as a threat to the unity of the family. Writers and poets belonging to the progressive writers forum and IPTA came into cinema about this time. And that was thanks to P.C. Joshi. His idea of popular front was a way of going to the people culturally and that is where writers, poets, actors and others associated with IPTA played a very significant role. This contributed to what today we call the golden period of Indian cinema.

Manto, Ali Sardar Jaffri, Kaifi Azami, Abbas and many others projected an overtly secular outlook in the cinema. After Partition and independence, a substantial section of the Muslims became citizens of Pakistan. One of the far-reaching consequences of this was an increased ambivalence towards the Muslim community. Indian Muslims were perceived as having a choice in the matter of citizenship. They could either remain in India or immigrate to Pakistan. Their allegiance to the country was not taken for granted as easily as with other religious groups. Thus their nationalism was always suspect and needed to be ritually re-affirmed. How were Muslims to be depicted in cinema? There was an awkward formality and a great deal of self-censorship in the way they were shown in films. Part of the problem had to do with the political correctness and a desire not to offened. Muslim characters were routinely shown as sensible, good and devout. During the Nehruvian era many films, especially those written by progressive writers, sought to create the image of a Secular Muslim. For instance, in <u>Dhool ka Phool, (1959)</u> an old Muslim adopts an abandoned child whose religious antecedent are not known. He signs a song: <u>You would not be either a Muslim or a Hindu, you are the son of a man and shall be a human</u> *(Tu Hindu Bane ga, na Muslaman Bane ga; Insan ki aulad Hai , Insan Bane ga)*. There was great deal in it which was tokenism. Diversity within the Muslim community was not reflected in the cinema, especially the negative characters were not be shown in any minority community. Christians were depicted as good hearted, devout and wonderful human beings, but always drunk. Large crosses around there necks continue to be shown till today. Communal harmony became a kind

of signature in large number of films during the fifties and sixties. Cinema came to seen as a socially integrative force. National awards were given to such films which promoted national integrity. It became difficult for Hindu Muslim relations to be shown without sanitizing them, while there was no such inhibition in the regional cinema. In Kerala, where there was a sizeable population of Muslims, Hindu Muslim relations were depicted in a far more direct and credible way. Some of the films were based on inter-communal love stories. These films did not seek to represent India as a nation and Kerala had not suffered the trauma of Partition.

Muslims in Kerala did not feel the social insecurity that sections of the Muslims felt in northern India. By contrast Hindi cinema was self- consciously secular. In its attempt to make the minority community accepted and socially secure it performed the paternalistic duty of the avowedly secular Indian state. Consequently, however benign it may have appeared, the secularism of Hindi cinema, to a large extent, reflected the secularism of the Indian state, at its best patronizing. This popular representation of Muslims and other minorities, continued till the fifties and sixties. It was not untill the early 1970s that things began to change, Hindi cinema was now in a position to tackle subjects related to Partition and contemporary Muslim experience which till than was considered an akward subject. Two important developments made this alternative depiction possible. The creation of state- established film institutions and second Partition of the sub-continent in 1971 i.e., the creation of Bangladesh. The creation of Bangladesh made possible the production of a film like <u>Garam Hawa</u> that treated the subject of Partition in a realistic manner for the first time in Hindi cinema .

Indian cinema was a flourishing industries at the time of independence and was totally market driven and unregulated. The Indian cinema grew with the growth of new urban townships and migration to cities due to industrialization and others programmes of developments . The complexion of audiences too began to change. The old middle class was no longer the arbiter of cinematic taste. A growing new middle class and working class and a vaste number of immigrants from countryside into the towns, started playing their part in

determining the aesthetics of cinema. Films had to meet their needs and taste as they constituted the largest segments of the audience. The effect of all this began to be felt in the popular cinema of the 60s.

The films had to appeal to a large audience. Films had to meet their entertainment needs as they constituted the largest segment of the audiences. In the popular cinema Muslims were not at the centre stage. They could only figure in the genre known as 'Muslm social'. <u>Garam Hawa</u> was the first film which grappled with the Muslim experience in the immediate aftermath of Partition. Until <u>Garam Hawa</u> was made Muslim characters were routinely depicted in a token way; they were separated from the community, effectively making them the Other. Despite its affirmative nationalist closer <u>Garam Hawa</u> remains the only film to address the plight of the Muslims in post –partition India in the early years after independence. Ironically, a section of the Muslim community appealed to the Government to ban the film. Finally, the film was only released on television. The historical moment i.e. the birth of Bangladesh, was also responsible for the making of <u>Garam Hawa</u>. Till 1971, the period continued to be a period of migration for Indian Muslims because Pakistan was still an option. This option disappeared after the creation of Bangladesh . The new Partition along linguistic lines helped the Indian Muslims to manage some of their anxieties. It is only after this that popular cinema was able to take on subjects centered on the Muslim community in a contemporary setting. However, the first film to take up the issue of Hindu-Muslim divide was the mini-series based on Bhisham Sahni's novel <u>Tamas</u> by Govind Nihalini in 1987. Fortunately, it was not a feature film otherwise it would have been banned under the pretext that it promoted hostility among the communities. It was telecasted despite objections.