

Article
Abhishek Talukder

Protest Film – Outwith the Obvious



*How to see the world taught me thou
How to change it weighin' am now —*

All set is Bob Dylan to strut his stuff, and thereupon the crowd, squealing with glee, bellows at him to sing a 'protest song' - a familiar scene from ye sixties. PROTEST SONG! PROTEST MUSIC! And the Paragons: Wolf Biermann, Billy Bragg, Nina Simone, Philip Ochs, Billie Holiday, Victor Jara - a whale of a movie! Whence did the audience, including the highbrows, derive this kind of categorization? Well, today, we all know, more or less, its meaning, importance, and historicalness - thanks to Internet's benignancy. Now, like 'protest song', is there anything on earth called 'protest film'? If yes, what does it spell? If a film portrays any protest agin something in order to inform or to commove the audience, would it be classified as a protest film? Suppose, in a film, the male protagonist protests fiercely when he finds out that he has been cuckolded over the years, or the local students take to the streets with alacrity to protest against unlawful arrests, would it be deemed worthy of the term protest? Per contra, if we find a film that

puts trust in the formation and transformation of subjectiveness with confidence and effectively portrays (and impugns) the grim reality, which shapes our lives, but abstains from displaying any so-called protest, would it not be considered as a protest film? Well, cinema has long been used as a means of evincing and communicating protest against injustice, favoritism, exploitation, and oppression on the part of rulers, and 'Protest Film' has become a culty term over the past few decades; h/e, it is often decked with meanings that don't hold water and seen rather barely in terms of its function, as forms of suasion or propaganda. So, what is the scope and merit of protest film? What follows is an objective analysis, canvassing few films relevant to this subject.

Framing a general idea or understanding of protest film, in common with many other notions used in contemporary film studies, is no picnic, since the essence of protest is that it has no predefined rules; even public esteem - if "public esteem" could be predicted in this connection - may amount to an old wives' tale that is occasionally convenient to scotch.

It entails heedful thought. Well, let's cut to the chase - what is a protest film? Simply put, if a film whales away at the entire system that winks at injustice, racism, exploitation, noisome nexus between the State and various avaricious suits, etc., using particular issues and actions, incites new insights into dialectical realities, and, in some cases, calls for a grand social change, we may see 'protest' as the apotheosis of that film. Social system in its entirety - the moot point! Even though after vigorously protesting about something, a film ultimately talks about how to reach an accord with that very social system, it can't be divined as a protest film. A protest should be overarching and definitive; it must spell out its objectives, even if it is an indirect one. Two types of protest could be formulated, in my view. One way is obviously by means of indwelling criticism. To accept the prevailing notions and then unmask its inner and ineluctable contradictions. The second possibility is that a protest filmmaker may reject the entire system and construct an alternative approach to those of the establishment, expecting that to be considered seriously. Approaches to the subject of protest may differ, and so are the forms. Films like *'Ten Years'* (2015) or *'Battle of Algiers'* (1966) would certainly not make your flesh creep in the same way as a *'No Regrets for Our Youth'* (1946), or *'La Chinoise'* (1967), which solely focuses on the ideas behind the forces of change and, more importantly, the worlds they represent, does. Now, like counter-revolution, here lies a possibility of counter-protest, for ideas and principles, spirited and fleet, approach us as they seek unmapped territories. 'Twas ever thus - protest films in no way should accept social/political status quo. Moreover, we need to consider the impact of such films on politics, and on sociopolitical changes, and whether 'Protest' and 'Film' (both documentary and feature) are two conflicting terms apropos of aesthetics.

The uttermost tension of bellicose reflexes of protest in *"Strike"* (1925) is an accrual of reflexes that scarcely offer any respite, i.e., the concretion of reflexes of social struggle, giving tongue to the prospective class tone. This film serves as a beacon to all filmmakers who unfeignedly wish to approach the path of protest, irrespective of their background. *'The Silence'* (1963) unleashes a sharp critique of the post-war European bourgeois civilization. However, Bergman has followed Descartes' metaphysical dualism. He has depicted that the European mind is getting destroyed, by easy stages, 'by madness, starving hysterical naked', and a dwarf-civilization is

drawing nigh. The self-stimulating mind and intellect drove into the blue, and - mirabile dictu - we're forced to confront a baffling silence and bottomless vacuity. But for all its suavety and grace, this protest still seems to be nonrepresentational, not being in the direct context of the social system. The auteur often resorts to metaphor and wittingly attempts to make the characters emblematic. Therefore, this kind of protest hardly can string through the realities encountered by the hoi polloi. A similar argument would work for *'The Big Night'* (1951). *'The Story of the Late Chrysanthemums'* (1939) expresses a strong objection to the conventional family system, although, in the end, it feels prudent to emphasize the importance of a compromised unification! As if, one could slay time at the double sans hurting eternity. *'Lewat Djam Malam'* (1954) is a cogent film about conniption and disenchantment, about the dream of a society that has been devalued and distorted by government repression as well as bourgeois indulgence on the other for a long time; however, protest is merely reduced to mere avenge. Contrariwise, *'Rome, Open City's'* (1945) protest carries much significance because of the epic nature of resistance, strongly vouching for a better tomorrow. *'The Great Dictator'* (1940) dares to employ, with fluidity and assurance, comedy as a tool of protest. It indirectly calls for upending any totalitarian system (Hitler is decidedly not the only target). It is a film that is the nonesuch of beauty and protest. There is no dubiety that Chaplin's treatment is capable of conveying the needed effect. *'if...'* (1968) and *'A Grin Without a Cat'* (1977) are peradventure two of the most brilliant examples of protest agin authoritarian repression. These two films, pregnant with savage truth, not only oppugn the positions of power and authority but yearn for a new world as well. Their protest takes the second avenue mentioned above. *'Where Do We Go Now?'* (2011) also takes a similar route. Interestingly, *'Protest'* (1967) stages a different type of protest, on the order of *'Aakrosh'* (1980). *"The Black Power Mixtape 1967-1975"* (2011) judicially steppes up to support black liberation. In the eyes of posterity biopics of revolutionary figures may not become the model of protest. For example, Margarethe von Trotta fails to bring to her take on Luxemburg (*'Rosa Luxemburg'* (1986)) a staggering sweep of comprehensive protest.

Protest art can inspire the great unwashed, who have limited access to the established sources of power, with courage. The ideal of protest film is to affect

the dialectical relationship between the individuals and the surrounding communities or establishment. However, defining film(s) as 'protest film' is culturally, geographically, and historically specific at all times. In Latin America, film has been a significant weapon of protest, which ain't worn out by the fatigue of foredoomed egotism. The responsible treatment of protest and violence by makers like Ray and Mann has continued to have some significance in American cinema. Filmmakers hailed from the Latin American countries have possessed a combatant and humane disposition, and they have kept on wondering about the limitations of real democratic change. We have descried the outgrowth of 'Third Cinema' that brazenly incites revolutionary activism. The spirit of non-conformity has permeated the masters. In Argentina, few filmmakers have mysteriously evanesced during the Dirty War period, and the incidents and events that have resulted from savage dictatorship contribute to making a handful of new filmmakers who, after getting a second wind, have ipso facto embrace radical politics, seeking a fundamental social change. They have been in the groove over the last few decades, and their protest explores questions of violence, revolution, neocolonialism, sexuality, globalization, social exploitation, post-human identities, and religion, and there is no point in inundating this section with examples because there are too many (ranging from "*Memorias de un Mexicano*" (1950) to "*Workforce*" (2019)). Anyway, as regards sensitization to social oppression and exploitation, it is unfeasible to draw a parallel between Latin America's protest films, most of which are good, both aesthetically and historically, and yet so markedly engaged with disengagement, and Europe's (barring the so-called underground films). In every case, however, the impetus behind these films is the same: to use the camera as a weapon of protest, to record or capture the energy that might have a howling impact beyond the theatre in which they are projected, keeping the aesthetic highlights in mind.

In India, films have made their voice heard to dissatisfaction with corruption (of all kinds), poverty, unemployment, social injustice, and oppression. Partition plays a pivotal role. Here, the term 'protest film' is oftentimes used as synonymous with 'political film', but, as noted earlier, it is broader in scope. Political films can make people aware of the social problems that individuals, and not the state, can collectively be responsible for; thus, they do not necessarily target political authority and call

for an overall change. We may recall "Udayer Pathey" (1944) or "Chinnamul" (1950) in this regard. Their protest does not speak with great severity; however, that does not mean that it is denuded of any significance. The disposition of protest has become clear in the works of Ray, Ghatak, Sen, Benegal, or Abraham. Their sense of cinema has made protest an even sharper face. Ghatak's is a lunar luminosity in this genre. His course seems to be a straight line in its obstinacy. 'Subarnarekha' (1965), is a protest film through and through, and no warrant is required to confirm my statement. The form is rendered explicit and the force is augmented at the same time. Sen's protest embraces a sui generis mannerism. He is an avowed communist who makes no bones about his political proclivity. 'Interview' (1971) is one of his best communiqués, embodying protest in its both form and content, and brushing aside the established conventions. In 'Padatik' (1973), the protagonist stirs up a hornet's nest by rambling kvetch against the inequitable acts and deeds by the leftists, including his comrades, and the entire system. He even questions his own ability and notions. Other talented makers also have used film as an instrument of protest. 'Antarjali Jatra' (1987) picks evil beliefs and practices to pieces, taking us by storm. A maiden is viciously denied her ration of common humanity by the upper castyahoos, and a doma tries to rescue her with all his might. The protest here is all-encompassing, unlike 'Devi' (1960) which is greeted with unqualified acclaim. "Just because you gave my land back, don't think I'll vote for you. Don't think the world around will never wake up" - the poor farmer hoots his anger and grimace while striking at the face of the landlord's campaign poster, pasted on a tree, with his spades ('Halodhia Choraye Baodhan Khai' (1988)). Here, the vociferous "you" should be understood as an allegory with many strata of meaning. It could be interpreted as landlords, venal policemen, mendacious government officials, mighty middlemen, and, above all, the State. He assures us that his battle is not going to peter out but will continue until the first light of justice pens his triumphal ode. This film is a perfect manifestation of overarching protest. However, Ray, as well as Aravindan, is more or less of a gentle disposition. It isn't effortful to determine whether there is a greater or lesser protest through film in the Indian subcontinent than anywhere else in the world. Perchance, relative to the magnitude of the change required, it seems insufficient, either in quantity or in its impact. On the question of coveted impacts, if it

has verily led to sociopolitical and sociocultural changes, the answer is that it is not easy to ascertain how much is due to protest films alone. Be that as it may, the more this world is concentrated on an object of desire or fear, the more intense it becomes, and the more the strength of this intensity enlivens the expression of protest. Moreover, film can be a more powerful form of protest than books or plays, as, firstly, it can reach a large number of audiences, and, secondly, it not only makes the viewers aware of the wrongs being protested against but also arouses it to instantaneous actions. Protest (or political) films are prone to censorship or virulent reaction from the community. H/E, compared to the

severeness of censorship in South America, China, Philippines (at the time of Marcos), or Indonesia, protest has somewhat been possible in India, and censorship is outfoxed, to some extent, by ingenuousness. I shall draw this exposition to a close by stating that the indispensable quality of protest films is that these are invariably directed towards the power of Authority - Political, Social, or Religious, exhorting the audience to reexamine and, if required, change their customary beliefs. Such an approach is worth its weight in gold because they offer intellectual, emotional, and moral support even to the already converted ones.

Mr. Abhishek Talukder is an Independent Filmmaker and a Writer, based in Kolkata.