

Chidananda Dasgupta Memorial Contest 2022: Winner of Best Critique Award

Abhishek Roy

Struggle in Paradise: The Little Wins That Have a Big Impact

A film criticism on Turup / Checkmate (2017)



“He laid out the chess board, and we each played our pieces.

Then fortune made a move so bold.

The win was his, we were left counting losses.”

- Chakram dada

Films that narrate stories about a particular community or a group of individuals frequently identify a cast of characters along with one or two "protagonists" who introduce and advance the plot. Hindi films like *Garam Hava* (1974), *Lagaan* (2001), *Manthan* (1976), and *Ankur* (1974) address important societal concerns movingly encompassing countless people, and yet they adhere to the same cliché. Their strategy is successful in bringing about or motivating change, indubitably so. Each of these movies is deeply compelling and often distressing. But what if a film could do more to tell the tale of events that impact society as a whole? Films like *Bombay* (1995),

Hey Ram (2000), or *Firaaq* (2008), which depict political tensions in society, concentrate on one or a limited number of characters and leverage their journeys to evoke feelings connected to these overarching themes. Watching *Turup* (2017), however, brings out subtlety in sentiments related to life today in India, and it does so with such refinement and style that no other mainstream films or popular television shows have done before. The film accomplishes everything that other films may achieve. It goes on to deliver more, layered with messages of both ethical universalism and relativism, in a fashion that is not only exceptional but also

challenging to actualise. The experience of watching *Turup* not only evokes a strong sense of indignation and despair but also makes us want to reflect on our actions and resolve to seek out situations that will help us win minor triumphs over bigotry and fundamentalism.

Turup, is an Indian Hindi independent film produced and developed by a collection of artists who work together under the moniker 'Ektara Collective'. Maheen Mirza (Scriptwriting and Cinematography), Puloma Pal (Editing), and Rinchin (Scriptwriting and Casting) make up the core crew of Ektara Collective that produced this film. The film highlights the distinctive socioeconomic characteristics of Bhopal's "Chakki Chouraha" neighborhood, where a group of residents often play chess together in between going about their everyday chores. Far from easy, the film has a very well-choreographed opening, and this gets to the heart of the film's best-kept secret — it is not about people winning over each other in a board game, but how a simple board game can mobilise a bunch of people together and form a cultural space of their own. The three-minute-long exposition itself, coupled with Shafi Faqir's version of the song "*Can't you hear the music? The eternal music of the universe,*" sung by Sangeeta Lahiri Srivastav, defines the colourful characters of Chakki Chouraha in terms of their social status, occupation and personality. These characters subsequently shape the nature of the Chouraha, which initially presents itself as a gender-exclusive Habermasian public sphere.

In television and cinema, the usage of games like chess and poker is sometimes more random than one may like to believe. Instead, the story's inclusion of individuals playing games is just as crucial as the plot's central conflict. Games are a creative narrative device that allows the audience to get to know the characters while absorbing essential background information. The board game of chess has played a significant role in some of the most famous cinematic and televisual narratives of the 20th and 21st centuries, whether it be the themes of class and colonialism in Satyajit Ray's *Shatranj Ke Khilari* (1977) or the general philosophy of allies and adversaries in the Marvel comic book series *X-Men*

(2000), as depicted by Professor X and Magneto. *Turup* incorporates chess to symbolise the intimacy and camaraderie among the locals of 'Chakki Chouraha' as they negotiate their way around amid individual struggles staged in a larger political context. From the start, the narrative flows with continuity, even if it's fragmented. Instead of beginning with a typical establishing shot, the film begins with a mid-shot of a person (an early morning exterior scene). Then it cuts to an over-the-shoulder shot (OTS) of two individuals playing chess in the middle of a crowd of people to introduce the audience to the setting of the neighbourhood instantly. Throughout the film, the board game brings characters with different ideologies and inclinations close together to discuss shared subjects of the 'basti' (locale). And, by all accounts, the film captures the nuances and personalities of each participant in the game just as well, and it certainly feels, on a visceral level, as if were right there, watching the action with these ordinary individuals.

It is a deeply involving and rewarding film and should be seen by everyone with interest in cinema and effective storytelling. The film adopts an inductive strategy that exposes the irony of contemporary Indian nationalism on various scales. Throughout the film, we observe the people's perceptions of one another and get insight into their responses to situations that manifest around them while exquisite interpretations of *Kabir's* poetry periodically erupt in the background score. It is already an exciting scene to see a bunch of chess players engage in heated competition at a set of community chess boards. But concealed behind it is a narrative that examines and exposes the indiscriminate social and sectarian pressures that India's poisonous political atmosphere has been reviving for some years. The majority of the basti's residents react to a group of "politically motivated" persons in a way that indicates that these tensions among them have not always been present. However, these undetectable strains have evolved from being detestable to harmful and pose a threat to the community's peace. Before choosing to "address" the "problem" of a Hindu girl eloping with her Muslim

boyfriend (*Love Jihad*) from the same neighbourhood, *Devkant* makes more inflammatory statements which get lukewarm reactions from the locals. It should be simple to see how seemingly innocent love relationships like these may devastate a quiet neighbourhood and turn everything topsy-turvy. The film also points out the present ethical crisis in journalism when it frames such issues in a communal light without checking the veracity of such allegations with the source itself. *Turup* constructs the character of a community on top of this underlying knowledge, assuming that it has already been established in the viewer's mind. The traits are formed by how various individuals respond to the increasing intolerance among them — the tea vendor shakes his head in disapproval, some openly mock it, another clique of three are quick to shift focus to the game and dismiss such discussions. In contrast, one naive individual succumbs to its influence. With such a wide variety of perspectives and reactions, the characters come to life as a group, and the movie is seen as an examination of a group rather than an individual. And because each of these principles is so practical and rooted in life, it is impossible not to identify with the characters. Interestingly enough, individuals outside the chess players' circle keep politics and business separated, while others long for a life where they are free to live as they like.

The uniqueness of *Turup* (*Checkmate*) extends beyond its 'non-career' actor cast. The characters, personality traits and roles in the narrative are complex, dynamic, and multi-faceted, which is where the true challenge lies. What sets *Turup* apart from other run-of-the-mill projects is the balance and the subtlety in expression. This is mainly made feasible by the fact that locals themselves took part as actors in the story grounded in real life. In an otherwise protagonist-free film, Monika Didi, an elderly working-class woman who is a household help at *Varun* and *Neelima's* residence in one of the upper-middle-class neighbourhoods, is the de facto centre point. Her reserved demeanour contrasts with the pivotal part she plays in the conflict and as a meeting point for the various groups of characters in the narrative. When we realise that she

is secretly resisting and taking part in "the struggle," she becomes on par with an introverted, contemporary revolutionary by the movie's conclusion. Her charming, dynamic, yet restrained presence is noticeable throughout the film. While Monika remains the thread that leads us through the entire story, connecting lines that branch out into another individual, more minor episodes make up the unique experience *Turup* manages to offer. Each of these strands has a distinct character and perception of life, right from the boisterous party worker *Tiwari*, the silently suffering *Majid*, and the hesitant housewife *Neelima* who actively participate in the narrative to the characters of *Lata's* father, hapless shopkeepers, and the tea seller, all of whom barely have any spoken lines. Despite this, viewers get a decent impression of these character traits and where they stand on the community's ideological spectrum. However, it's not as if where people fall on that spectrum affects how they live their everyday lives. Their responses exhibit a subtle detachment from the lives they lead; it seems as though nothing they say or do will matter. They may have abandoned active engagement in favour of a quiet but "normal" existence after seeing the seeming futility of what they believe or feel should govern society. The majority of those emotions are frequently expressed in jest or privately. Even those who vehemently disagree with concepts they encounter in public will only embrace them in private. For instance, it is evident from the spectators' lack of response when *Tiwari's* thugs make ugly accusations stating that Muslims migrate into this basis to encourage looting and violence that they do not concur. No one speaks, however, other than casually rejecting or changing the comments' subject. We don't see any dissent or remark, "Aren't we all outsiders," until later in a one-on-one conversation. Looking through the lens of social and cultural psychology, the perception of the insider/outsider complex, as peddled by some characters in the film, signifies the presence of conflicting societal elements pertaining to identity and group supremacy.

The film frequently aligns with a more collaborative kind of authorship than other artistic

media because of the nature of the filmmaking process. Even though certain films are celebrated for their directing or writing styles, the intentionality of the collective that created the final result is where a film's actual authorship rests. In addition to immersive storytelling, *Turup* also challenges the established notion of authorship in films as texts. The film goes on to prove that absence of the director does not necessarily mean a lack of direction. *Turup*, in both form and content, gives the viewer a more organic feel about what is happening on the screen, providing a better sense of place and atmosphere that seems strangely familiar. The cinematography and colour treatment adds a certain degree of realism to the text without compromising the aesthetics of the story and the characterisations. The simple yet profound cinematography, the intentional use of more

ambient light along with the spirit of *Kabir* in the form of music from Dev Narayan Saroliya, Kaluram Bamniya and Narayanji Delmia as non-diegetic elements lend more authenticity to the overall tone, treatment and pace of the small locality, its residents, and the social relations they share. The film effectively portrays the abject and pervasive influence of politics in public spaces and projects discourses around the issues of caste, gender, and class in the history of now.

Film: *Turup* / Checkmate (2017)

Director: Ektara Collective

Language: Hindi

Duration: 1:11:51

Watch: <https://cutt.ly/xB3kwrE>

☞ **Mr. Abhishek Roy lives in Dhenkanal, Odisha.**