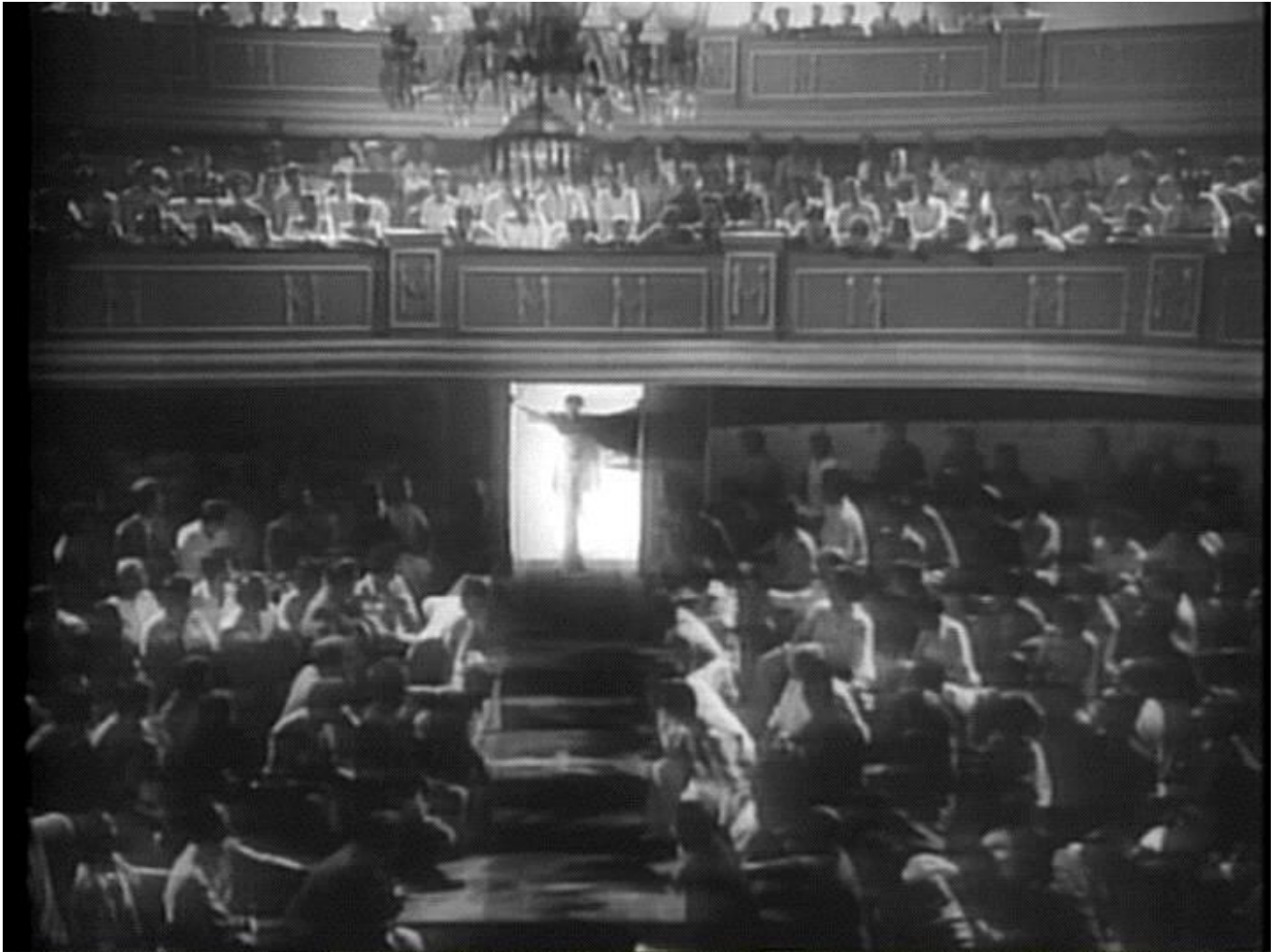


Article

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Projection of Urban Space in Indian Cinema



Pyasa (1957)

The concept of urbanity is closely associated with modernization. Rather than the infrastructural development, it is a socio-cultural movement of a society. Along with their lifestyle, it changes the minds of the people too. Urbanity has both positive and negative connotations. The same place can be a place of knowledge or freedom for someone; for others, it can be a place of homelessness.

Cinema, which deals with complicated relationships, has always been fascinated by depicting the unique setting, customs, way of life, and

social situations of urban and rural cultures. Academics often occupy the study of the connection between urbanity and film from two perspectives. Urbanity is defined in cinematic texts in the first, whereas cinematic production and dissemination take centre stage in the second perspective within an urban environment (Shiel & Fitzmaurice, 2001). In the creative minds, a city might be a character, metaphor, symbol, piece of history, or commodity. Since the turn of the 20th century, photography has allowed people to view cities in various ways. Cinema

presents a historical record of the developing urban infrastructural and behavioural image since it is a repository of the modern way of life. Cities are depicted in creative imaginations as people, metaphors, symbols, historical events, and objects. Since the turn of the twentieth century, there have been numerous methods to experience the city through a camera lens. The film, a reservoir of the modern way of life, provides a historical narrative of the evolving urban infrastructure and behavioural landscape. It is possible to perceive the energy of urban life through cinematic representations of cities. The idea of "Real" and "Reel" cities is receiving wide-ranging attention in the critical discussion of an increasing number of disciplines as the popularity of celluloid cities grows. It has been possible to combine the history of art, architecture, urban, social, and cinema studies in a new area of study called the history of the cinematic portrayal of the city (Maher 2010, 15). Film and urban experiences are related to each other in various ways, according to research on the subject by Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin. According to both, the film medium serves as a social institution that satisfies the urge for stimulation brought on by urban life's constant stress (Larsen 2010, 31). Cinema does not always act as a critic of the evolving urban landscape, but it can support audiences in navigating these new social contexts. Cinema, with its twin purposes, was essential to the development of urban society. On the one hand, it presents a fragmented image of the urban environment; on the other, it offers suggestions for managing urban pathologies. Film, in his opinion, can offer the idea that all this will suddenly burst apart, but most of the time, he concludes, it does not. While Walter Benjamin is "more optimistic: he is certain that film, by its fragmentation, has the redeeming power necessary to help the urban masses break the spell of modernity, to blow up 'our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railway stations and our factories'" (Benjamin 1977, 236; Larsen 2010, 31). Construction on the "imagined city" reached its peak in the 20th century. These imaginative depictions actively contributed to the proper investigation of city life. Even academics agree that city life can be imagined rather than

experienced in actual cities. Allan Siegal said that: "It would be erroneous to talk of the city as a singular unified social reality that we have all experienced, participated in, or have an understanding of. Such a city does not exist. More appropriate to the discussion are images of a city, a multifaceted city that represents ideological concepts, economic forces, and social spaces that reflect a diversity of cultural, historical and geographical markers" (Siegal 2003, 143).

While theorising modernity and urbanity in the context of cinema, Barbara Mennel sorted out two types of cinema engagement with the urban phenomenon or what she calls "emerging metropolis". Referring to George Simmel's sociological observations on the "effect of the modern metropolis on subjectivity that encapsulates the potential of the medium of film to express the characteristics of the city", Mennel illustrates how certain films projected "the sensory experience of the city through its "associative montage," a method which can capture the fragmented aspects of modern life in the metropolis". The second type of cinema engagement combines the contrast between the rural and the urban environment with a developmental narrative from rural to urban" (Mennel 2008, 25).



Do Bigha Zamin (1953)

Indian film has always been a stage for opposing dichotomies like tradition, modernisation, and urban and rural life. The figurative triumph of the rustic over the metropolis in the cinema tales expresses the rejection of modernity. It is interesting to note that for a short while, films like *Mother India* (1957), *Do Bigha Zamin* (1953), and *Pyaasa* (1957) established a pattern of limiting filmmaking to rural themes. Anytime urbanity is discussed in this

cinematic discourse, it always opposes the benefits of rural existence and pastoral aesthetics. Hence, Yves Thoraval rightly records that: “the films produced during the 1950s to 1960s are profoundly Indian and exposit the virtuous life of poor; while rich city dwellers are shown as Westernised egoistic and inveterate materialist” (Thoraval 2000, 50).

Critics like Ashish Nandy and Ranjani Mazumdar have identified the reasons for this type of cinematic representation in India in the fact that, in contrast to the West, urbanity in India is the extension of rurality; urban residents have always migrated from villages, and their detachment forced them to express themselves through cinema, especially the commercial and entertaining cinema of India (Nandy, 2001; Mazumdar, 2002).

Additionally, the revival of Indian nationalism that started in the 19th century and has now strongly relied on the natural and imagined remnants of rural India is another factor contributing to the development of Indian cultural awareness. The Indian liberation movement was the time when Indian villages were glorified. The opinions of Gandhi, the father of the nation, on the village were influential at this time. His ideas on the village brought a revolutionary change in the Indian nationalistic imagination. Gandhi believed that “if the villages perish, India will perish too. It will be no more India. Her mission in the world will get lost” (Joshi 2002, 2). Urbanity, for Gandhi, is a place of evil and corruption (Prakash 2002, 2). He said that: “We are inheritors of a rural civilisation. The vastness of our country, the vastness of the population, the situation and the climate of the country have, in my opinion, destined it for a rural civilisation... To uproot it and substitute for it an urban civilisation seems an impossibility” (Joshi 2002, 2).

The literary and aesthetic representation of the city and urbanity, according to scholars like Ashish Nandy, has a history that predates the relatively recent nationalist rule, notwithstanding such Gandhian celebrations of the countryside in the age of nationalism. From ancient time “the city has had a distinct and identifiable relationship with the village, and that dyadic bond has been an important theme in

classical plays, such as those of Bhasa, and epics such as Mahabharata” (Nandy 2001, 24).

This relationship was severed during colonialism, and Nandy claims that the mythmakers of the time were working to restore it (Nandy 2001, 24). However, the vision and development strategies of India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, who saw the village as a place of backwardness and ignorance, were the immediate and most noticeable aspect that led to the city's re-emergence in the national imaginary. He considers urbanisation as the most rational channel of modernisation. Expressing his village views, Nehru wrote a letter to Gandhi in 1945 - “I do not understand why a village should embody truth and non-violence. Normally, a village is backwards intellectually and culturally, and no progress can be made from a backward environment” (Prakash 2002, 3). Following Indian independence, the Neheruvian development policy strongly emphasised turning villages into towns. His fundamental guiding principle was to urbanise or modernise Indian villages. Nehru approached the city as a component of planning and development because “urbanisation meant modernisation, which was expected to lift India out of the morass of the past and set it on the road to progress.” The construction of Chandigarh as a representation of India's emancipation from historical traditions arose from his perception of history as a linear path of development and fulfilment and his trust in planning as a tool to achieve progress (Prakash 2002, 4). The ideology driving the Nehruvian model of socioeconomic development in independent India was this idea of progress and modernity. The planned implementation of this development plan resulted in the growth of towns, cities, markets, industries, and urban lifestyles. Ravi Vasudevan has provided a thorough overview of India's sociopolitical environment and how parallel and Bombay popular cinema mirror it. The earliest film to feature an Indian village is Satyajit Ray's *Pathar Panchali* (Nandy 2001, 17); however, in that same film, the railway tracks are used “as the vehicles to carry one into an extending universe of new experience” (Vasudevan 2010, 307). Urbanity eventually started to be represented in Indian films frequently.

“The city – urban space- became an increasingly important location for films in the 1950s: the site where survival and change, allurements and search were to be dramatised; it embodied the life-world of a new individual that cinema had to invent in the context of the post-independence modernisation” (Biswas 2007, 48).

Another aspect started to play a role in the rise of urban imagery in Indian cinema, in addition to the officially approved development narrative. That was the 'crisis' of Indian nationalism in the 1970s, which ultimately struck at the nexus of nationalism in the villages: "It was the crisis of Indian nationalism in the 1970s that led to Bombay cinema's reflection on urban life in terms that had not been feasible earlier. The aspirations of India's new leadership for the "development decades" had come to nought by the 1970s. Rapid increases in unemployment led to the emergence of social movements with strong urban roots across the nation. The belief in post-independence nationalism was questioned for the first time. In film representation, the village, essential to Gandhi's imagined constitution of anti-colonial nationalism, had begun to disappear. Urban space was now more widely acknowledged, especially for its centrality (Mazumdar 2007, xx). In Indian cinematic narratives, the dichotomy between the rural as residual and the urban as emergent has appeared frequently in various ways with varying tendencies towards either of the polarities. However, most commercial and entertaining movies are noted for their biased representation of the rural, which received enthusiastic responses from the rural audience and the urban cine-goers. The symbolic significance of the village-city duality in the context of Indian popular cinema has been aptly interpreted by Nandy: "... the village of the imagination has become a serene, pastoral paradise. It has become the depository of traditional wisdom and spirituality, the harmony of nature, intact community life and environmental sagacity- perhaps even a statement of Gandhian austerity, limits to want, and anti-consumerism. The village is no longer a village but a counterpoint to the city. India lives in its villages- social reformers and political activists love to say, usually as a glib, ideological ploy. That statement has

acquired a deeper meaning today. The village symbolises control over self; the city reeks of self-indulgence and the absence of self-restraint” (Nandy 2001, 13). However, this bipolar situation soon came to be added with another feature, which can be regarded as the undesired byproduct of the socio-economic development in the Nehruvian scheme. It is the emergence of slum areas and the speedy expansion of slum-dwellers on the liminal space between the city and the village. This has led to a situation where the village is no longer the *essential other* to conceive the planned and homogenous urbanity. However, the increasing differences and conflicts within the city began to paint the city as “the pre-eminent space of representation(s)” which is characterised by “ceaseless conflict of interests between two opposed energies, embodied, on the one hand, in transparent city that planners and administrators, architects and utopianists dream of bringing into being, and on the other hand, in the dense, obscure, opaque lived city of human experience” (Prasad 2007, 82). The city's population gradually split into two groups: the sophisticated and enlightened urban dwellers who live the urban lifestyle and the other type of people residing in expanded urban areas, which academics call unplanned cities. Conflict between these two factions was made into a movie plot in India. About this phase, Aruna Vasudeva commented, “In the 1970s and 80s, Bombay and other big cities have been marked by underworld activities, a rise in crime, smuggling, illicit fortunes, rape and prostitution.....A more serious problem is the degeneration and systematic denigration of the forces of law and order----the impact on cinema being even more pronounced--- which has resulted in an exaggerated portrayal of the general growing disenchantment with established institutions. Commercial cinema sees in this phenomenon a way of making money” (Thoraval 2000, 120).

Many parallel filmmakers like Satyajit Ray, Shyam Benegal, Govind Nihalani, Saeed Mirza, Ketan Mehta, and others opted to tell their stories outside of these oversimplified binary schemes, in contrast to the rural-urban and intended-unintended city dichotomies that have been exhaustively

depicted in commercial film. Their films' themes centre on many complicated, nuanced aspects of daily life in the urban environment.

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