Article

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Social Construction of an Indian Villain in Post-Colonial Bombay Cinema

Darr (1993)

I. Introduction

A villain can be defined as an antagonistic character in a narrative which defies established norms and represents the 'evil' against the 'good' incarnated by the classical hero. Over the years, Bombay cinema has presented a varied and layered structure of social deviance where straying from the norm is either by accident a product of halat (situation or circumstance) or by choice arising out of a notorious lineage. In the case of the former, the narrative creates a sympathy point for the villain by holding the circumstance responsible for the character's negativity. These situational deviants are often given a status close to a hero's and have been explained uniquely, typical of Indian celluloid and termed 'anti-hero'.

Bombay cinema invariably designs these negative characters in a manner where they reform themselves midway by associating with the hero. The interplay of various forms of deviance is the mainstay of Bombay cinema, where the 'good' in its quest for justice and order overpowers the 'evil' and, in the process, reforms the lesser evil. The 'good' is always presented as a reference point to assess the extent of deviance in both forms. These deviants have a world of their own and an ideology that they think would help them achieve their individual goals.

Villains in post-colonial Bombay cinema are not just characters, they are reflections of the society they belong to. The evolution of Indian society, particularly the transitional period from colonialism to independence, has significantly impacted the portrayal of these negative characters. The Indian history till the

1960s experienced a transitional period from colonialism to independence, significantly influencing the growth of the 1950s and thereafter reformist narratives. During these transitional decades, cultural expressions and formations carried political sentiments concerning imperialism, fascism and social transformation, which are mirrored in the portrayal of villains.[1]This phenomenon was, however, not limited only to Bombay cinema. Nation-wide movements around organised cultural responses to political events have been one of the key contributors to the growth of Indian cinema in general.

During the initial years after independence, when nation-building through social reforms became India's revered theme for growth, Bombay cinema's construction of evil was identified with individuals, institutions or forces that obstructed the broader national development objectives by either monopolising or usurping benefits designed for the poor and the disadvantaged. These countervailing economic forces mostly operated in the agrarian set-up as moneylenders or land grabbers. Masterpieces like *Do Bigha Zamin* (Two Acres of Land, 1953) and *Mother India* (1957) established a strong cultural interface of cinema with Indian society by skilfully capturing and narrating the stories of these exploitative economic forces.

An alternative approach to identify an evil could be through the analysis of its source in society and the extent to which the villain represents an evil social system. This refers to ideology, social stigma, cultural barriers, rural-urban divide, and society with a predatory and degenerated value system. The second set of evil forces is either the traditional rural patriarchs or the erstwhile zamindars losing out on social authority with the advent of modernity. The nature of these social deviants and their ideological basis changed as the society gradually moved away from independence and got delinked from its colonial past.

The transition of nature and the philosophical basis of evil from colonial to independent India could draw an analogy from Premchand's 1935 *nibandh* (Essay) called 'Mahajani Sabhyata' that explains the substitution of white *Mahajan* (usurers) of colonial times by black ones of post-colonial India[2]. This explains the continuation of exploitation with new exploiters in their changing *avatars* [3]Since evil's formation and growth are contextual and time-sensitive, sociopolitical and economic contexts form their own sociopaths and deviants at regular intervals. A villain could also be a representative sample of a specific mode of production with changing economic variables.

II. Social forces influencing the evolution of an Indian villain

Villains are critical to conflict narratives and are the biggest predictor of complexities. They are a product of time and circumstances and a reflection of the political economy of contemporary society - whether it is Sukhi Lala (*Mother India*, 1957), Gabbar Singh (*Sholay*, 1975) or Rahul (*Darr*, 1993). The celluloid has picked up the evil that society has already constructed. The 'reel' has made the 'real' relatable. The villains in Bombay cinema have not only represented contemporary social narratives but have emerged from the country's changing political and economic contexts.

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[1] Damodaran, Sumangala, 'The Radical Impulse: Music in the Tradition of Indian People's Theatre Association', Tulika Books, New Delhi, 2017, p.5

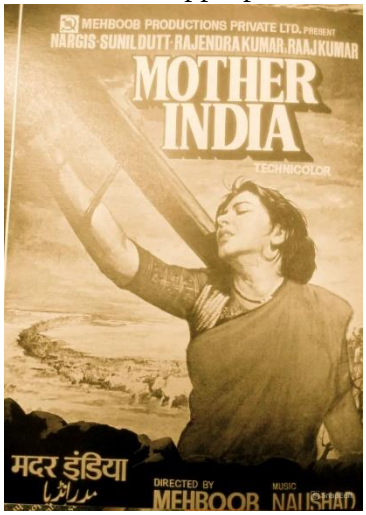
[2] Sen, Mrinal, 'Montage: Life, Politics, Cinema', Seagull Books, Calcutta, 2018, p.46

[3] This is further explained by Rahim Chacha (Yunus Parvez) in the 1975 blockbuster '*Deewaar*' (The Wall) where he explains Vijay (Amitabh Bachchan) about the changing faces of exploitative forces that reappear over time in their different incarnations; when he says, '*log kehte hein zamana badal gaya....maine to sirf hapta lene walon ko badalte dekha hey*'.

During the 1940s, as discussed earlier, cultural expressions across the country, including filmmaking, had intensified fierce attacks on the capitalist way of life. More than an individual a mode of production and consumption, benefiting a select few was the source of evil. There were examples where the individual was presented as a villain for being a collaborator with an exploitative colonial and imperialist system. The 1942 Mehboob Khan's blockbuster *Roti* (Bread) was an excellent presentation of the dangers of opting for a capitalist and cash-based economy against a blissful barter system-driven traditional life. During the climax of the film, the protagonist dies of thirst in the desert while he is storing gold ingots inside his car. The desert signifies the aridity of greed.[4]The film metaphorically warns a ready-to-be independent India not to opt for uncontrolled accumulation and greed but to continue on its traditional path of morality, simplicity, and altruism.

With the onset of the 50s, the promises of the much-publicised and awaited land redistribution were losing ground. The most critical and immediate challenge independent India faced was securing land for millions of dispossessed peasantry. A sizeable percentage of the 'disempowered' Kings and Zamindars, after losing their Estates in 1951, stepped into politics to regain political authority and compensate for the loss of their economic power. By virtue of political proximity, many of these erstwhile Zamindars and Kings influenced decision-making on land reforms to either slow them down or reverse the process. This was when another set of intermediaries was created who connived with moneylenders to grab the land that was being transferred to the tenant farmers. Moneylenders were conduits of such illegal land transfer, sowing the initial seeds of urban poverty as in Bimal Roy's *Do Bigha Zamin*, a heart-wrenching account of the dispossessed peasantry. When zamindary was abolished, these sets of land grabbers emerged to take advantage of the confusion with regards to the ownership rights of tenant farmers, a confusion caused by the fact that the reckless zamindars have washed off the obligation to record the rights of the tenant farmers. Bombay cinema approached these post-colonial agrarian vulnerabilities differently, where reckless zamindars and the land grabbing intermediaries as in *Saheb Bibi Aur Ghulam* (The Master, the Wife, and the enslaved person, 1962) and *Do Bigha Zamin* (1953) respectively accepted the major share of evil.

The conflicts relating to land ownership and forcible land grabbing continue resurfacing as a stellar theme in Bombay cinema. Tigmanshu Dhulia's *Paan Singh Tomar* (2012) depicts the life of an Army man of the same name who turned *Baaghi* (Rebel) when the revenue administration failed to restore his ancestral land that his relatives grabbed. Paan Singh's recourse to guns and violence is a result of a chronic systemic failure where Paan Singh is only a representative victim. The film is a brutal exposition of the powerful feudal system of resource appropriation caused due to a disempowered modern state, a pan-Indian narrative of failed record keeping by a subjugated instrument of power.



Mehboob's magnum opus, *Mother India (1957),* presents two varying shades of wickedness. One form of flagitiousness is presented through Sukhi Lala (Kanhaiyalal), the parasitical and vicious moneylender, and the other is Birju (Sunil Dutt), a rebel who takes the law into his hands at the end. During the time when *Mother India* was made, Birju was probably not considered evil. It could be for two reasons. The first was Sunil Dutt's reputation at that time of being a hero who has always been a nice guy; secondly, Birju's character was designed as a rebel who was always ready to fight against any form of social evil. He was able to draw the audience's sympathy for his retaliatory action against Sukhi Lala's daughter, whom his mother, Radha (Nargis), considered immoral and killed him in the end. This differential attribution to wickedness opens up an

[4] Ahmed, Rauf, 'Mehboob Khan: The Romance of History', Wisdom Tree, New Delhi, 2008, p.45.

interesting angle to the conversation on who is a villain or how a villainous character is defined. The narrative offers two sets of negativity. Birju's negativity is situation-driven, while Sukhi Lala is a habitual exploiter, an evil on an everyday basis. Therefore, a character does not necessarily become a villain by way of a rare wrongdoing.

How does the narrative of a time create and evolve its evil? In a post-colonial scenario, characters like Sukhi Lala also represented a form of evil in agrarian India where moneylenders or land grabbers could be seen as 'friendly villains'. The friendly villain would refer to a person whose evil intentions are camouflaged by his reassuring and supposedly sympathetic gestures. They appear 'friendly' as they are always available for people in need; 'villain' as their hidden agenda is either to grab the land or to appropriate any immovable, mortgage-able property. In rural India, these intermediaries enjoy a tremendous amount of trust and confidence from villagers who overlook the hidden wickedness and seldom sever their economic ties with these intermediaries. For this practice of 'service at doorsteps at any given time', institutional money lending and other market intervention services by government programmes have achieved limited success.

While moneylenders and the land grabbers, the colonial intermediaries, had a smooth transition and played a part in shifting the exploitative cobweb to independent India, a new set of post-colonial collaborators and opportunists emerged. Post-independence, filmmakers deviated from the IPTA (Indian People's Theatre Association) approach to locating the evil in colonial intermediaries, like the village headmen, landlords or moneylenders, which was a distinct departure from the existing tradition of literary writing. They argued that in a free nation, continuing to locate the evil, enemy, or villain in the colonial remnants was an exercise in futility. Independence brought in a new set of vested interest groups; therefore, finding the enemy within the characters who may not have an exploitative legacy is crucial.[5] Postcolonial India, with improved economic instruments, established its own 'enemy within' that was largely delinked from the colonial past.

In Mrinal Sen's *Mrigayaa* (Royal Hunt, 1976), while Govind Sardar (Sajal Roy), the village moneylender, is the colonial intermediary, the enemy within is Dora (Sadhu Meher), his tribal henchman, who connives with the colonial forces to eliminate Shalpu (Samit Bhanja), a young freedom fighter of the same village. Sen impressively located the villain beyond the feudal remnants from whom the colonial exploitative forces draw their strength. While colonial literature identified the villain or the enemy invariably in the exploitative economic institutions, Sen went a step ahead in locating them within common men in the society who were not part of those institutions but extended their evil dispensations for *mala fide* gains. While Govind Sardar is an easily recognisable enemy who harvested from an exploitative money-lending system that empowered him to forcefully grab the land of the loan defaulter, Dora deviated from the collective agenda of the time and became its biggest opponent as well as the beneficiary.[6]

Caste barriers and deprivations, and religious bigotry, the other nagging colonial wrong, also managed a safe passage to independent India, though it was not as visible as the wrath of the landlords or moneylenders unless it was manifested in caste-based violence. Pre-independence was the time when law and society, especially the higher caste, opposed inter-caste marriage and firmly supported the ostracism of the untouchables[7]. In Himanshu Rai's *Achhut Kanya* (Untouchable Maiden, 1936), the Brahminical domination could not be challenged, and the climax was designed in a manner where Kasturi, the Dalit girl (Devika Rani), sacrifices her life. In Bimal Roy's *Sujata* (1959), on the contrary, the Dalit girl (Nutan) was being disgraced

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[5] Sen, Manjula, 'Mrinal Sen', Cinema in India, NFDC Publication, Bombay, Annual 1991, p.100.

[6] Patnaik, Sanjoy, 'In Search of the *Invisible Left* in Mrinal Sen's Cinematic Canvas', Mrinal Sen@100, IIMC Monograph Series, December 2023, pp 57 - 65

[7] Erik Barnaum, S Krishnaswamy, 'Indian Film', Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1980, p.141

for her lower caste lineage though in the most subtle manner[8]. Looking at how caste narratives were handled, it appears that makers of the time were cautiously courageous to dare a confrontation with the powerful high-caste patriarchy. Besides, filmmakers like Gurudutt (*Pyaasa*, 1957) and Raj Kapoor (*Awaara*, 1951) placed the evil within the parasitical petty bourgeoisie, having increased access to resources within the broader societal framework.

As Madhav Prasad writes, Bombay cinema narratives, especially during the 1950s and 60s, 'was dominated by a form that can be described as feudal family romance'. This narrative form reflected a mutually beneficial co-existence of the colonial elite and the bourgeoisie in independent India.[9]. It is not easy to deduce whether it was a fallout of the above nexus or caused by a general sense of dysphoria. However, the dreams gathered during independence started to break by the end of the first decade of independence. The country started to experience the emergence of a repressive state apparatus contradicting the promises made during independence, making 'corrupt politicians' a pet evil character for Bombay cinema and, in other languages, cinema. Bombay cinema of the time experimented with narratives that presented democracy vs feudalism, substance vs hypocrisy, and opportunism vs human values. Evil was represented by the new capitalists of the time, who, by accessing technology, resources, and power, could control modes of production and establish cultural pre-eminence. A befitting example would be Mr.Ghose (Rehman), the publisher of *Pyaasa* (1957), who, in anticipation of financial gains and cultural recognition, tries to establish how he promoted the poet Vijay (Gurudutt) when the poet was alive, whereas the truth is just the reverse.

III. Bombay villain redefined during the 1970s

The 1970s is a defining decade in Bombay cinema primarily due to it being a tumultuous time in Indian political history. During this time, the country fought a decisive war and faced the first and most daunting challenges of poverty and hunger, inflation, unemployment, industrial unrest and militancy, black marketing of essential commodities and widespread corruption. When citizens were disenchanted by the unmet promises of the Congress Party and the Indian Communists were calling for reforms, Indira Gandhi called for 'Garibi Hatao' in 1972, which only remained limited to a populist slogan. Social disorder and systemic anarchy were the key contributors to the construction of villains in Bombay cinema of the time.

Though not a big commercial grosser or one of the best-known movies of the 70s, *Samaj ko Badal Dalo*, (Let Us Change the society, 1970) is certainly one of the earlier films to have dealt with simmering hunger and common man's barred access to food because of uncontrolled black marketing and hoarding of essential commodities. Post-independence, the country, for the first time, tasted hunger and starvation on such a gigantic scale. Such was the extent of hunger that a mother, Chhaya (Sharda), had no other option but to poison her kids to relieve them of the pain of hunger. The film presented, though in the most melodramatic fashion, how a slowly modernising India was replacing human labour with machine, leading to massive unemployment and how modernity became a predictor of debilitating morality, greed and dishonesty. The film was vociferous in its critique of the indifferent and unsympathetic capitalist forces that almost controlled the democratic institutions and justice system. The representative face of the evil was the mill owner considered an enemy of the workers.

The 1970s was also the time when people started to question the effectiveness of socialism as an egalitarian system of economic governance, though capitalism was not considered an alternative. The growing disparity questioned the idea of social equality. Hrishikesh Mukherjee's *Namak Haram* (Traitor, 1973) was a

[8] By the time *Sujata* was made, the Special Marriages Act 1954 and The Untouchability (Offences) Act 1955 had been promulgated liquidating the high caste domination to certain extent.

[9] Prasad, Madhava, M, 'Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction', Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1998/2022, p.55

unique endeavour to restore popular trust in socialism as the most preferred way of life. Set in an industrial background, the film narrates three eternal and intergenerational truths: capitalism must guard against middle-class conscience, internal division of capitalism carries the seeds of self-transformation, and the timelessness of divide and rule as a means to demolish popular resistance. The film adopts a Gandhian way of resistance against the evil that is capitalism. All the major players in the narrative, Somu (also Chandra, Rajesh Khanna), Vijay (Amitabh Bachchan) and Simi, Vijay's girlfriend, undergo a silent and non-aggressive reform of conscience to bring in self-realisation within the evil. In the movie, Mukherjee does not take a stand against capitalist forces but does offer a soul-searching path.

The 1975 blockbuster *Deewaar* (The Wall) narrates an almost similar discourse on the evil industrial forces. Skilfully employing the divide-and-rule approach, the factory owner (Kamal Kapoor) completely breaks the strong resolve of the trade union leader Anand Babu (Satyen Kapoo) by kidnapping his family. The factory owner not only decimated the labour strike for bonuses in a particular place, but the bigger damage it inflicted was germinating the seeds of popular mistrust against trade union leadership. The skilled scriptwriter Salim–Javed picked up a famous slogan used the previous year against a political party of the time and replaced it with Anand Babu, which goes like this: '*gali gali mein shor hey, Anand Babu chor hey*' (A shout goes in every lane that Anand babu is a thief) to present popular discontent against a trade union leader who cannot be trusted.

During the 1970s, Bombay cinema sourced different forms of evil primarily from the political economy of India. The evil was nurtured and endorsed by a modern oligarchic state. The representative villains of the time flourished in an environment where modern welfare institutions failed to negotiate and balance citizens' rights because it was reserved as a private space of the capitalist forces. On a separate plane, the systemic lapses or the failure of modern welfare institutions were narrated through the helplessness of an introspective doctor (Bhaskar Banerjee, portrayed by Amitabh Bachchan) in *Anand* (Bliss) in 1971. The representation of evil during most of the 1970s looked through the lens of a middle class that was apprehensive of its moral and ethical supremacy being challenged by substituting social equality with private property.

IV. Changing faces of Bombay villains in post-liberal Indian society

The glorification of evil was one of the many ways that Bombay cinema welcomed the liberalisation of the 1990s. The narrative constructed the conflict primarily between two sets of evil where the lesser evil annihilates the relatively bigger and the more immoral one (*Gangs of Wasseypur*, 2012). The post-liberal narratives also provided multiple shades of negativity: a) revolving the story around the evil, b) interplay of the ethical incorrectness of two sets of evil, and c) soft deviation from the gospel of *satyamev jayate* by presenting the conflict at two levels; an alliance of feudal and modern instruments of power, and the conflict between two forms of modern forces in their support for and fight against law-breaking feudal forces. The liberal India exhibited a queer contrast in the rural – urban division as regards the construction and location of evil. While the urban was guided more by either grabbing or inventing productive opportunities or both, the rural evil was a product of feudal and political nexus along communal lines.

The changing value system eulogised evil and considered it masculine. The post-liberal youth was not always socially and politically correct. The post-liberal youth rarely sacrificed; they were Machiavellian,

unlike their counterparts in the 50s. For this new formation community came prior to individual gains. Rahul (Darr, 1993), the post-liberal youth with a disturbed childhood, unable to accept failure in his romantic advances, plans to eliminate his romantic adversary. What makes the character of Rahul (Shah Rukh Khan) so significant is how the audience receives it. Even if Rahul defied the traits of a traditional lover and was unconventional, the popular craze for this character seemed to be in sync with the post-liberal expectations of aggression and the notion of 'by any means'.

The quintessential feature of the post-liberal evil had its genesis in the pre-eminence and free play of market forces that were primarily responsible for the growth of a private and elite state dominated by oligarchic cartels and interest groups. This has resulted in reduced state capacity and a consequent governance deficit and restricted citizen access to rights and justice[10]. Caste conflict, land grabbing and gang war resurfaced in new forms where the clientele was not limited to the urban middle class. Unlike the caste narratives of the 50s and 60s, where the boy belonged to a higher caste, invariably Brahmin, and the girl was a Dalit, the post-liberal caste conflict was rechristened as honour killing, where the girl's family eliminated the boy who was from a lower caste for the sake of honour. Priyadarshan's *Aakrosh* (Outrage, 2010) is a gripping account of a conflict between the CBI investigating an honour killing and the village feudal forces supported by the local police to hush up evidence of murder. The evil here is a collective of rural patriarchs, local police and officials operating under a mutual protection network. Like CBI, in this case, in Prakash Jha's *Gangajal* (The Holy Water, 2003), Sadhu Yadav's criminal empire was challenged and later demolished by a modern instrument of power. In Kabeer Kaushik's 2005 film *Seher* (The Morning), the STF of Lucknow used modern technology and gadgets to track down the evil, Gajraj (Sushant Singh), whose political ambitions were representative of a post-liberal feudal evil.

The post-liberal evil underwent a metamorphosis in terms of its nature and spread, which dispersed across the length and breadth of the country. The relocation was more towards the rural areas of north India, mostly Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The evil in these rural and semi-urban spaces originated mainly from the rejuvenated remnants of a feudal and patriarchal order in the form of caste oppression, gender violence, land grabbing, kidnapping and contract killing. One can draw an exciting correlation between economic liberalisation and its 'state withdrawal' narrative, leading to the increased role of the deep state and the unregulated non-state players in privatising natural resources, including mineral resources, and the communalisation of upper caste Hindus, especially in north India[11].

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[10] Patnaik, Sanjoy, 'Of Reels, Romance and Retakes: Social Narratives of Cinema in Odisha', Routledge, (UK and New York), August 2023, p.95

[11] Patnaik, Sanjoy, 'Of Reels, Romance and Retakes: Social Narratives of Cinema in Odisha', Routledge, (UK and New York), August 2023, p.96.