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### The (In)Domitable Spirit of a Woman: Realistic Contemporary Cinema

Social enterprise is at its most impactful when the goal is empowerment, not relief.

-Neil Blumenthal

Women have been playing a pivotal role in the film industry. When a woman was not on the stage the men had to garb themselves to portray her existence in the lives of the men who were playing the lead roles. Time took a turn. The women evolved not only as the lead character of the movies but also there are a number of women directors, producers, sound recordist, stunt masters, choreographers etc. in Bollywood today. One such woman was Fatma Begum, the first Indian woman director whose directorial debut was a fantasy film *Bulbul-e-Paristan*, directed in 1926. The wheels of change turned faster, as a few more women braved the strong waves of disdain and, went a step ahead by calling the shots from behind the camera! Historically it is not an easy feat to find the complete collection of the films made by the women directors in Indian cinema. The women filmmakers have spun intensely deep, soul touching and sometimes nerve racking movies that are unnerving the gender inequality prevalent across many levels in our society! The change in mainstream cinema brought about by these women directors is gathering pace and has the public taking note and appreciate their efforts. The paper explores two aspects: one the rise of women directors in realistic Indian cinema and second the theme of

motivation and inspiration exalted by Ashwini Iyer Tiwari's directorial debut – *Nil Battey Sannata*, portraying the beautiful relationship of a mother-daughter bond. It is appreciated that the present day women filmmakers are more sensitive to the various nuances of life experiences and are not hesitant in exploring these challenges.

#### Introduction: The Indian cinema

Much has been written about the Indian films right from the silent era to the contemporary period. Cinema in India started with evolution of bioscopes and connected the viewers deeply with what we identify as Bollywood today. Since India has its own diversity in language and culture, cinema in regional languages has also played a magnificent role. Films in Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Kannada, Marathi and Bengali, to name a few, have a great role to play where both masala and parallel cinema are concerned. The first full-length motion picture in India was produced by Dadasaheb Phalke, Phalke is seen as the pioneer of the Indian film industry and a scholar of India's languages and culture. He employed elements from Sanskrit epics to produce his *Raja Harishchandra* (1913), a silent film in Marathi. The female characters in the film were played by male actors. Only one print of the film was made, for showing at the Coronation Cinematograph on 3 May 1913. It was a commercial success. The first silent film in Tamil, *Keechaka Vadham* was made by R. Nataraja Mudaliar in 1916.<sup>1</sup> The talking films were crowd pullers and the tickets were very affordable. There were several films in all languages which have shown that this means of entertainment was not located in a particular region but covered the nation under the British rule. Certain films under the British raj were also prohibited from the screens. Late 1940s till 1960s is considered the Golden Age of Indian cinema by film historians.

India's 100-year film history spans colonialism, independence, partition and globalization. A realist Indian cinema emerged parallel to the mainstream as early as the 1930s. Where films depicting epic stories such as *Raja Harishchandra*, then religious epic about *Sant Tukaram* grew popular among the audience, a number of realistic films were also produced. Films, such as *Raithu Bidda* in Telugu representing the peasant uprising in zamindari system under the British raj, were banned. Indian realist cinema is also identified as art cinema, as parallel cinema, alternative cinema and lately as auteur cinema.

Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay writes, "Seventy-five years ago, several years after a ginger start was made by a group of writers who organized the first Progressive Writer's Association Conference in 1936, when the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) was formally inaugurated in 1943, no one imagined the deep impact it would leave on successive generations of artists". People who joined this group came from different fields of art in creative pursuit thereby strengthening the progressive forces. IPTA was born during Quit India movement and it became a pan-India movement within no time.<sup>2</sup>

A number of creative artists, directors, producers, lyricist, and composers were associated with IPTA. The oeuvre on social realism coming from the defined group was enormous. Realist IPTA plays, such as *Nabanna (Harvest)* by Bijon Bhattacharya in 1944 was the first to bring realism in Indian cinema, exemplified by Khwaja Ahmad Abbas's *Dharti Ke Lal (Children of the Earth)* in 1946. Films like *Neecha Nagar*, *Meghe Dhake Tara*, *Mother India*, *Subarnarekha* are just a few films which are realistic films when the film industry was a fledgling.

Realism is a concern for fact or reality and rejection of the impractical and visionary while reality is the state of being actual or real. A realist art cinema becomes a part of a culture of civil society which is in practice of society and is removed from the wider weave of social

and political subjectivity. The social and aesthetic realism of such films refers to poverty and work, the emergence of the middle class, crime, violence, and the law while arguing for their sustained and critical attention to forms of fantasy. The Parallel Cinema movement began to take shape from the late 1940s to the 1960s, by pioneers such as Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak, Bimal Roy, Mrinal Sen, Khwaja Ahmad Abbas, Chetan Anand, Guru Dutt and V. Shantaram. This period is considered part of the 'Golden Age' of Indian cinema. This cinema borrowed heavily from the Indian literature of the times, hence became an important study of the contemporary Indian society.

In the later years, Shyam Benegal merits a mention for bringing realism and reality to the Indian cinema. *Ankur* (Seedling) was one movie which juxtaposed the powerful against the powerless, domination against subjugation, inequality and injustice. His movies thereafter brought to the audience what the nation would have liked to achieve. Another milestone of Benegal was *Manthan (the Churning)*. These films differentiated Indian cinema into mainstream cinema and alternative cinema. The achievement of realism in a film becomes a mark of value, sincerity and truthfulness on the part of the filmmaker and the authenticity of the work presented.

#### Indian Cinema and Women Directors

The women evolved not only as the lead character of the movies but also there are a number of women directors, producers, sound recordist, stunt masters, choreographers etc. in Bollywood today. As filmmakers, women date back to World War I, but in terms of numbers, they are minimal.<sup>3</sup>

Shoma Chatterji in her article states, 'If and when auteur critics and film scholars turn to the study of women directors, they typically look for ways in which women directors conform to or

diverge from patterns followed by men directors'. Within the patriarchal system women directors have made an arduous journey in the Indian cinema though they did manage to carve a niche for themselves working silently. Readings on women directors are much compared with the kind of films made with a masculine attribute whereas the women directors have portrayed harsher subjects with much sensitivity.

Male directors shift genres more smoothly and fluidly than their female counterparts. Judith Mayne observes that "surprisingly little attention has been paid to the function and position of the woman director." In fact, the entire concept of authorship itself, traced back to Cahiers du Cinema's auteur theory transported from France to England, and America, is historically encumbered with patriarchal overtones. Kaja Silverman has stated that Roland Barthes, while announcing the "death of the author", sought to elide not only the author as an institution, but also as the occupant of an exclusively male position.<sup>3</sup>

Fatima Begum, the mother of actress Zubeida, formed her own film company, Fatma Films (1926) and later, Victoria-Fatma Films. She directed six films: *The Nightingale of Fairyland*, *Heer Ranjha*, *The Goddess of Fate*, *Shakuntala* and two others. '*Bulbul-e-Paristan*' that released in 1926, became the first Indian film to be directed by a female director

Some other women directors were Jaddan bai, P. Bhanumathi Ramakrishna, Shobhana Samarth, K. Savitri, Manju De, Arundhati Devi. The problem is that the repertoire of Indian cinema produced by these women directors is unavailable to the masses. Considering the times they worked within, the ambience within the film industry everywhere was not conducive at all to women directors. Producers chose them as actresses so most of them had to produce their own films at great risk.

The wheels of change turned faster, as a few more women braved the strong waves of disdain and, went a step ahead by calling the shots from behind the camera! Sadly, our cinema has conditioned people in a certain way that they cannot get past the 'Barbie doll' image of a woman! In the early days, one could count female directors on one's hand. The Eighties mark a defining moment in the entry of women directors. The women donning the mark as directors were educated, urban, progressive, and contemporary even if were distanced in terms of geography, background, training and age. Their films often, not always, reveal a feminine point of view, are expressive of a feminine 'voice', collectively presenting, consciously or otherwise, a feminine sensibility distanced from the masculine sensibility. These women point out possibilities of women's statements/comments/opinions about the patriarchal society in which they live from the specific discursive context of cinema, and how these possibilities can be translated into actualities. These, in turn, give "insight into the specific structures of patriarchal power and the possibilities of resistance to it." However, they openly refused to be identified as just women directors and is to be understood in the larger context of spectatorship. The same applies to their hating to be labelled as feminist filmmakers or as filmmakers who make feminist films. Because, it is problematic for any creative filmmaker, especially if she happens to be a woman, to take up positions which might alienate certain sections of a politically heterogeneous audience.

This world comprised of Vijaya Mehta, Sai Paranjpye, Prema Karanth, Aparna Sen, Kalpana Lajmi and Aruna Raje to name a few. The first three women have their origins in theatre and were well trained in performance art. Sai Paranjpye and Aparna Sen glorified art in cinema. Sai paranjpye's *Sparsh* touched a beautiful subject on how intense love in a friendship is and sometimes, it takes a difficult path to emerge between a couple. *36 Chowringhee Lane*, directed

by Aparna Sen is a memorable film which highlights human expectations and disappointments. Despite being Aparna Sen's directional debut, this movie won her the Best Director Award at the Indian National Film Awards. Most of Sen's directorial films are based on her own story and screenplay.

Aruna Raje is the only one to have received formal training in cinema. Earlier in her career, she co-directed with her husband but subsequently turned an independent director.

In later years, more women joined the firebrands as wonderful directors. Revathi, Mira Nair, Gurinder Chadha, Deepa Mehta, Reema Katgi, Gauri Shinde and Lakshmy Ramakrishnan are just a few names. Their success at reaching into the core of people's heart and mind is ascribed to how deeply they perceive human emotions whether it is love or/and hate, happiness, sadness, euphoria, anger, objectivity and, wickedness – name them all – a woman feels each of them intensely and deeply.

The exploration of a recent film, *Nil Battey Sannata*, by a new director, Ashwiny Iyer Tiwari in present times highlights one of the most important nation/state political aspect of education among the underprivileged. However, the director has conveniently converted the issue into a mother-daughter story which abounds in mother's aspirations for her young daughter.

#### Nil Battey Sannata: An Analysis

Motherhood encompasses wide ranging emotions. One moment a mother loves having the opportunity to be close to her daughter but sometimes feels as if she has been taken advantage of by the expectations of the relationship. She loves feeling needed and sharing intimacy with her daughter but also feels overwhelmed by her daughters' dependency. This is a

complex relationship mixed with love and affection, pleasure, conflict, responsibility, reassurance and a lot of connection. The daughters' connection with her mother has a lifelong impact on her sense of self and well-being. In the contemporary scenario where daughters' need a direction, they may find their mothers' preoccupation with their own struggles to be a source of resentment. Admiration for the mothers' accomplishment comes later when the daughter begins to see the mother as a human being different from self. It becomes important for both to understand that a mother may have less emotional energy for her children when preoccupied, yet the connection and communication that she has with them keeps the bond nurturing. The primary responsibility of a mother to be a role model and source of advice & comfort to her daughter remains the same despite changes in social, cultural and economic norms.

In 2015, Ashwiny Iyer Tiwari, in her directorial debut *Nil Battey Sannata* brought to fore a simple story and left an indelible mark on the masses. The same year, the film was remade in Tamil as *Amma Kanakku*, with Iyer returning to direct. The following year, it was remade in Malayalam as *Udaharanam Sujatha*. It was translated in English as *The New Classmate*. The title of the movie significantly means good for nothing because literally zero divided by zero has no value. The phrase from the Hindi has captured the essence portrayed in the film. The film's theme is a person's right to dream and change their lives, irrespective of social status.

Chanda works as a maid, but she dreams that her daughter Apeksha a.k.a Appu will finish high school and get to college, to strive for a better future. However, Appu has no aspiration of the kind. Her mindset is exactly as the limits society has put on her: she is resigned to be a maid for the rest of her life. This thought motivates Chanda to do everything to create for her daughter a better tomorrow. With the help and advice of one of her employer, a physician, Chanda comes up with a plan to hopefully get Appu to be interested in school and not drop out. Since she

herself was a high school dropout, she decides to go back to school herself, actually to be in the same class as her daughter. She believes that by doing so she can become a challenge to Appu, or they can build a shared interest, or just to learn the subject well enough to assist her to clear her class tenth exams. Things of course don't turn out as she has hoped. Appu not only hates the idea of having her mother in the same class but also the fact that her mother learnt faster, was more interested in academics and muster energy to study while working.

Apu rekindles her interest in school and begins to treat her mother with respect, having realised that she can perform well if she possesses the will. She brings her mother back to school and the duo finish their tenth year of education together. Appu begins to appreciate her mother's intention and sacrifice, and starts to weave her dream and change her own future. Apu finally appears for her IAS exams and sits through the interview informing the panel that her inspiration is her mother.

There are many instances in the film that show that even if you think you are a 'Nil Battey Sannata' which means 'good for nothing', the right outlook can make all the difference in your life. In spite of the fact that Chanda was just a maid and a menial worker, she dreamt and dreamt big. She explains to her daughter the importance of dreaming by saying, "*Hamare paas agar zindagi me age badhne ke lie kuch bhi hai na, toh bas yahi hai, hamara sapna aur ye hamse koi nahi chin sakta*". With the backdrop of the Taj Mahal in a distant, Chanda's dream is as elusive as the seeming mirage of the grand architecture but her daughter proves herself.

The truth is that one should have hope or "Apeksha" from oneself in life to forge ahead. Ashwiny I. Tiwari during an interview with Indiwire, stated that India is a country where 38 percent of girls drop out of school by the eighth grade. Writing her own script, Tiwari's unique

and interesting story brings out the hopeless mindset of the poor: why study if your life is prescribed, why dream if you know you can't see it fulfilled?

The story is realistic, stirring up empathy and showing viewers the boxed-in trajectory of life among the working poor in India. The movie received rave reviews. Kunal Guha of the *Mumbai Mirror* wrote, "It's rare to come across films that force you to keep aside your yardsticks of what a good film is and dive into the experience". Suparna Sharma of *Deccan Chronicle* called it a "real film in a real setting about real people that delivers several empowering, powerful messages".

## Conclusion

The women directors today are able to express themselves more freely compared to the women directors of the yesteryears. Women have not had an easy trajectory in the field of direction. The focus has been to celebrate womanhood subtly. They have handled varying subjects ranging from man-woman relationship to mother-daughter bonding or a woman-woman relationship with a lot of sensitivity, empathy and passion. Their dealing with harsher subjects of life and society in India have only emboldened them. The women filmmakers have spun intensely deep, soul touching and sometimes nerve racking movies that are unnerving the gender inequality prevalent across many levels in our society! The change in mainstream cinema brought about by these women directors is gathering pace and has the public taking note and appreciate their efforts. The achievement of women directors through realism in films becomes a mark of value, sincerity and truthfulness on the part of the filmmaker and the authenticity of the work presented. Thus, Films as a social enterprise can aid in empowering the women of the

Indian society rather than only being a source of entertainment and the role of women directors is immensely laudable.

Notes:

1.Susmita Dasgupta. Towards a Theory of the Indian Popular Cinema - Exploring the Need For Moving Beyond Western Film Theories. <https://www.academia.edu/3831469/>. Retrieved 01 June 2019.

2.Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay. <https://thewire.in/.../past-continuous-why-ipta-has-a-special-place-in-indias-cultural>. Retrieved 18 June 2018.

3.Shoma Chatterji. <https://criticsunion.com/2018/07/10/women-directors-in-indian-cinema/>. Retrieved 3 June 2019.

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