

Indian Economic Transition through Bollywood Eyes

Hindi films and how they have reflected changes in

India's political economy¹

Amir Ullah Khan and Bibek Debroy

Abstract

Bollywood presents a fascinating picture. In a little over hundred years, the Hindi film industry has grown steadily to reach enormous proportions. Hindi films are now seen in nearly 13,000 cinema halls all over the country, and by nearly 100 million filmgoers every week all over the world. The Indian economy has grown steadily too. The days of the Hindu rate of growth over, the country has seen several important changes in policy especially over the last decade of the 20th century and the economy grew leaps and bounds.

It has often been argued that economic reforms are difficult in India because liberalization has not been sold to the masses. Hence, there is no popular support for reforms. Reforms are perceived to be top down and there has been no attempt to make out a case for liberalization (unlike in other countries like Turkey) that is bottom up. This is a failure on the part of the government, as well as on the part of other stakeholders like industry. Any discussion of reforms is, therefore, restricted to the English language press, and within that, pink papers.

Reforms don't just mean opening up of insurance or divesting equity in public sector undertakings. Since 1947, India has had successes in the economic sphere. But these successes are insignificant compared to what could have been achieved. The poor and the disadvantaged have not benefited from growth by as much as they should have and this is witnessed in sectors

¹ This paper emerges out of a multi-media film presented by Bibek Debroy, Director (Research), RGICS and Amir Ullah Khan, Director, Asia, International Policy Network for the April 2002 seminar on India's Political Economy held by the Rajiv Gandhi Institute for Contemporary Studies. Details on this media presentation can be obtained from the producer Zafar H Anjum – contact zafar@policynetwork.net or editor Rachna Mittal – rachnamt@yahoo.com

as diverse as agriculture, industry, the financial sector, infrastructure, education, and health and law reform.

Films, more than any another form of popular culture, reflect the socio-economic milieu and changes in policy. While not necessarily directed towards communicating an economic message, beginning with the 1950s and right down to the 1990s, films have depicted economic problems. Some of the more important examples have been Awara (1951), Jagte Raho (1956), Naya Daur (1957), and Kala Bazaar (1960) while some unlikely names that have commented seriously on economic policy have been Johnny Mera Naam (1970), Namak Haraam (1973), Amar Akbar Anthony (1977), and Gupt (1994).

We start our journey in this study with the country getting its Independence, and choosing its economic policy of import substitution and foreign exchange controls. This followed by the days of public sector reaching commanding heights, big dams being constructed, the green revolution, spree of nationalization, and then liberalization in bursts and spurts. India's political economy has seen its twists and turns, its ups and downs. Studying this trend with all its intrigues, we find a strange companion in Hindi cinema. Films over the years reflect in their own inimitable style the changing moods in economic policy. The days of heady idealism of Raj Kapoor, a cynicism that creeps in with Guru Dutt, the strength of character that is seen in Dharmendra's early movies, and romance in the films that follow—the heady mix that kind of culminated in the era of the angry young man. Then follows a phase of confusion and complete lack of imagination, after which we see the happy-go lucky recklessness of generation next. The symbolism in all this is crystal clear. Today as the Indian economy looks outward, Hindi cinema goes global too. Infrastructural issues are crucial, institutions need to be revamped, legal and bureaucratic controls are thoroughly in review—all this amidst great opposition from various strange quarters, as with Bollywood so also with India's economic policy.

Part 1

The beginning - Economic policy making in India

Economic Policy refers to a course of action adopted by the Government to achieve certain stated national objectives. In India, these objectives have usually been directed towards equity and a balanced growth of various productive sectors of the economy with the haloed attempts at growth with social development through justice and equality. Medieval India was characterised by a lack of policy. Villages existed as little republics with almost no contact with the rest of world. Local rajas collected revenue in various forms and this funded the state treasury that looked after the well-being of the king, his staff and sustained the meagre administrative structure. Towns on the other hand relied primarily on trade that passed by, and each town specialised in a few commodities.

India came under the British Parliament's rule in 1858 and then followed a policy regime that was clearly a new economic system rooted in colonialism. The focus was on generating surpluses through stringent land revenue collections. After the industrial revolution, India became increasingly a source for raw material and a market for manufactured goods. Investment was largely on plantations, transportation and mining. Food grains were the mainstay of Indian agriculture but productivity remained stagnant.² Non-food grain production grew handsomely and tea, coffee, sugarcane and spices saw a healthy growth in exports. Railways and electricity reached a large part of the country. However, infrastructure was far too deficient to harness any benefits for the economy.

All these factors weighed heavily on policy makers as they sat together to evolve an economic and industrial policy for independent India. The first casualty was free enterprise. It was felt that in an economy where infrastructure facilities were poor, per capita income and the levels of

² The compound annual growth rate in food grain production has been in the range of 1.7 per cent in the fifties to 3.5 per cent in the eighties and now seems to be going back to the old pattern where it fails to match the rate of population growth.

savings extremely low³ and great inequality in the distribution of income, free enterprise could not be allowed. Exports, seen as a drain of resources, were considered dangerous and the idea of free trade ridiculous. Foreign investment was and continues to be considered synonymous with foreign domination, and hence was ruled out. But foreign exchange reserves had to be built to pay for essential imports and that is why it was felt that it would be easier and safer to take foreign loans.

Domestically it was believed that rapid industrialisation was desirable with an emphasis on capital goods and heavy industries. This would in effect spur growth in agriculture, employment generation and the service sector. Underlying all these was the belief that the State must play an active and central role in the development process through the five-year plan model. Out of this thinking emerged India's post-independent economic policies – a course of planned economic development that would ensure rapid growth in production with a view to achieving a higher level of national and per capita income, full-employment and a reduction of inequalities in income and wealth. The Socialistic pattern of society, with a democratic framework would pave the way for justice and absence of exploitation.

The scene was dismal. In 1950–51, the population of the country stood at 361 million, the literacy rate was a poor 18%, per capita income (at 1980–81 prices) was Rs 1,127, 3000 villages were electrified, the railways covered 54000 kilometres of route length, and the banking sector boasted of a little more than 5000 branches. It is in this backdrop that India's political economy sought to define itself. And chose the path of import substitution, foreign exchange controls, public sector led growth and a savings-oriented economy. The Fiscal policy aimed at increasing Tax revenue and handling of debt servicing. The Monetary and credit policy orchestrated under the aegis of the Reserve Bank of India worked its way through crises by way of large-scale bank nationalisation and a tightly controlled credit policy. The pricing policy was based on administered prices, cost plus pricing and discriminatory and dual pricing. The Industrial policy was founded on the principles of licensing, clearances and a centralised investment policy. The Agrarian policy laid emphasis on irrigation and land reforms. And the

³ The savings rate in India, as a result of the push for more, increased from about 10 per cent in 1950 to about 24 lately. The domestic saving rate was even higher as foreign assistance came in. However, growth rates could never correspond with this increase. Bhagwati, Jagdish and Srinivasan, T. N., *India's Economic Reforms*, 1993

Labour and employment policy was aimed at securing employment in the organized labour, provisioning of social security for the labour force within the organised sector and through monopolised government owned insurance schemes.

Part 2

The forties: Bollywood comments on new India's economic policy

The greatest challenge of writing on Bollywood and looking for meaningful patterns in its plots and themes is lending oneself to contradictions. While undertaking this exercise, even though we run “the risk of essence,” we confront this essentialism by offering to discuss a comprehensive number of films that fall in the range of our arguments on economic policy. This strategy necessarily means making a number of judgements. In this process, however, we might get some of the judgements wrong. Some important issues could get sidelined, some glaring examples missed. Overall though, the attempt has been to cover as wide an arena as possible.

Going against the popular grain, Bollywood after all is not just a dream factory that belts out trashy material in the fashion of assembly line production. The pot-pourri called Bollywood, maybe despite itself, offers a glimpse of India's values, traditions, and contemporary events often in a unique formulaic package of its own derivation (and “for millions of Indians, wherever they live, a major part of India derives from its movies⁴): “From the glitziest of entertainment to the sparest of intellectual abstraction, from lavish spectacle to minimalist poetry, issues of gender, of politics, of poverty and plenty, India's cinema encompasses them all.”⁵

Although cinema in India started with mythological themes because “when technology made it possible to tell stories through moving images, it was but natural that the Indian film pioneer turned to his own ancient epics and Puranas for source material,”⁶ Indian filmmakers soon realized the possibilities of voicing contemporary socio-economic and political concerns through this new medium. In 1921, Dhiren Ganguly attacked the values of the Western way of life and

⁴ Rajadhyaksha, Asish (1994), Introduction, *Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press and British Film Institute.

⁵ Vasudev, Aruna (ed.) (1995), Introduction, *Frames of Mind: Reflections on Indian Cinema*, New Delhi: UBSPD.

⁶ Nair, P. K. (1995), “In the Age of Silence,” in Vasudev, Aruna (ed.) *Frames of Mind: Reflections on Indian Cinema*, New Delhi: UBSPD.

their imitation by some Indians in his film *England Returned*.⁷ It is considered to be the first “social satire” on Indians obsessed with the Western way of life. This was followed up by Baburao Painter’s *Savkari Pash (The Indian Shylock)* (1925), which looked at the plight of the Indian peasantry and their exploitation by village moneylenders. Similarly, films like *Achhut Kanya* (Franz Osten, 1936), *Roti* (Mehboob, 1942), *Aurat* (Mehboob, 1940), *Sujata* (Bimal Roy, 1959), and *Do Bigha Zameen* (Bimal Roy, 1953) dealt with issues of casteism, urban dehumanisation, economic and gender roles and mass migration of rural population to the cities and their degradation in urban slums.⁸ Agriculture and the rural sector received much attention, and the plight of the farmer was highlighted. Economic policy though, neglected Agriculture historically, and even now the neglect of reforms in the Agriculture sector is obvious. The average annual growth rate in agriculture has always stayed between 2.5 to 3.0 per cent. The Green revolution, much talked about, also could not raise the growth rate beyond the 3 per cent mark.

The socialist thought had made its mark on the filmmaker and the storywriter. Indian writing, in almost all languages reflected this trend. Two other non-mainstream films that attempted what was seen as a realistic portrayal of the economic conditions of the Indian people - Chetan Anand’s *Neecha Nagar (World Down Below)*, 1946) and K. A. Abbas’s *Dharti ke Lal (Sons of the Soil)*, 1947). *Neecha Nagar* dramatized the class conflict through anti-colonial nationalist images and motifs:

“The central image is that of water, the source of life, contaminated by big industry and turned into a life-threatening hazard for the poor. The pollution of water is both the effect and the analog of bourgeois oppression of the working class. The world depicted in this film is separated into *ooncha nagar* (upper town/area) and *neecha nagar* (lower town/area) inhabited by the very rich and the struggling poor, respectively. The source of conflict between these groups is a dirty stream that a rich industrialist known as Sarkarji (“Your Lordship”) is diverting to pass through

⁷ Nair, P. K. (1995), “In the Age of Silence,” in Vasudev, Aruna (ed.) *Frames of Mind: Reflections on Indian Cinema*, New Delhi: UBSPD.

⁸ Masud, Iqbal (1995), “The Great Four of the Golden Fifties,” in Vasudev, Aruna (ed.) *Frames of Mind: Reflections on Indian Cinema*, New Delhi: UBSPD.

the poor section of the town so that new houses can be constructed in the cleaned up upper section.”⁹

India added about 55 million hectares to its irrigated land in the years following Independence and now the total stands at a little more than 80 million hectares. Even this is about half the potential and arguments on this issue continue. Governments have tended to debate the issue of funding medium and major irrigation works. Should more money be pumped into large projects or should the focus be on minor schemes? Should new projects be taken up, or old ones completed? Should canal waters be priced, so as to at recover operational costs? And how does the government ensure the over-exploitation of ground water?¹⁰

Abbas's *Dharti Ke Lal* came in the aftermath of the tragedy of the Bengal famine of 1943-44 in which five million peasants died. The film concentrated on the human dimensions of this tragedy. The Bengal famine, a man-made disaster, was depicted as such in this film. However, as Sumita Charkavarty notes: “as is usual in the Hindi film, the British do not enter the picture, and the agents of oppression are their Indian counterparts—the landlord, the moneylender, the grain dealer.”¹¹ Films, however, missed out on taking pot shots at the government. For it is indeed true that Indian agriculture has been subjected to an array of the most restrictive government regulations and controls. Oktay Yenal¹² in 1993, argues that these controls have always been justified through arguments like the protection of the poor by way of providing them consumption goods at low prices and through generating employment. It is another matter that farmers can greatly benefit only when their productive resources of land, labour, capital and technology are available in the free market.

This is indeed remarkable. For a long time, the British actually did not enter the picture in Hindi films. In hindsight, a spate of nationalistic films should have been made just after the country's Independence. Coming as it did after a long and patient struggle against colonialism. It is indeed

⁹ Chakravarty, Sumita S., (1998) *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema 1947-1987*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

¹⁰ This over exploitation is obviously on account of the incentive structure by way of power tariffs. Cheap power results in excessive pumping.

¹¹ Chakravarty, Sumita S., (1998) *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema 1947-1987*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

¹² Yenal, Oktay, (1993), *Freeing Agricultural markets*, IGIDR, Bombay, 1993

a point that has been made several times over, that the post- Independence political economy did not do away with the institutions it had fought against. The bureaucracy, in fact the entire administrative structure that the British bequeathed, was left largely untouched. One major reason for films not taking on this subject could have been the bloodied Partition of the country, which had stunned the nascent nation-state so much so that it needed to be lulled by a flurry of romantic capers. This went on for years, even decades, till a time when it was considered safe to talk of the old wounds. Chakravarty says “not only did the threat of censorship deter filmmakers from attempting communal subjects, but perhaps the events were too close in time and therefore painful to confront.”¹³ It was not until 1975 that M. S. Sathyu dared to broach the subject in his seminal film *Garam Hawa (Hot Winds)*. In the 1980s, Govind Nihalani’s *Tamas* also took a dispassionate look at the phenomenon of Partition. Interestingly, *Garam Hawa* was initially banned. Later, it received national awards.

Even the depiction of pre-Partition India was not seen in many Hindi films. However, some notable exceptions defy this generalized view, such as: *Shatranj ke Khiladi*, *Junoon*, *Waqt*, *Shaheed*, *Satyakam*, *Lagaan*, and *The Legend of Bhagat Singh*. While Shyam Benegal’s *Junoon* is a love story in the background of the Indian Mutiny of 1857, Satyajit Ray’s *Shatranj Ke Khiladi* is set in the year 1856 and portrays the political events leading to the annexation of the Kingdom of Oudh by the British East India Company. Alongside this historical narrative is the story of two rich landowners in Lucknow. The two friends spend all their time over the chessboard, oblivious of the political game going around them.

Yash Chopra’s *Waqt* (1965) opens in pre-Partition Lahore where the prosperous Lala Kedarnath inaugurates his new shop (This in a way might be reflective of the loss of Karachi, a major merchant city, in the wake of Partition). But soon after the story takes a leap in time when the family is split (and lost and found) following a large earthquake. Hrishikesh Mukherjee’s *Satyakam* (1969) is set in both pre and post-Independence days. The film critiques the state of the nation, and focuses on corruption and the break down of the nationalist-utopian dreams. It

¹³ Chakravarty, Sumita S., (1998) *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema 1947-1987*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp. 166.

also depicts as a sub-plot the resistance of the Princely states towards accession to an Independent India.

Manoj Kumar's *Shaheed* is the story of the Indian revolutionary and martyr, Bhagat Singh. In its opening commentary, Kumar explains the economic drain theory¹⁴ rather dramatically, and emphasises the excessive land revenue model adopted by the British. The peasants, who laboured hard on their fields had to part with most of their produce to fill the coffers of their colonial masters. Kumar argues that this led to the impoverishment of the peasantry and rural backwardness. Such kind of exploitative antecedents, argues Kumar, had the seeds of revolutionaries like Bhagat Singh. The same story of taxation and colonial exploitation forms the introductory commentary in Ashutosh Gawrikar's *Lagaan* (2001), a much talked about film of the most recent times. The film is set in 1893 in a district called Champaner, somewhere in central India. The film juxtaposes the colonial masters and the exploited in an unusual battlefield/space of confrontation--the cricket field. The fair play comes with a rider: if the villagers lose the game, they will have to pay tax three times over. If they win, their taxes would be written off. The film ends on an optimistic note with the villagers rejoicing their victory over their own misery.

In the pre-British period, the advanced sectors of the Indian economy were agriculture and manufacturing sectors. The 1871 census showed that 56% of adult male population was engaged in agriculture. In manufacturing, technical skills in spinning weaving, dyeing, gold, silver, handicrafts, perfumes etc., were predominant. However, trade suffered, as the communication systems were poor, and transportation meagre. Yet, there was enough evidence of external trade. India enjoyed surpluses and received gold and silver. There were virtually no roads but shipping was of a very high standard. Individuals and families operated banks and the main instrument of credit was the Hundi of two kinds - the Darshni Hundi and Mudati Hundi. All in all a predominance of rural life, an economy that was almost entirely rural in its simple division of

¹⁴ Romesh Dutt's famous hypothesis that *the lifeblood of India in a continuous ceaseless flow was drained away*. The Economic Drain theory propounded by Dadabhai Naoroji in his *UnBritish rule in India* is articulated in Manoj Kumar's *Shaheed* rather forcefully.

labour and an emphasis on hereditary skills. A very small urban population was found in a few centers.

The British period evidenced a large scale stagnation in the British rule and India became an underdeveloped economy. This downward slide came about as a result of these major factors:

a. Reduction in the per capita income

b. Low living levels, a high birth rate of 45 per thousand that is considered the biological maximum rate. Death rate went up to 47 per thousand in 1941 and this with a literacy rate of only 17%.

c. Low growth in national income coupled with little addition to stock of real capital. Net investment was low. Capital stock in fact declined due to the Second World War. Partition led to further depletion as the fertile lands in Punjab were partitioned and 23% of territory went with about 18% of population. The British had encouraged feudal relations and landlord tenant relationships.

d. The number of workers in agriculture went up from 74% in agriculture in 1881 to 76 % in 1931. In manufacturing 18 per cent in 1881 reduced to 15 per cent in 1931.

The causes of stagnation were many. Meagre resources, Low levels of technology and anti growth attitudes¹⁵, Population pressure¹⁶, state apparatus used in the interest of British industry and against Indian economy with heavy import duties in Britain, high excise duties in India, and a lop sided Government procurement policy. On top of all this the country was squeezed of its surpluses from the budget and the foreign trade sector. Several payments for which there was no return. The drain is estimated to be at least 2 to 3 per cent of national income in the period 1757 - 1939.

¹⁵ Knowles, in *The economic development of the British Overseas empire*, lists these factors as religion, caste structure, etc.

¹⁶ Kinsley Davis makes an argument that the population pressure seen as the major culprit is not the main reason. The problem is not that of sheer numbers but that of economic growth not keeping up with population growth. Dadabhai Naoriji and Romesh Dutt both put the blame squarely on The British Government's colonial policy.

Timeline-The Forties

1942	Quit India Movement	<i>The Legend of Bhagat Singh</i>
1943	Bengal Famine	<i>Dharti Ke Lal</i>
1947	Partition	<i>Tamas, Garam Hawa</i>
	Accession of Princely States	<i>Satyakam</i>
	Nearly 22 large Muslim business families move to Pakistan	<i>Garam Hawa</i>

Part 3

The fifties – Mother India and the Naya Daur

Since 1951, a planning process has been in existence and India has been through nine Five-Year Plans, and is now in the Tenth Five Year Plan (2002-07) period. The attempt was to boost the domestic savings rate, which has indeed gone up from 8.9% in 1950-51 to 22.3% now. With the Second Five Year Plan (1956-61), there began a process of import-substituting industrialization, with an emphasis on capital goods, the entire planning experiment influenced by the Soviet model. Hindi cinema took a decisive turn in the 1950s, the period known as the “golden era of cinema.” Iqbal Masud has a disclaimer to put here “Such phrases can be misleading. You cannot isolate one decade in a continuing cultural process. The root of the 50’s cinema lay firmly in the past.”¹⁷ The “great four - Mehboob, Bimal Roy, Guru Dutt, and Raj Kapoor”, made the major films of the 50s. These directors had seen the traumatic years in their formative years, the 30’s and 40’s that encompassed major events in the sub-continent: the struggle for Independence, famines, changing social mores, the global fight against fascism, etc. All these events shaped their ethos and vision. Masud has noted the common traits in the works of these filmmakers:

“There are many common traits in the works of these directors. The foremost is that much-abused word, humanism.... In the 40s ‘humanism’ had a specific connotation. It was fuelled by outrage against India’s savage poverty and inequalities (exacerbated by the rise of the black market in the Second World War). A second element was its deep awareness of India’s past and present cultures—both ‘high’ and ‘popular’. A third was the skill in communicating its outrage and call for change to the masses. This last element has been called ‘entertainment’. But in the 40s and 50s this had an aspirational touch about it which has vanished long ago from our cinema.”¹⁸

¹⁷ Masud, Iqbal (1995), “The Great Four of the Golden Fifties,” in Vasudev, Aruna (ed.) *Frames of Mind: Reflections on Indian Cinema*, New Delhi: UBSPD.

¹⁸ Masud, Iqbal (1995), “The Great Four of the Golden Fifties,” in Vasudev, Aruna (ed.) *Frames of Mind: Reflections on Indian Cinema*, New Delhi: UBSPD.

Their films have attempted to document the social truths of their times. Raj Kapoor's *Awara*, *Jagte Raho*, *Boot Polish*, and *Shree 420*; Mehboob's *Mother India*, Roy's *Do Bigha Zameen*, and Dutt's *Pyaasa*, and *Mr. & Mrs. 55*—all these films stand as social and cultural documents of those days. The running strand in these films was the abject poverty and unemployment in India. Industrial policy, intended to generate adequate income and employment in rural areas and to dissuade urban migration, clearly failed in its purpose.¹⁹ Agriculture in India is dominated by the production of food grains—mainly rice and wheat—as well as oilseeds, pulses, cotton, sugar, tea, coffee, rubber, jute and potatoes. The agricultural sector accounts for around one-quarter of nominal GDP (at market prices), and is an important determinant of overall economic growth. Yields per hectare for all major crops in India are comparatively low by international standards even today. And almost three-quarters of India's population continues to make a livelihood from agriculture, forestry and fishing, accounting for about 30% of GDP. The majority of landholdings is in private hands, and is cultivated at subsistence level.

Time line: The Fifties

Food constraints: *Awara*, 1951

Essential Commodities Act, 1954; the problem of credit availability: *Mother India*, 1956, *Boot Polish*, 1954

Requisition and Acquisition of Immovable Property Act, 1952: *Do Bigha Zameen*, 1956

Industrial Policy Resolution, 1956: *Naya Daur*, 1957

Food Adulteration Act, 1954; the concern over spurious drugs, counterfeit currency and prohibition: *Jagte Raho*, 1956

Public Employment Act, 1957: *Shree 420*, 1955; *Mr. And Mrs. 55*, 1955; *Pyaasa*, 1957

Money, Inflation, and Price Controls: *Kala Bazaar*, 1960

Rural-urban migration: *Shree 420*, 1955; *Do Bigha Zameen*, 1956; *Naya Daur*, 1957

Dams-Temples of Modern India, *Mother India*, 1956

¹⁹ *The 9th plan approach paper*, Madhu Dandavate, January 1997, observed that the rate of female employment has actually declined and this was particularly pronounced in rural areas. The rate of growth of employment, for both males and females was significantly lower when compared to urban areas.

Following the ravages of the Second World War, the 50s began with shortage of food. Raj Kapoor addresses this issue, as an aside, in his film *Awara* (1951), even though the film's central theme was about "lineage vs. upbringing." In one particular sequence, the young (child) hero of the film (played by Shashi Kapoor) enters his dilapidated hutment in a slum area where his emaciated mother lies on a cot. The mother tells the child to eat something. The child asks the mother whether she has actually cooked something. The mother says that she has cooked something for him and it is hot and ready to be served. The child runs to a corner of the house where the kitchen is set. One by one, he checks all the utensils. There is no food in any of them. After a while the mother asks him if he got anything to eat. The child says yes he did. The poignancy is depicted through close-ups of the mother and son's faces. The silent lie they share articulates the large-scale issue of poverty and non-availability of food for the poor of the country.

Mehboob's epic *Mother India* (1956) begins with the problem of credit availability for the rural farmers. Early in the story, Raj Kumar loses his oxen. He borrows money from the village moneylender Sukhilala (Kanhaiya Lal). An overjoyed Kumar, who has just become a father, distributes grains to the labourers in a celebratory mood. Sukhilala objects to this saying that Kumar has no right to distribute the grain as the majority share belonged to him and not Kumar. A quarrel starts over the share of the crop. The matter is taken to the village panchayat. This powerful sequence clearly establishes the problem of credit availability for the small farmers, who had no way but to turn to the exploitative moneylender in times of crisis.

In *Mother India*, we also see for the first time the big dams, the temples of modern India, on the silver screen. Indeed the narrative is sandwiched as a flashback between the dam scenes. The film opens with an old Radha (Nargis) being taken to inaugurate a dam. The film closes with the dam's "blood-stained" water (a metaphor of sacrifice-Radha's sacrifice of her son to maintain the morality of the village) nourishing the farms of the village. Raj Kapoor's *Boot Polish* (1954), in one scene, shows a long line of consumers at a ration shop.²⁰ Perhaps this was the first

²⁰ The Public Distribution System and the Fair Price Shops (popularly called ration shops) were part of a huge network of outlets, godowns, rules, regulations and inspections. In the crop sector, on the output side, a procurement price was fixed which in times of surplus worked as a minimum support price (MSP) at which the Government was ready to purchase any amount offered. At other items, the Government procured a part of the grain at the

instance of registering the presence of rations shops in the country, in the wake of the Public Distribution system and the *Essential Commodities Act, 1954*.

Raj Kapoor shows similar sensibilities in another brilliant film, *Jagte Raho* (1956) directed by Sombhu Mitra. Kapoor, a thirsty peasant, wanders through the streets of Calcutta for a drink of water. He breaks into an apartment bloc. Soon he is discovered but he dodges the residents. It could not be a coincidence that the film uses water as a precious commodity that encourages crime. In India, the crisis over drinking water and irrigation continues to haunt policy makers and citizens. The *Food Adulteration Act, 1954* gets reflected in the film through the filmmaker's concern over spurious drugs. The film has also shown incidents of counterfeit currency-makers and illegal liquor producers.

Roy's *Do Bigha Zameen* (1956) as discussed earlier, is one of the most realistic portraits of its times. One of the issues that the film talks of in the first half of the film is the issue of property, a shadow of the *Requisition and Acquisition of Immovable Property Act, 1952*. The village landlord wants the two bighas of land owned by Shambhu (Balraj Sahni) to form it a part of his upcoming mill. Shambhu is under the debt of the landlord. When Shambhu refuses to part with his land, the landlord asks him to pay back his loan within two days. A poor Shambhu, after obtaining a reprieve from the court, departs for the big city, Calcutta, in the hope that he will be able to earn enough to pay back his loan. Shambhu does not realize that he is fighting a losing battle.

Another theme of Roy's film is the phenomenon of rural-urban migration. Shambhu migrates from his village to earn money to pay back his loan. Then follows his dehumanisation in the city's industrial and materialistic environment. Two other films circa the same time, *Shree 420* (1955) and *Naya Daur* (1957) also talk of the same phenomenon. Raj Kapoor comes to Bombay from Allahabad in search of a job. Despite being a first-class graduate, he fails to land up a job

procurement price mandatorily and distributed it to through the network of ration shops. The difference between the prevailing market price and the procurement price on the procured gain (usually 15 to 30 per cent of marketable surplus) was a tax to the producer. On the other hand, there was an explicit subsidy on fertilizer. Additionally, there were subsidies on irrigation, power and credit. Trade restrictions came by way of a need to mop up surplus for domestic use. Not only were exports and imports restricted, there were restrictions on inter-State movement of agricultural products as well.

by honest means. Crookery, the film suggests, is the ticket to success in cities. This is the beginning of the end of a dream (the dream of new India where talent and merit would be rewarded) for the educated Indian. Guru Dutt's *Mr. & Mrs. 55* was also released in the same year. The film "satirises the reformism of India's urban upper class."²¹ Again, the hero (Dutt) is an educated person, a cartoonist, who fails to get a job. The needy hero agrees to marry Anita (Madhubala) for money as part of a plan wherein he'd have to divorce her as soon as he marries her. So crookery is again an issue here, though in an understated way. All these films foreshadowed the *Public Employment Act, 1957*. While this Act was passed, the problem of unemployment continued. In his classic melodrama *Pyasa* (1957), Dutt's hero is again a qualified person, this time a poet, who not only is denied jobs but who also suffers the ignominy of being a burden on his family members. In one scene, Dutt is shown sitting on a bench in a pathetic condition. One of his former class friends, Tuntun, spots him. She asks him, referring to his love-lorn state (Dutt was in love with his college mate, Mala Sinha):

"Tum kis ki talash me majnoo bane phir rahe ho?"

Dutt says: "*Naukri*".

This is a piece of shocking dialogue. Not only does it bring forth the angst of the "displaced romantic artist" but also of the state of the nation.

One film that succinctly captures the larger theme of industrialization and its impact on the poor in India is B. R. Chopra's *Naya Daur* (1957). In the wake of the *Industrial Policy Resolution, 1956*, the film becomes an important commentary on the question of traditional technology vs. modern machinery. The livelihood of the villagers, the tonga drivers and mill workers, is threatened when the villain Kundan (Jeevan) introduces an electric saw and cars into the village. Rajadhyaksha and Willeman note: "The dramatic highpoint sees everyone joining forces to build a road to prove (via a race between a bus and a horsedrawn carriage) that traditional technology is just as good as the new machinery. Ironically, the nationalist modernisation argument is

²¹ Rajadhyaksha, Asish and Willeman, Paul (1994), *Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press and British Film Institute, pp.341.

advanced by the villain while the benevolent father figure Seth Maganlal (Hussain) hopes that a humanist attitude will abolish all class divisions. The hero Shankar argues for collectivisation as the proletarian way of managing new technology.’²²

In contrast to the man vs. machine debate of *Naya Daur*, Vijay Anand’s *Kala Bazaar* (1960) depicts the other economic issues of urban India: money, inflation, and price controls. Raghubir (Dev Anand) is a bus conductor who one day is thrown out of his job. Not knowing what to do next, and with an old mother and a young sister to take care of, he becomes a black-marketer. Incidentally, this was the phase when studios were breaking up and black money was entering into the film industry, as in other sectors of the economy. The film glorifies the importance of money through the catchy number: *Suraj ke jaisi golai, chanda se thandak bhi payi, teri dhoom har kahin...* The foreign exchange crisis of 1957 and the ensuing rise in inflation and fiscal deficits sent the economy reeling, and the effects were felt all around.

²² Rajadhyaksha, Asish and Willeman, Paul (1994), *Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press and British Film Institute, pp.341.

Part 4

The sixties – Wars, drought and a change of guard

In the 50s and 60s, with the break up of the studio system, the rules of the game were changing. The heroic period of the Indian cinema, with its socially and politically conscious underpinnings, was getting over. Meanwhile, the growing urban population, wanting to forget their painful and struggling existence, began to favour an escapist kind of cinema. Hindi films, more and more, moved towards a formulaic construction, befitting Sudhir Kakar's interpretation of Hindi cinema-- "collective fantasy" built around a "fairytale on celluloid." This interpretation applied to a majority of the formulaic or masala films. However, the meaningful films did not completely become a thing of the past.

One era in India's political economy comes to an end with Nehru's death in 1964.²³ Lal Bahadur Shastri, who succeeded Nehru was immediately faced with severe crises. The war with Pakistan was devastating coming within three years of another battle against the Chinese. The drought and failure of monsoons in 1965 and 1966 heaped further misery, even as the United States suspended aid to both India and Pakistan. The Second Five year Plan (1956 – 61) had neglected agriculture and focused on industry, especially heavy industry. The third plan did try to give more emphasis to agriculture but failed. Stagnant growth from 1961 to 1963 saw a break with increased production in 1964, but then the drought took over. The successive wars and the fall in agricultural output paved the way for double digit inflation and the food price inflation shot up to 20 per cent. Defence expenditure rose from about 1.6 per cent of the GDP in 1960 –61 to 3.2 per cent in 1965-66. The balance of payments position slid further as exports suffered, despite the devaluation in 1966. This further increased the government's dependence on aid and loans.²⁴ The

²³ Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister died in May 1964 having held sway over the new nation's ideology through his belief in the socialist thought and the welfare state for nearly two decades. Towards the end of his career however, the national mood was one of despair. The war with China was a major disaster and many blamed Nehru for his optimism in peace between India and China.

²⁴ The gross external assistance rose from about 2 per cent of the GDP in 1961 – 62 to 3.5 per cent of the GDP in 1966-67. Aid however, came with a price. The US would not commit to a long term agreement on PL 480 and wanted to push India towards a new agricultural policy, and towards liberalisation of its trade and industrial policies.

rupee was devalued by 36.5 per cent in 1966²⁵ and a rationalisation of export subsidies and tariffs followed.

On the social front, the fifties has seen a spate of laws being enacted. A great deal of legislative effort went into codifying personal law. Modern personal law is the creation of the *Hindu Marriage Act (1955)*, and of the *Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act*, *Hindu Succession Act*, and *Hindu Adoptions and Maintenance Act* (all of 1956). Until 1955-56 it was possible to claim exemption from the personal law if a custom could be proved to be of sufficient certainty, continuity, and age and was not contrary to public policy. Very little scope is now allowed to custom. As an example of the changes, the *Special Marriage Act (1954)* provided that any couple might marry, irrespective of community, in a civil ceremony, and their personal law of divorce and succession automatically would become inapplicable. One of the burning social issues of that era was the curse of dowry. Cases of bride burning screamed from the headlines. The government passed the Dowry Prohibition Act in 1961. Around that time, many films were made that showed the enmity between the mother-in law and the daughter-in law. Even in the 70s and 80s, dowry was there in most social films as a subplot. One of the mentionable films on this topic was *Dulha Bikta Hai* (Anwar Pasha, 1981). The trend of showing the cruel “Saas” continues till today. As late as 2001, Raj Kumar Santoshi had a sub-plot of dowry in his film, *Lajja*.

Time line: The Sixties

War with China, 1962: *Haqeeqat*, 1964

War with Pakistan: *Border*, 1996

Droughts: *Guide*, 1965

Green Revolution: *Upkaar*, 1967

Rupee devaluation, 1966 and Bank Nationalization, 1969: *Sabse Bada Rupaiya*, 1976

Anti-corruption Laws, 1967: *Satyakam*, 1969; *Zanjeer*, 1973

Gold Control Act, 1968: *Deewar*, 1975

²⁵ The exchange rate was lowered from Rs 4.76 to Rs 7.50 to a dollar on 6 June 1966

Talking of crime, the lawyers cannot be far behind. Most Hindi films have lawyers as side characters. The Advocates Act was passed in 1961. *Kanoon* (1960), an eponymous film on the world of law, had come out one year earlier. This B. R. Chopra film, a song-less courtroom drama and suspense movie, tried to show the loopholes in the legal system (the film made a strong plea against capital punishment). Decades later, *Andha Kanoon*, with Amitabh Bachchan in the main lead, again tried to establish that the rich and the criminal use legal loopholes to save their necks and the innocent get embroiled in the net of law. Another notable film that had commented on this side of our legal system and on “institutionalised corruption” was Raj Khosla’s *Kalapan i* (1958). Two most recent films that have commented on our legal system are *Aakrosh* (1980) by auteur Govind Nihalani, and *Damini* (1993) (judicial delays) by Nihalani’s former assistant, Rajkumar Santoshi.

The early half of the 60s was dominated by the wars. Starting 1962, India had to fight a Chinese attack. Later, Pakistan also attacked India. These wars have been authentically captured by Hindi cinema in films like *Haqeeqat* (1964) and *Border* (1996). Just after the wars, India was hit by a severe drought. This instance of drought was depicted by Dev Anand’s *Guide* (1965). First the war and then the droughts had a devastating effect on the country’s economy. Inflation swamped the market and the rate of crimes increased. The government had to devalue the rupee. Other policy steps were taken to keep the economy within check. The banks were nationalized in 1969. Money or the currency note became so important for the common man that Mehmood crooned for the public:

No Biwi na bachcha na baap bada na bhaiyya
The whole thing is that ki bhaiyya sabse bada rupaiyya

(*Sabse Bada Ruppaiya*, 1976).

This was also the time when corruption was increasing in the civil life and was getting institutionalised in government departments. To check this rot in the system, the government passed the Anti-corruption laws in 1967. Hrishikesh Mukherjee’s *Satyakam* (1969) was a

collective cry against this rising poison of corruption. This was the cry of the post-Independence generation (“The Midnight Children”) whose dreams of an honest and fair India were being cast to the drain. The film perhaps was also the harbinger of the message that the honest person has no place in the India of the future. The parallel economy in India has been a subject of much attention. However there are no clear estimates on the amount of money floating in the *black* economy. Clearly, complex tax laws and excise policies went a long way in creating this system. Restrictions on convertibility and the stringent laws on foreign exchange regulation helped create a *Hawala*²⁶ market, and a stage was set for several major scams that broke out later. The study made by S N Acharya and associates (see footnote below) estimates India’s black economy to be 18 – 21 per cent of the GDP in 1980. There is no reason to believe that this figure would have reduced over the years.²⁷ And it has been argued that if the growth of black economy has been the same as the white economy, and that the black economy constitutes 20 per cent of the GDP, better tax compliance could work wonders. A ten percent of the black economy converted into white would increase GDP by 2 per cent, and the fiscal deficit would go down from 5 per cent to 3 per cent automatically. However, this would need a concerted effort from the governments and a far simpler tax structure, and not just tax amnesty schemes, to ensure lesser evasion.²⁸

This cry for the honest, however, fell on deaf ears. Public anger against this official corruption finally got a vent in a Salim-Javed construct, “the angry young man.” The era of the angry young man, which begins with Amitabh Bachchan in the 1970s, makes a clear departure from the earlier eras of Hindi cinema. Now for the next two decades, everything else will become inaudible except for the ranting and fuming of the angry young man. The tirade was usually against all forms of black money, of which tax evasion is only a part. Black Income came to be

²⁶ *Hawala* – an Urdu word implying trust, where one party hands over large amounts of foreign exchange to another without any receipt or collateral, and receives the converted amount in Indian Rupees and vice versa.

²⁷ The various estimates show that black money in India ranges from Rs 350 to Rs 700 thousand crores Acharya’s work is discussed below, the others who have worked on this aspect are Chugh and Uppal, *Black Economy in India*, 1986, Tata McGraw Hill, Pendse, *Black Money and Budgets*, 1989, Allied Publishers and Ray, SK, 1991, *The Parallel Economy*, Prentice Hall.

²⁸ There have been no less than ten tax amnesty schemes in the last fifty years. The first scheme worked between May and October 1951, the Finance Act of 1965 gave another amnesty schedule, the Voluntary Disclosure Act was passed in 1976, the Special Bearer bond scheme in 1981, the Finance Act again in 1985, the foreign exchange remittance scheme, the gold bond scheme, deposits with the National Housing Bank and the amendment 273A of the Income Tax Act in 1991, the Gold Bank scheme of 1993, the Voluntary Disclosure of Income Scheme in 1997 and the Kar Vivad Samadhan Scheme in 1998.

generated through smuggling, drug trafficking, gambling and bribes.²⁹ It is also revealing to analyse why the black economy upsets so many people. First, larger the parallel economy, weaker the GNP as a measure of welfare. National accounting suffers as tax evasion and underreporting of incomes distorts data. Black money, usually generated through illegal means spawns other illegal activities and encourages bribes. It must be pointed out here that a large amount of property in India, especially in Mumbai and Delhi, is transacted in black money. And black transactions inherently are insecure contracts. One major reason for the large amounts of property disputes and unclear rights is the shady nature of the transaction. Another problem with black money is that it is normally invested in less productive activities such as gold purchases and property, residential commercial and agricultural. On one hand it artificially inflates prices and on the other returns fall further.³⁰

²⁹ In an interesting study in 1985, S N Acharya and Associates, in *Aspects of the Black Economy in India*, show how black was converted into white. Interestingly, the most significant manner was through showing lack of income as income through agricultural activities. The other popular measure are to show large monetary gifts from friends and relatives, the hawala channel, buying of lottery tickets from winners, loans from fictitious friends, fictitious sales, bearer bonds and by way of cash spending on consumption goods.

³⁰ Arindam Das-Gupta and Dilip Mookherjee, 1996, argue in their paper *Tax amnesties as asset laundering devices*, that it is possible for black investment made from black money to be far more productive than white investment, leading to a large multiplier effect. The white sectors on account of government control on bank deposit rates and administered interest rates are prone to abysmally low returns. The returns from black money investment, they argue, would trickle down to improve overall levels of life.

Part 5

The seventies: Fury, Scorn and draconian laws

The seventies was a happening decade. On the one hand, the spectre of the angry young man was hovering over the collective consciousness of the society; on the other, the government was clamping down on many prominent and prevalent ills of the times. Major legislations passed in the seventies included the Indian Patents Act, 1970, MRTP Act, 1969, Contract Labour (Regulation and Abolition Act), 1970, Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, 1971, Antiquities and Art Treasures Act, 1972, Election Laws, 1975, Coking Coal Mines (Nationalization) Act, 1972, Coal Mines (Taking Over of Management) Act, 1974, COFEPOSA, 1974, Smugglers and Foreign Exchange Manipulators (Forfeiture of Property) Act, 1976, Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976, Urban Land Ceiling and Regulation Act, 1976, and Prevention of Black Marketing and Maintenance of Supplies of Essential Commodities Act, 1980. All these legislations, or the compulsions for these legislations, have been underlined in the Hindi films of those days.

Let's take the case of spurious drugs. As discussed earlier, a reference to the malpractice of producing and selling spurious drugs had been made in Raj Kapoor's *Jagte Raho* in the early fifties. In the seventies, Prakash Mehra's *Zanjeer* (1973) makes a dramatic plea against manufacturing spurious drugs. Mehra, in the relevant section of the film, almost addresses those who are involved in this dirty business. The occasion is that young Amitabh's father is being released from the jail. The jailor, played by Satyen Kappu, implores the man not to go back to making spurious drugs for his bosses, the very crime that had him land up in the jail. The man comes out of the jail and on reaching home, finds that his daughter has died because of a lethally spurious injection. The man is transformed and refuses his boss's command to continue in the business. His boss gets him eliminated before the eyes of the young Amitabh, who grows up to revenge his father's murder, and hence the beginning of the "Angry Young Man."

The same angry young man who fights for the cause of social justice and egalitarian principles, however, finds himself on the other side of the fence in Hrishikesh Mukherjee's *Namak Haram*

(1973). The context of the film is the labour rights after the passage of the MRTP Act, 1969, and Contract Labour (Regulation and Abolition Act), 1970. Rajyadhyaksha and Willemen (1973: 418) describe the film as a “buddy melodrama in an industrial working class setting.” They write:

“When his father (Shivpuri) falls ill, the rich playboy Vikram (Bachchan) has to manage the Bombay factory. He insults a union leader (Hangal) and triggers a strike, which he can end only by publicly apologising. Vikram asks his friend Somu (Khanna) to help avenge this humiliation and Somu joins the workforce. Somu becomes involved with a female union activist (Rekha) and changes his views about the conflict and sides with the workers. Vikram’s father exposes him as a management stooge and Somu is killed. Vikram takes the blame, is jailed, and when released, decides to champion workers’ rights to honour Somu’s memory.”³¹

Therefore, by the end of the film, a redeemed Vikram (Bachchan) once again, after the image of the messiah of the masses, is co-opted to become a part of the working class or the hoi polloi. Amitabh would keep on playing that role till the late 1980s until the angry young wave loses out to a new emerging sensibility of romance and riches, but that we discuss later. The problems concerning labour continue to be of an immense magnitude in the country, helped greatly by a myriad set of laws passed time and again.³² And these concerns are acutely addressed in a number of films of the seventies, in the backdrop of large-scale uprisings, lockouts and strikes declared by various Trade Unions and political outfits all over the country. The objectives of the Government in framing industrial policies were based on a historical set of priorities and parameters in light of the exploitation seen in a society beset with problems of caste and class

³¹ Rajyadhyaksha and Paul Willemen (1999), *Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema*. New Delhi: OUP.

³² To ensure industrial development the late sixties saw several draconian measures passed. Trade and regulatory regimes were designed to shield industrial producers from competition. This resulted in high tariffs, industrial licensing, Monopoly and Restrictive Trade Practices (MRTP) Act, Foreign Exchange Regulation Act (FERA) et al to protect Indian industry from external competition, restrict foreign investment, direct domestic investment and encourage small scale units (through reservations) to avoid concentration of economic power in the private sector. The other measures adopted were directed allocation of subsidized credit through the commercial and developmental banking system and over valuation of exchange rate. This was done to ensure an inexpensive source of credit (since interest rates were administered) for the Government and the priority sectors and also cheaper imports for the Government. The attempt also was to direct Public Investment in Industrial activities. Under this, core industry was in the Public Sector of which the Government was 100 per cent equity holder. The private sector was expected to work in line with the overall objectives of economic planning under strict regulation.

hierarchies. Over the years, a comprehensive set of minimal labour laws has not evolved. There are a number of laws dealing with different subjects that at times are overlapping, thereby leading to confusion and uncertainty. The reason for such diversity is the intention to address varying concerns from time to time, such as the number of persons employed, location restrictions on industrial units, divergence in scope of employment and wages drawn. For example, the legislature has failed to make a distinction in relation to the size of enterprise and frame laws accordingly. This makes it difficult for the smaller enterprises to comply with the rules which are intended for larger units, since such smaller enterprises often do not have sufficient manpower to comply with procedural formalities like maintenance of registers, records and other compliance requirements.

The Trade Union Act has often been blamed. It has been found that sometimes intra union disputes arise when two rival bodies of executives and office bearers claim to have been elected in the Annual General Meeting of the Trade Union concerned. There is no provision in the Trade Unions act, 1926, to deal with such contingencies. The registrar of trade Unions generally maintains status quo in his file, on the basis of the status existing prior to the dispute. The Registrar advises the body opposing the claim, of the existing

Time line: The Seventies

Indian Patents Act, 1970; spurious drugs: *Zanjeer*, 1973

M RTP Act, 1969, Contract Labour (Regulation and Abolition Act), 1970: *Namak Haram*, 1973

Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, 1971: *Lajja*, 2001

Antiquities and Art Treasures Act, 1972: *Johny Mera Naam*, 1970; *Mr. India*, 1987

Election Laws, 1975: *Aandhi*, 1975

Coking Coal Mines (Nationalization) Act, 1972, Coal Mines (Taking Over of Management) Act, 1974: *Kala Pathar*, 1979

COFEPOSA, 1974, Smugglers and Foreign Exchange Manipulators (Forfeiture of Property) Act, 1976: *Deewar*, 1975; *Amar Akbar Anthony*, 1977

Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976: *Damul*, 1984

Urban Land Ceiling and Regulation Act, 1976: *Jane Bhi Do Yaroon*, 1983

facts in his file to approach the proper civil court for resolution of the dispute. This causes serious difficulties for employers, as they are in a quandary to find out which body of executives they will have to deal with for negotiating wages and other service conditions. There are at least 45 different labour laws in operation today, all this amidst great opposition to any reform in the labour legislation and to an exit policy.³³

By the mid-seventies India as a democracy had begun to mature, at least in terms of its institutionalisation. This period, however, saw the first emergency imposed on the country under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's rule. There were many films of that era that depicted this draconian political step. *Kissa Kursi Ka* and Gulzar's *Aandhi* were the two important films of that period. These films were banned by Mrs. Gandhi's regime. In 1975, the Elections Laws were passed. The same year, *Aandhi* attacked the political establishment and its shenanigans. The common people had largely begun to eye the politicians as corrupt souls. One of the songs in the film went like this:

Salaam kijiye, aali janab aye hain

Yeh paanch saloon ka dene hisaab aayen hain

The comment was on the politicians who come to the voters once in five years, that too only to seek votes during elections. Elections in India are a much-celebrated affair, given the multi-party system and the three tiered government apparatus comprising of elected representatives. A strong centre ensures that a great deal of attention is lavished on the Parliamentary elections, and with Members of Parliament enjoying exalted status and multiple perks, the election process over the years has grown to involve large sums of money, violence and conflict. Electoral reforms continue to be neglected, while any number of suggestions abound, regarding the first-past-the-post system prevailing, the possibility of state funding of elections and a hard look at the multi party and the Parliamentary form of governance.

³³ A casual look at some of these shows how much they obviously overlap and overkill - Payment of Wages Act, 1936, Minimum Wages Act, 1948, Employees Provident Fund Act 1952, Employees State Insurance Benefit Act 1948, Workmen Compensation Act 1923, Payment of Gratuity Act 1972, Payment of Bonus Act, the Bonded Labour System [abolition] Act 1965, Child Labour Prohibition and Regulation Act 1986, Trade Union Act 1926, Industrial Employment [Standing Orders] Act and Industrial Disputes Act 1946.

In the 70s, corruption was not limited to public life alone. It had become a way of life in other sectors too. Smuggling of gold, foreign exchange, and antiques had become the major issues. The government passed legislations such as Antiquities and Art Treasures Act, 1972 and COFEPOSA, 1974, Smugglers and Foreign Exchange Manipulators (Forfeiture of Property) Act, 1976 to tackle these crimes. Films like *Johnny Mera Naam* (1970) and *Mr. India* (1987) clearly showed these crimes on the screen. Smuggling of gold became pivotal business lines for the villains in the scripts of Salim-Javed, for example, *Amar Akbar Anthony* (1977) and *Deewar* (1975). The character of Amitabh Bachchan in *Deewar*, as admitted by Javed Akhtar, was modelled after the famous smuggler of those years, Haji Mastan. Interestingly, Mastan began as a dockworker in Bombay and rose to become one of the big time dons of the underworld. The parallel did not end there. Later Mastan joined politics. In real life, Amitabh also joined politics for a brief time, only to return to cinema.

Policy-wise, one of the most important steps was the nationalization of the coalmines. This was a logical step after the nationalization of all banks in the country. The government nationalised all coalmines in the country through Coking Coal Mines (Nationalization) Act, 1972, and Coal Mines (Taking Over of Management) Act, 1974. India's energy needs are met through both commercial and non-commercial energy sources. The primary commercial sources are coal, oil, natural gas, nuclear fuel and hydro electricity.³⁴ However, almost all energy resources are monopolised by the Government. All five-year plans have lavished budgetary support on the public sector involved in the energy sector, and the support has often been at the range of 30 per cent of the total plan outlay. This amount of support and protection has, not surprisingly, made the public sector complacent and what is seen is a vast network of waste and inefficiency.³⁵

Coal contributes to more than 50 per cent of India's commercial energy supply. Till 1972, the private sector played an active part in coal production. Small mines, privately owned, dotted the landscape in the coal producing regions located in the east, in Bihar, West Bengal and Orissa.

³⁴ Per capita commercial energy consumption at 248 kgoe continues to be far lower than the world average of 1433 kgoe(kilogram of oil equivalent) and is only 3 per cent of the per capita consumption in the US (World Development Report, 1997).

³⁵ In 1997- 98, the actual average rate of return for state electricity boards stood at -17.6%.

The government nationalised coking coalmines in May 1972 and non-coking coalmines in 1973. Since 1975, Coal India Ltd and its subsidiaries have been the major producers of coal. However, the coal mafia continues to be a major stakeholder and the industry is mired in a number of violent conflicts, delays and bottlenecks. Reforms in the energy sectors are now urgently called for, competition at all levels ensured, and the vast subsidies rationalised.

This time, Yash Chopra's *Kala Pathar* (1979) argues for this kind of a step. The film showed how the greed of the evil capitalist (Prem Chopra), who owned a coalmine, had wreaked havoc on the lives of his workers. In one sequence, the film's heroine who plays a journalist (Parveen Bobby) lectures Chopra on the working and living conditions of his workers. She says: "The workers in your coalmine lead their lives like vermin." Once again this was a Salim-Javed script.³⁶

The decade of the 70s was also the time of rapid urbanization. In Bombay, massive land areas were turned into flats and residential cooperatives to house the burgeoning middle class. As urban infrastructure burst at its seams, a spate of legislation followed. Continuing its agenda towards redistribution of land, the government passed a number of laws putting a ceiling on the amount of land ownerships. Land prices shot up as that available for transaction shrunk in size. A large number of builders rushed in and flouted all kinds of building norms that had been enacted, as big money was involved in this business. Amidst all this the government passed the Urban Land Ceiling Act in 1976. However, the ingenuity of the builders always found ways to circumvent the government regulations. Kundan Shah's debut film, *Jaane Bhi Do Yaroon* (1983) hilariously depicted the builder-bureaucrat-politician-media nexus in the metros.

This does not mean that the villages, where the majority of Indians lived, were untouched by corruption. Here the corruption was of a different kind. It was feudal in nature and was labour-intensive. Landlords in the Indian villages had this old custom of having bonded labour. It was an Indian form of slavery steeped in caste hierarchies. In 1976, the government passed the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act to put an end to this shameful practice. Even as late as 1984, Prakash Jha's *Damul* showed this kind of a system in the villages of Bihar. The local

³⁶ Javed, in one of his interviews, has admitted that this was one of his weakest scripts.

landlords and politicians had enslaved these poor village people using the bonded labour system. Under this system, the labourers have to sign a paper assuming the debts of their ancestors.

Part 6

The eighties and on: A twist in the tale

Fifty years after Jawaharlal Nehru decreed “the noble mansion of free India where all her children may dwell”, the country remained for many a slum or a village with neither sanitation nor clean water, no primary school, or jobs. For all its achievements, an audit of human development today, as in 1949, makes sad copy. India’s billion people comprise one-sixth of humanity, but the country contains nearly one-third of the world’s absolute poor. More than 130 million people have no access to basic health facilities, 226 million have no safe drinking water, 70 percent of the country lacks basic sanitation, and nearly half the population is illiterate: India has the biggest illiterate population in the world. Women and children fare the worst. More than 50 percent in India’s under-five’s are malnourished, worse than most countries in sub-saharan Africa. Almost 40 percent of India’s female children do not attend schools. Altogether, the country today finds itself ranked in the UNDP’s annual human development index below such countries as Kenya, Guinea and Equatorial Guinea, and only higher than Nigeria, Zambia or Zaire. In part it is a question of resources - India’s annual per capital investment in health and education stands at just \$14 against, for example, \$160 in South Korea. In part, it is bureaucratic inertia, political bias towards the better-off, and complex social inter-relationships of cast and gender.

Yves Thoraval notes in his book, *The Cinemas of India*, quoting Aruna Vasudev that “in the 70s and 80s, Bombay and other big cities have been marked by underworld activities, a rise in crime, smuggling, illicit fortunes, rape and prostitution—evils daily denounced in the press and on TV and radio.”³⁷ (Thoraval: 120 pp). He further argues that what was actually happening was the “degeneration and systematic denigration of the forces of law and order.” Hindi cinema also attempts to cash in on this systemic crisis by “reflecting in form as well as in content these conditions in its own way.” Therefore, the heroes and heroines are depicted as “brutes” that dispense justice and fight with the villains in the cities or with those of the oppressors of peasants in the villages. The growing urban audience was identifying with these “urban” films.

³⁷ Thoraval, Yves, *The Cinemas of India*. New Delhi: MacMillan India Ltd., 2002.

(Interestingly, in the urban areas in India, the demographic growth has increased from 18 percent in 1961 to 26 percent in 1991, as opposed to 40 percent in China and 70 percent in Mexico and Brazil, in almost the same period -Thoraval: 119 pp).

At the level of policies, the government was trying hard to curb the increasing crimes in the urban centres. Black marketing and hoarding of essential commodities were highly paying illegal businesses of those days. It was not hard to imagine that such things might happen in a controlled economy. The prices went very high and many essential commodities seemed to disappear from the market. The government passed the Prevention of Black Marketing and Maintenance of Supplies of Essential Commodities Act in 1980. Hindi films were already addressing these issues. For example, Manoj Kumar showed the villains as black marketers and hoarders in his well known film, *Roti Kapda Aur Makan* (1974). In one of the scenes of the film, the main villain Madam Puri, jubilant after hearing the news that his men have successfully hoarded a lot of articles worth crores of rupees, he laughs at the Prime Minister's speech who was warning harsh actions against the black marketers. Kumar had also dealt with this issue in his earlier film *Upkar*. Hrishikesh Mukherjee also had highlighted the issue of price rises in his worker's melodrama, *Namak Haram* (1973).

Time line: The Eighties onwards

Prevention of Black Marketing and Maintenance of Supplies of Essential Commodities Act, 1980: *Roti Kapda Aur Makan*, 1974, *Namak Haram*, 1973

Bureaucracy, delays and Red Tape: *Saaransh*, 1984

TADA in 1985 and Terrorist Affected Areas Act in 1987: *Mr. India*, 1987

Narcotics and Psychotropic Substances Act, 1985: *Hare Rama Hare Krishna*, 1971

Judicial Delays: *Damini*, 1993

A New Culture emerges: *Qayamat Se Qayamat Tak*, 1988

Liberalization: *Gupt*, 1997

Babri Masjid Demolition, 1992: *Bombay*, 1995

Joint ventures and collaborations: *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun*, 1994

New Telecom Policy: *Haseena Maan Jayegi*, 1999

Foreign Direct Investment: *Duplicate*, 1998

Cable TV Network Regulation Act, 1995: *Phir Bhi Dil Hai Hindustani*, 2000

By the mid 80s many film directors were commenting on the system of endemic corruption in the country. Mahesh Bhatt's *Saaransh* (1984) looked at bureaucratic delays and red tap. Around the same time, terrorism in Kashmir, Punjab, and the North Eastern India were growing. The government passed legislations like TADA in 1985 and Terrorist Affected Areas Act in 1987. Films like *Mr. India* (1987), and later *Khalnayak* and *Roja* looked at the issues of terrorism, albeit in true Bollywood formula style.

Another issue that Hindi films doggedly focussed on was the illicit drug trade. In 1971, Dev Anand had made a strong plea against drugs in his film, *Hare Rama Hare Krishna*. Films like *Jaanbaz* and *Saathi* also underlined the need to brutally destroy this deadly trade. As a result, the government passed the Narcotics and Psychotropic Substances Act in 1985.

By the late 80s, a new culture was emerging in the country. Bollywood also showcased this change through films like *Qayamat Se Qayamt Tak* (1988) and *Maine Pyar Kiya* (1989). The environment in the country was changing for sure and there was already a mood for reforming the affairs of the state. This new mood was the harbinger of the watershed economic reforms introduced by Dr. Manmohan Singh.

In the 1990s, the films became more and more oriented towards the new economic policies and dismantling of the old moribund systems. Except for the darkness that enveloped the country in the wake of the Babri Masjid demolition in 1992 (*Bombay*, 1995), the country seemed poised for taking giant leaps to get a foothold in the new world order. Films potently reflected that mood in all its hues and shades: *Damini* (1993) pleaded to restructure the judicial system, *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* (1994) talked of joint ventures and collaborations, *Haseena Maan Jayegi* (1999) celebrated the mobile culture ("What is Mobile Number"), *Duplicate* (1998) urged for foreign direct investment, and *Phir Bhi Dil Hai Hindustani* (2000) depicted the rivalry between various TV channels (Cable TV Network Regulation Act, 1995).

However, one film that must be mentioned in the context of the liberalization of the Indian economy is Rajiv Rai's blockbuster, *Gupt* (1997). Not to be mistaken, the film was not a secret paean to the virtues of liberalization and globalisation. Rather, it was a racy whodunit, which won the charismatic actress Kajol the best villain award of the year.

The film shows a meeting inside a government building. Governor Jaisingh Sinha (Raj Babbar, who is a politician in real life too!) heads the meeting as a moderator. The meeting has an assorted cast of characters: politicians, sidekicks, industrialists, moneybags, go-betweens, and union leaders. The topic of the debate is the open door policy. The moot question is: Will the open door policy be the bane of the country? The term open door policy sounds colonial—harking back to the times of the *lasses faire* economy. In the given context of the film, the term “open door policy” has been euphemistically used for the liberalization policy. By the time the film was released, India had already successfully swum through the first phase of liberalization. The nation, however, was still debating the pros and cons of the liberalization policy.

The debate is actually between two characters: Dilip Tahil, who represents the interests of a forward-looking pro-liberalization industry and Sharat Saxena, who represents the causes of the labour. Dilip argues that the open door policy will bring in foreign investment into the country and strengthen the economy. The governor agrees with him on this point saying that dollars would strengthen the domestic currency. Sharat, on the other hand, makes a counter point. He argues that foreign companies would by and by gain control of the economy and later of the whole political system. He sees the open door policy as an invitation to foreign powers to make India once again a slave country. He cautions that India's doors to foreign investors must remain closed lest once again we lose our sovereignty. He says that computers would turn majority of the workforce jobless and people on the street would become more impoverished. At this, Dilip attacks Sharat as the representative of the regressive and right wing thinking in the country. He says that the partition of the country, the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi, and the demolition of the Babri Mosque happened because of people like him. Sharat harks back labelling Dilip a pimp who is ready to sell off his country for a fistful of dollars. Doesn't the same debate get replayed in Parliament even today whenever the issue of deregulating a certain sector come up?

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