An Ode to the Nehruvian Hero: Revisiting Films of Dilip Kumar

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Abstract

With the passing of veteran actor Dilip Kumar on 7 July 2021, a void has been left in Hindi cinema. Along with his method acting and power-packed performances, Dilip Saab was known for his on-screen charisma, political fervour, and his down-to-earth nature. This article attempts to revisit his works from 1944-1964, also referred to as the 'golden age of Bollywood cinema'. The article tries to draw a parallel between Nehru's leadership of India and how films of Dilip Kumar represent the discourses of modernity and in turn critique them. For this, two films from his oeuvre have been chosen for analysis- Naya Daur (1957) and Ganga Jumna (1961).

Keywords: *Actor, Nehruvian, Hero, Cinema, Bollywood*

INTRODUCTION

When one reflects upon the 'golden age of Hindi cinema', he'd come across the pantheon who stood as pillars for Bollywood. These names include Raj Kapoor, Dev Anand, and Dilip Kumar who created a niche for themselves in the Hindi films of the 1940s and 50s. These stars were born within a year of each other (1923/24) and made their debut within a couple of years of each other. Dilip Kumar debuted with *Jwar Bata* (1944), Dev Anand with *Hum Ek Hain* (1946), and Raj Kapoor with *Neelkamal* (1947). With their stylistic innovations, good looks, and onscreen personas, they quickly became household names and continued to 'rule' the Hindi film industry for the next quarter of a century and in the process gave a new definition of stardom to post-independent India. While two of them (Raj Kapoor and Dev Anand) went on to form their production companies-Raj Kapoor launched R.K.

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Films in 1948 and Dev Anand launched Nav Ketan in 1951-and were thus in a position to shape their images and careers. Dilip Kumar, on the other hand, preferred to remain an actor first and last, thus, was compelled to shape his career and form his image through the films he starred in.

Born as Yusuf Khan in Peshawar, Pakistan in a humble family, Khan immigrated to India in the1930s with a dream of becoming a cricketer, but like many, he stumbled across cinema and was discovered by Devika Rani, 'first lady of Indian Cinema' and owner of Bombay Talkies, which is one of the most leading production houses. As prevalent during those days, most of the Muslim actors changed their names, so Devika Rani rechristened him as Dilip Kumar.

Dilip Kumar resembles Marlon Brando whose career, interestingly, covers the same period. When Brando (with his animal charm) and Dilip (with his brooding tragic persona) exploded on the screen, they drove men and women wild with adulation. Both were the followers of Stanislavsky's 'method acting' and became the symbols of the time. However, it was Kumar who won accolades for his performance as 'tragedy king' as well as for portraying the idealistic leader of a newly Independent India in films like *Naya Daur (1957), Ganga Jumna (1961), and Leader (1964).* According to Lord Meghnad Desai,

Dilip Kumar's career is a reflection of the course of India since Independence. His career took off and rose to its peak during the time (1947-64) when Jawaharlal Nehru was India's Prime Minister; 36 of his 57 films were made during this period. It was during this period that Dilip Kumar developed a range of highly popular characters that reflected the idealism and range of optimism of that period, characters that inspired the youth and were often imitated by them. (Desai, 2004, p. vii)

Desai further adds,

This was the time of the Second Five Year Plan (1956-61) which sought to rebuild rural India, to lay the foundations of industrial progress, and to secure to the greatest extent feasible opportunities for weaker and underprivileged sections of our people and the balanced development of all parts of the country…for a country whose economic development was long retarded, these are difficult tasks but, given the effort and the sacrifice, they are well within our capacity to achieve. (Desai, 2004, p. 25)

It is with this view that this article attempts to revisit the concepts of Gandhian tradition and Nehruvian modernity in the works of this veteran actor.

INDIAN MODERNITY: TWO APPROACHES

As India gained its independence in 1947, there were fervent changes in the nation. The subcontinent was now divided into two nations of India and Pakistan after a violent communal partition. Bollywood, which was so far directing studio musicals and melodramas, saw its downfall with partition with many well-known studios such as Bombay Talkies, New Theatres, Prabhat, Imperial Film Company, Sagar Movietone, etc. shutting down. The promised independence was far from reality with rampant unemployment, high mortality rates, etc. Also, Gandhi's death in 1948 threw India further into an abyss.

Post-Independence films of the 1950s and 1960s ratified or critiqued the Nehruvian drive of modernization. Rashmi Doraiswamy reflects, "Films by Raj Kapoor and Dev Anand presented the disillusionment created by this whole context of modernization. Narratives about criminals-usually thieves functioned as the 'limit text' of an era" (Doraiswamy, 2008, pp. 8-9). She further adds,

> The figure of an outsider coming to the city to earn a living and accidentally becoming a criminal were the themes on which films were made under R.K. and Navketan banner. While Raj Kapoor films dealt with the theme of individual's descent into crime and inscribed a debate about criminality engendered by social and not genetic factors, the Navketan films made the condition more universal and more modern (Doraiswamy, 2008, p. 16).

It is here when films of Dilip Kumar truly stand out as narratives of hope and optimism, while films of Dev Anand and Raj Kapoor, critiqued modernity and were sometimes infused with socialist overtones, for instance in Raj Kapoor's *Shri 420* (1955) and *Jaagte Raho* (1956). Unlike films of Raj Kapoor, Dev Anand, and Guru Dutt, where an anti-hero trope was part of the narrative attempting to critique and highlight the social wrongs prevalent in post-independent India, it was Kumar's films that stood as a symbol of hope and unity. Dilip Kumar seldom played a villain or anti-hero in the Nehru years, while the other two based their image on playing the criminal or rebelling against society. In his films, there was a Gandhian belief in the equality of all religions, castes, and classes and a Nehruvian belief in the ability of all institutions being set up in post-independent India to dispense social justice. This welding of the visions of the Father of the Indian nation (Gandhi) and the Father of the Indian State (Nehru) found an aspirational touch in his films.

But both the Nehruvian and the Gandhian sense of modernity worked at different

levels and were constantly at loggerheads with each other. Mahatma Gandhi in his autobiography *'My Experiments with the Truth'* pointed out, "If India copies England, it is my firm conviction that she will be ruined...Civilization is not an incurable disease, but it should never be forgotten that the English people are at present afflicted by it." (Gandhi, 2000, p. 168). Throughout the late 1940s to 1960s, Indian cinema began to flourish much to the dismay of Gandhi, who died in 1948. Jawaharlal Nehru, like all the other leaders in the west, understood the value of cinema, as the whole experience of film viewing was seen as a community effect, and was also seen as a source of disseminating propaganda. With Nehru's appointment of S.K. Patil film inquiry, which became the first official statement on the new independent freelance investment sector that had replaced the old pre-war studios, the report observed,

> The cinema going habit spread much further and faster among the population following a greater purchasing power among all classes. Within three months of the end of the war, the leadership of industry had changed them and established producers to a variety of successors. Leading 'stars', exacting 'financiers', and calculating distributors forged ahead. Film production, a combination of art, industry, and showmanship, became in substantial measure, the recourse of deluded aspirants to easy riches (Nowell Smith, 1996, p. 679).

It was during this period that Dilip Kumar broke away from the stereotypes of rebellious characters, who lose out on everything at the end, which was portrayed in films by Raj Kapoor, Dev Anand, and Guru Dutt. Films like Raj Kapoor's Awaara (1951), Dev Anand's *Taxi Driver* (1954), *Kala Bazaar* (1960), and Guru Dutt's *Pyaasa* (1957), castigated India and its leaders for their failure to match the expectations raised during the Independence struggle. Dilip Kumar was part of the milieu, sharing hope but aware as in his film *Footpath (1953)*, that all was not well with Nehru's India. Yet overall, he was optimistic which could be argued below with the help of the selected films, which tried to capture the undercurrent of dynamism and social upliftment in those years, which were a significant part of the Nehruvian vision.

NAYA DAUR (1957)

In the second half of the 1950s, Dilip Kumar reworked his image as the tragedy king and started doing lighter films that didn't require him to die in the end. Though he worked in comedies like *Azaad* (1955), *Kohinoor* (1960), etc, he attempted to reshape his image as the

hero, who represented the angst of the rural population as well as the class of factory workers in the urban milieu to discourses of modernity and in turn critiquing it. This was successfully established in B.R. Chopra's *Naya Daur* which was released in 1957. The year 1957 was quite significant in many ways for India. It was the tenth anniversary of Independence, and was also marked by the release of films like Guru Dutt's *Pyaasa* (1957), dealing with nationalist disillusionment in post-independent India. Mehboob Khan's *Mother India* (1957) was nominated for an academy award in the 'Best Foreign Film' category. So, it was a pretty charged atmosphere in the nation when *Naya Daur* (1957) was released, hence, becoming the quintessential Nehruvian film fitting nicely with the new initiatives in economic planning and rural community development.

The film stars Dilip Kumar as Shankar a '*tangawallah*' (horse-cart driver) and is set in a village where the older systems of production and livelihood are threatened by the coming of machines. The film takes a look at the issue by pitting two sets of binaries against each other—traditional economy vs. capitalist modernity and village against the city. The film's principal characters are portrayed in a way that they personify these aspects of being. The protagonist Shankar (Dilip Kumar) seems to personify the goodness of the tradition while the antagonist, Kundan (Jeevan) personifies the evil of modernity. Kundan's altruistic father Seth Maganlal (Nasir Hussain) stands for a traditional, indigenous, and self-sufficient economy under which there is harmony in the village. His departure for a pilgrimage and the coming of Kundan in the village becomes the origin of the crisis, ostensibly caused by the interference of a capitalist, mechanized economics of the city in an existing system of harmonious production and distribution in the village. The character of Krishna, Shankar's childhood friend is also interesting to note. Initially a part of the existing harmonious system of the village, he is overcome by the state of revenge and gets lured into Kundan's capitalist machinations after a misunderstanding between him and Shankar over their love for Rajani, played by Vyajanthimala. Krishna is a sort of a prodigal son who is temporarily lured away by the charms of the capitalist system, but towards the end of the film, realizes his mistake and returns to the fold. In terms of ideology, the film levels a critique of modernity from a Gandhian standpoint. Right after the credit sequence, there is a still shot of text which goes thus:

> We are all leaves of a majestic tree whose trunk cannot be shaken off its roots, which are deep down in the bowels of the earth. In this, there is no room for machinery that would displace human labour and concentrate power in a few hands. Labour has its unique place in a cultured human family...

Dead machinery must not be pitted against the millions of living machines represented by the villagers scattered in the seven hundred thousand villages of India. Machinery to be well used has to help and use human effort... (Gandhi, 2000)

The film thus makes no bones about its adaptation of Gandhian leanings. The text cited above reiterates a critique of capitalism and *capitalist modernity* so to speak. The film attempts to embrace socialism with Dilip Kumar's Shankar wielding a phawra (a plough) emblematic of soviet posters of the 1920s and 1930s where men and women worked together for the progress of the nation; for instance, in the lines from the song साथी हाथ बढ़ाना (O friend lend a hand)

"हम मेहनतवालों ने जब भी मिलकर कदम बढ़ाया
सागर ने रास्ता छोड़ा परबत ने शीश झुकाया …
फौलादी हैं सीने अपने फौलादी हैं बाहें,
हम चाहें तो पैदा करदें, चट्टानों में रहें …

("Whenever we the workers have walked in unison,
the sea has parted for us and the mountain has bowed down its head…
our chests are made of steel and so are our hands…
if we want to, we can create paths even in stone")

Despite having the message of hope, the film also reflects on mass displacement from the village to the city due to unemployment. Desai reiterates,

> The theme of loss and displacement caused by an economic system and human error and order of life in flux is not peculiar to *Naya Daur* and has a long history in Indian cinema being tackled in earlier films such as K.A. Abbas's *Dharti Ke Lal* (1946), which deals with Bengal famine in the 1940s and Bimal Roy's *Do Beegha Zameen* (1953), which deals with an ordinary peasant losing his lands to the high-profile politics played by the zamindars (Desai, 2004, p. 106).

Even in the end, film draws parallels to Fritz Lang's Metropolis, while attempting to bridge the class divide, further finding an alternative system wherein there would be a harmonious existence of man and machine. Meghnad Desai terms the film as "a quintessentially Nehruvian film" (Desai, 2004, p. 106). But taking this at face value is a too simplistic and reductive reading of the film. There is a somewhat contradictory strain in the ideological logic of the film's narrative. While the film takes up a Gandhian critique of modernity as its starting point, it also tries to find common ground with the Nehruvian

worldview. *Mechanization* is denounced here in the sense that it is seen as being the outcome of profit-based capitalism, but not *machinery* itself. Therefore, in some sense, the film tries to find a balance between the Nehruvian and the Gandhian approaches to modernity and mechanization. The film, therefore, does not blindly support or attack Nehruvian ideology. Desai himself recognizes this when he says that the film seeks "a compromise between the Gandhian dislike of machinery and the Nehruvian plan for modernity" (Desai, 2004, p. 106).

With this role Dilip Kumar enters his active phase of being a leader of men, acknowledged as such by his fellow villagers, he is sensitive but tough. This sort of persona has developed from a swashbuckling rebel in *Aan* (1952) via *Azaad* (1955) to arrive as a stronger version of rural man which is visible in Ganga Jamuna (1961) the next film that would be analysed.

GANGA JUMNA (1961)

Ganga Jumna, directed by Nitin Bose and written by W Mirza closely followed the trope of class divide and finds similarities to Mehboob Khan's *Mother India* (1957) and Yash Chopra's *Deewar* (1975). In *Ganga Jumna*, Dilip Kumar enters a territory long familiar to Raj Kapoor and Dev Anand, by glorifying a rebel or an anti-hero. The film goes back to the simplicity of the late 1940s and early 1950s, and the title sequence begins with childhood scenes: the background of poverty and dignity of the lives of the two boys Ganga and Jumna, and of their widowed mother (played by Leela Chitnis) is depicted. Ganga (Dilip Kumar) takes on all the hardship of physical level to ensure that Jumna gets a good education. As the story takes its usual turn, Ganga is falsely accused of embezzlement by the zamindars. Ganga is driven to rebellion and he takes to the hills with Dhanno (Vyajanthimala), his sweetheart. In the meantime, Jumna (Nasir Khan) has been in the city to get education and finds a job as a policeman. It is this contrast between the lives of the brother that sets up the climactic conflict in which Jumna has to kill his elder brother Ganga. It is only after Ganga's death that everyone acknowledges the circumstances that led to this transgression.

The Nehruvian model of development is ratified and critiqued in this film as compared to *Naya Daur* (1957). This film comes a year before the Indo-China war which threw Indian dreams of modernity for a spin and further widened the class divide. The film also moves away from the optimism of *Naya Daur* as we witness the feudalistic class divide in place in the agrarian economy. There is also a contrast between the old benevolent zamindars in *Naya Daur* and the ever capitalist and manipulative zamindars in *Ganga Jumna.* Unlike Shankar, who emerges as a role model and a leader in *Naya Daur*, Ganga is driven by his abject

poverty to commit dacoity which leads to the violent death of the capitalist Zamindar. In this sense, *Ganga Jumna* dismisses the possibility of any sort of reconciliation between the old order and the new one and actively pushes the drive for modernization. The absence of any sort of redemptive possibility also necessitates the death of Ganga at the hands of Jumna, a narrative that is earlier seen in *Mother India (1957)* and *Deewar (1975)*; in a sense, this also negates the possibility of any radical, revolutionary reaction to the old order at the cost of the incipient Nehruvian nation.

Meghnad Desai witnesses a key change in Kumar's oeuvre in Ganga Jumna as he notes,

> The film remains quintessentially Indian; we can see *Ganga Jumna* as Dilip Kumar's version of ideal manhood matured over the years. The ideal is a rural youth, simple and hardworking, god-fearing and loyal to his mother and brother, lovingly protective of his beloved whom he marries throwing caste considerations aside (Desai, 2004, p. 109).

In the film, Dilip Kumar gets closer to his audience, as the dialogues of the film slip from Hindi to Bhojpuri, a local dialect of Uttar Pradesh. While Ganga and Dhanno speak Bhojpuri, his brother speaks Hindi. Thus, there is a distance between the village and the city and between the educated and the illiterate. This linguistic barrier along with the class divide is responsible for the incomprehension of Ganga and his legitimate complaint against the zamindars' cheating as it is not recognized by the law, which speaks Hindi and not Bhojpuri.

This failure to communicate leads to the law siding with the wealthy, though later in the film the police realize that Ganga's rebellious streak came out of the abject poverty that he witnessed. Though the film is Nehruvian, it reflects the waning of hopes in Nehruvian promises as shown in *Naya Daur,* the village has expanded, but the power of the landlord has not gone away, as there is poverty and exploitation. While the rebellious Shankar in *Naya Daur* gets the backing from the community, Ganga faces ostracization from the community in *Ganga Jumna*; while in *Naya Daur*, Shankar fought against injustice while staying in the village, in *Ganga Jumna*, Ganga is forced to leave the village. There is despair now, where there was hope before. The law though doesn't side with the zamindars but is also uncomprehending Ganga's problems.

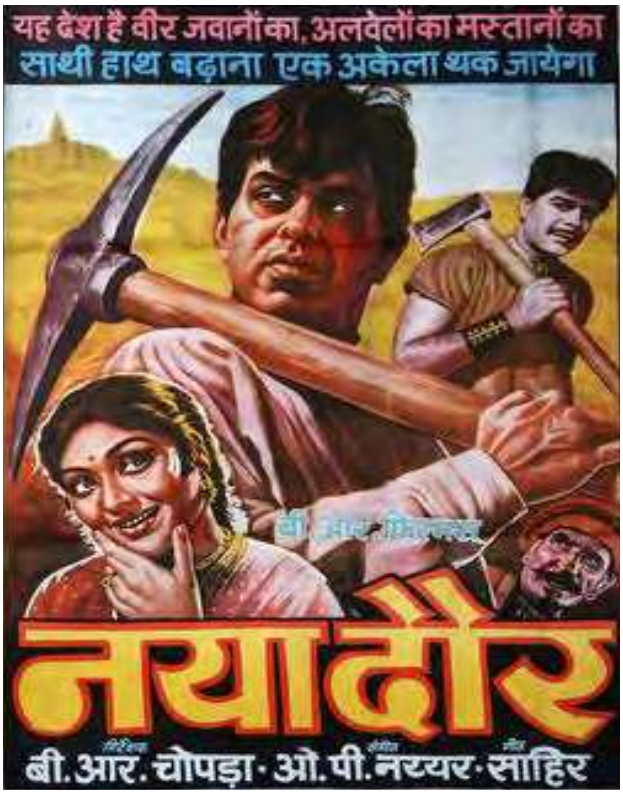

Image 1 and 2: From wielding a plough in *Naya Daur* (1957) to wielding a gun in *Ganga Jumna* (1961), the Nehruvian hero, Dilip Kumar goes through a drastic transformation.

CONCLUSION

As evident, Nehru's prime ministerial regime (1947-64) was marked by the thrust towards development and modernization, which involved the development of film as a medium of communication in India. The films discussed above are examples of Indian cinema coming to terms with modernization, though it leaves a lot of space from its purview. The basic argument remains that films starring Dilip Kumar can be seen as 'entertainers', capable of pulling capacity crowds as well as, active public engagement with nation-building policy at another level. Like all the role models from yesteryears, Dilip Kumar remained one for *Midnight's Children* (the so-called youth of immediate post-independent India), representing their angst and anguish in Nehruvian India. His roles as rural and urban youth fighting for its right and highlighting the downside of modernity, due to the capitalistic nature are very well represented in *Naya Daur (1957), Ganga Jumna (1961),* and many films like *Paigham (1959), Leader (1964), Sagina Mahato (1971)* (Bengali version directed by Tapan Sinha), *Gopi (1977)* and many more. His films didn't blindly criticize modernity but represented every discourse associated with it before critiquing it.

This article would further like to suggest that the question of modernity in the Indian cinema of the late 1950s formed modernity elicited filmic response at one level, and filmic introspection at the other. Therefore, the cinema of the period is at once ideologically charged, as well as cinematically charged, and the thrust towards *modernity* and the films of Dilip Kumar represented these aspects. As evident, the quality of the roles started deteriorating with the death of the mentor (Nehru's death in 1964), as Dilip Kumar's roles began slowly but perceptibly changing in keeping with the changing political life of the country.

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