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Land, Nation and Post-Independent Hindi Cinema: A Case Study of *Mother India* and *Do Bigha Zameen*

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Abstract

The idea of nation has been constructed, debated and reconstructed in socio-cultural representations throughout the world. In case of India, the idea of nation is deeply connected with the idea of land relations as a cultural policy. Hindi popular cinema after the Indian independence embraced the subject of land as its narrative trope and tried to disseminate the idea of a self-sufficient independent nation. Mehboob's *Mother India* (1957) became an instrumental cinematic venture not only for the Bombay film industry, but for constructing an idea of an 'Indianness' based on the metaphor of land as the mother. If the role of the Indian state was shown triumphantly way in *Mother India* in dealing with the problem of land in the post-independent nation, *Do Bigha Zameen* (1953) questioned the very validity of such statist interventions, especially at the wake of Jawaharlal Nehru's Five Year Plans for industrial development. *Mother India* and *Do Bigha Zameen* became two most important film texts of national film culture when it comes to the question of land and peasant lives. Ironically, these two films can be considered as two distorted mirror images of each other in their gaze on questions of land in early post-independence era.

Keywords: Nation, Hindi popular cinema, land relations, *Mother India*, *Do Bigha Zameen*

Article

The question of land has been haunting Western political thought since the 17th Century. John Locke, who is among the most influential political philosophers on Enlightenment, in his *Second Treatise on Government* published in 1690 looked to the influence of Scripture to define land.[1] Through the institution of private property, Locke not only justified appropriation of land in terms of mixing one's labour with it, but also sought justification on appropriation by stating that it served to advance common good by maximising productivity. In Western political thought, John Locke was establishing a legitimate shift from notions of common property to the notion of private property and providing one of the earliest justification for private ownership and capitalism. The earliest instances of primary or primitive accumulation in India was accomplished by colonial officials and European traders in mid 19th and 20th centuries leading to the rise of what Karl Marx had termed 'the merchant capital in Britain'.[2]

Cinema about land relations (ownership and distribution) has often featured legal issues and courtroom dramas and much of these contests over land and class inequality are commonly understood through their representation in popular culture. In matters pertaining to questions on land and property rights, it is only apt to ask whether the most significant arbiter of meaning is limited to the confines of judicial decision-making or its representation in mass media, mainly Hindi cinema, shaped by large-scale political processes. Two monumental films, taken as representatives of the era of the 1950s land reforms, have been pivotal in understanding the way Hindi films have addressed the land question since independence. Upbeat about the Congress Agrarian Reforms, its committee headed by Jawaharlal Nehru, while on one hand we have in 1957, Mehboob Khan's *Mother India* propagating a sense of national identity built on a correctional agrarian reform of apparent rationality and equitability (abolition of intermediaries and forced labour, tenancy reforms, ceilings on land holdings of the feudal colonial past); on the other hand, there is Bimal Roy's 1953 classic *Do Bigha Zameen* which punctured the projected nationalist imagination of the Congress ruling elite by questioning their idea of the 'tiller'.

In the essay *Land Reform in India: Issues and Challenges from 'Promised Land: Competing Visions of Agrarian Reforms'*, Manpreet Sethi says:

As the basis of all economic activities, land can either serve as an essential asset for a country to achieve economic growth and social equity, or it can be used as a tool in the hands of a few to hijack a country's economic independence and subvert its social process.[3]

Hindi cinema's stance on land relations in India cannot be straight-jacketed by simply reasoning it as a cultural production of sound and image that resonates and disseminates ideas of community and tradition rather than the modern approach of the State. The question of social

inequality through ownership of land as portrayed in Hindi popular cinema remains a contentious arena for a number of decades. Here, the role of the state becomes interesting as noted by Madhav Prasad:

The constitution of the subject is effected by a process of socialization undertaken by the principle ideological apparatus of the state... The reproduction of social relations hinges on this process of subjectification, without which there would only be a state of pure dominance enforced by the repressive apparatus.....[4]

He concludes

..... the institutions or apparatuses which serve an ideological function are the very means of production of a consensus which acknowledges the naturalness of the existing order.[4]

This brings the question of the role of land during the dawn of economic liberalization of the 1990s where, as rightly pointed above, there is a passive acceptance of the order implicated by the policy makers. Films like *Pardes* and *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge* do not pose a threat to those 10 percent of the population as mentioned by Manpreet Sethi in her essay.[3] Whether it is the feudal economy of rural India or the liberal market ethics of global India, land remains a centrally contingent point with pithy portrayals in Hindi cinema from its years of the Raj to that of Swaraj followed by Ramraj.

Mother India's initial scene starts with mid-close to long shots of hectares of agricultural land being tilled, tilled not by the traditional and archaic image we know of a bullock cart, but heavy machineries and heavy tractors – a sign of Indian foreign imports for its domestic and rural development, one of the earliest signs in the film about nation-building. Up until then we had rarely experienced sights of expensive, monstrous and state-of-the-art heavy duty vehicles tilling or developing an Indian village. These initial images of the film *Mother India* are those of development in terms of infrastructure, a projected iconic representation of the dream of nation building – all draped in the austerity of the idea of land, in a literal sense. This gives us a preconceived idea of a worldly view of the Nehruvian dream (Jawaharlal Nehru's *Tryst and Destiny* speech proclaimed his vision for a modern India with the consciousness of India's "awakening as a free nation"). This Nehruvian dream of an emerging nation would bestow hope on a 'shining tomorrow' based not only on its agricultural development, but development of the Indian people on the basis of their relation and liberation vis-a-vis their land. But this restoration of hope and the relation with the 'mother' earth would not come only with idealistic hopes conferred on social mobilization, but also on tools and machineries that the Western modernity had to offer to a nation like India. *Mother India* begins with the portrayal of the Second Five Year Plan of 1956-61 where the stress was on import-substitution industrialisation. The film thus becomes an iconic reminder of what the nation intends to be, a nation-in-making. In the film, the inauguration of the dam by Radhaa in itself is the personification of what Nehru mentioned of dams as temples of modern India, when he spoke specifically during the occasion of the inauguration of the Bhakra Nangal Project. These initial images suggest that a self-nourished independent idea of a nation is firmly rooted in rural life.

Whether it is the Indian epic *Mahabharata* or Rabindranath Tagore's political drama like *Red Oleanders* (*Rakta Karabi*), [5] the issue of land has always been in direct conflict with interests of the State or those who hold power, of the commons, of the economy, or even projected as a strange predicament of personal freedom and resistance against a system of repression and coercion. Cinema's pre-cursors and grand narratives have upheld the issues of land from various aspects and have been treating the same as if the idea of land has transgressed its spatial aspect of something that can be measured. Rather, it has become ideological terrains of validations, representations of a pre-state ordeal of a community in its sheer term of capacity, and has become the idea of vast magnitude that is beyond the comprehension of common men to gauge its magnitude. Various art forms like literature, visual images saturated with symbols, similes and metaphors, are deeply immersed into a belief system of a cultural practice and have been attached to the idea of land, attributing and augmenting social/ideological issues that are sometimes metaphysical in nature, beyond the realms of the world, and sometimes conforming to mere materiality of human existence.

The first question that Dhritarashtra (the blind king of Hastinapur and the father of the Kauravas who were defeated in the great battle of Kurukshetra) asks Sanjaya (charioteer of Dhritarashtra and commentator of the war) as the great battle of Kurukshetra begins is the question of land - an elaborate and detailed physical description of a huge landmass called 'Jamvudweepa' has been given in *The Mahabharata*,[6] Book 6, *Bhishma Parva*, from Section IV. Dhritarashtra asks about the provinces, the rivers, its mountains and other physical descriptions of the land. It is quite decipherable from such readings that even in an epic of antiquity, the land, with its physical nature, has been at the centre of contention

among the kings and princes. In his *Discovery of India*, Nehru speaks about 'Bharat Mata' as land and its relation to its people. While approaching the idea of India in terms of her diversities among the peasants, Nehru points out that along with diverse ethnicities with mammoth differences in their culture, the question of the peasants from the far north Kashmir to the southern tip of Kanyakumari, remains the same.[7] Nehru tries to address the very notion of a popular idea of nationhood through a small experience - on his arrival in a village he was greeted with the words, "...Bharat Mata Ki Jai - 'Victory to Mother India'. [7] It had been a popular norm of greeting another fellow Indian, which readily signifies a strong tie to the motherland in terms of linguistic expression. One of the most discussed and critically acclaimed plays of Tagore, *Raktakarabi*, [5] speaks about this issue of a shared heritage that not only refers the Indian epic of a collective aspiration, but a shared predicament that can even be traced in Valmiki Ramayana. At the centre of the play is the only woman character, and the entire diegetic space is that of a city called "yakshapuri" - a site of labour exploitation through mining of land.[5]

Renan's seminal work *What is Nation?* (1882) [8] defines a nation as something that constitutes a soul or a spiritual principle. This seems to be a melting pot for all the contentious points when it comes to conceiving the idea of a nation, the "spiritual principle" represented by Radha in *Mother India*, of course land being the leitmotif or the refrain. However, Renan identifies two characteristics that interjects into what he calls the 'spiritual principle' called nation – firstly, the possession of memories and nostalgia of a rich legacy of historical ideas of a community accumulated from various sources, the second being the unanimity of consent to live a community life with all the members of the society woven with the same thread of an ideological trajectory and the will to endorse and enable the undivided form of the value system that has been received through the heritage of culture.[8] Renan points out further,

...the fact of sharing, in the past, a glorious heritage and regrets, and of having, in the future, [a shared] programme to put into effect, or the fact of having suffered, enjoyed, and hoped together. [8]

Renan's view of a nation is that of a 'large scale solidarity' that endures the memory of the past as its unique and quintessential identity while envisioning a present in its continuum with consent to a common life. *Mother India's* opening scene reflects this idea of nationhood – reminiscing the past as something essentially credible that constitutes a national identity. But this national identity and pride is only arrived at after a succession of failures for Radha. An Indian identity of motherhood, embodying the mother Earth is again knitted into a series of actions, and these actions are ontologically and fundamentally tied down to activities related to land.

Mother India is actually a reinvention of the perception of land where the protagonist is to be perceived as something more earthly than a mere embodiment of (mother) earth or land, with a rich tradition of mythological and archetypal investments. The initial images are talking about a material present that India has set foot upon. According to David Hardiman [9] the tradition of pawning out of land in exchange of food grains or money for bare minimum sustenance as seen in *Mother India* and *Do Bigha Zameen*, does not fit into the traditional values of the village community. Hardiman's findings can be seen through Lala's relation to Radha's family in terms of usurer and the exploited peasant as the Baniya [9], a community of middlemen who "...have managed to exert their power over the peasantry", but not merely in terms of pure economics of the relationship. So the land relation in terms of pawning and such other activities, though from a vantage point may be seen as an economic term, but Hardiman reveals the inadequacy of such explanation, rather he finds the root of such a relation of land from the general extension of support to these usurers by the "...successive states from the pre-colonial times to colonial times." [9] This exertion of power through a chain of hierarchical positions of hegemony and ideology had been successfully exerting their power over the peasants. Hardiman resorts to the seminal works of Gramsci, Foucault and Bourdieu, and manages to interrogate the complex structure of the Indian land relations where the Baniyas like Lala in *Mother India* consolidate power.

Although *Mother India* and *Do Bigha Zameen* deal with the same issue of land and its relation to human society through characters like Radha, Shambhu Mahato respectively, these two films are starkly different from each other. It is well discernable that the former enters into the much desired nationalist project that talks about the modern state machinery as something that is imperative for a discourse of nationalist development. But *Do Bigha Zameen* almost scrutinizes these operative functions of the state for the same crisis of land-relation for the peasants, and represents them as a failed system. In spite of having the premise to set and roll the nation-narrative as something that takes the shape of a political and material mobilization, the film becomes a critic of the state and fails to come under the overarching nationalist discourse where *Mother India* triumphs. Shambhu Mahato comes to the usurer or the landlord (similar to Sukhi Lala in *Mother India*) to save his two acres of land. An important aspect that is connected to the loss of land for Mahato is strangely resonating not only as the leitmotif of the narratives of land in particular, but also a leitmotif of the much avoided history of land relations in the context of India's economic and social development from the

early days of the Nehruvian dream till the era of Special Economic Zones and industrial land grabbing in the second decade of the twenty first century as Shambhu Mahato's land, which he considers to be his mother and not a property, is being taken for building a mill. He asks, "how can one sell off one's mother?" But much to the insult of the rural sensibility of Shambhu, the landlord dismisses his plea with the harsh words, "By selling the land", he replies with a sneering laugh, 'the mother will become the father". [10].

Almost a kind of a prequel to *Do Bigha Zameen*, K.A. Abbas's debut *Dharti Ke Laal* has similar reverberations in terms of its portrayal of peasant conditions, specially with relations to their lands and land produce. The family, again, being the heart of a socialist-realist melodrama concerning man and his land, is at the centre of the narrative. Although the film made in 1946 under the cultural banner of the Indian Left, IPTA (Indian Peoples' theatre Association), was a response to the Famine of Bengal of 1943, more important questions that the film raises are about access of the peasant to the produce of the land. The landlord and the grain dealer's refusal to pay a fair money for the produce actually acquires much significance in the film. The denial of a fair price, especially during the period of World War II, strikes the Samaddars (the family which is at the heart of the narrative) with impending poverty. The deplorable price rate that is offered to the Samaddars does not have any parity with the cost at which the same grain is being sold in the city. Thanks to former Prime Minister of England, Winston Churchill that the village called Aminpur was on the verge of collapse and was in dire need of food grain. The Samaddars sold off their cow (ironically named Laxmi, which in Indian belief system is a connotation that stands for money and prosperity) and finally, their land. With a caravan of hungry peasants, Samaddars joined the exodus and made their way to the city in search of food. *Dharti Ke Laal* was one of the first mainstream Hindi films that tried to create cinema as a vehicle of social, historical and political consciousness by actually talking about the plight of the modern day peasant-turned-labourer migrants; whose displacement we continue to see even today in newspapers, films and even literature.

Abbas's *Dharti Ke Laal* was based on Bijon Bhattacharya's play *Nabanna* (Harvest) [13] of 1944. This was a period when the socialist ideals and Marxist leanings were reflected through the progressive social groups of artists that included the Progressive Writer's Association or PWA, which culminated in a perspective that critiqued the authority, the state and the government. In fact, Bengal Famine of 1943 was then and even now a widely talked about and debated area in these groups. The Famine of Bengal had been the curious case of human genocide in the history of the colonial discourse, and it is in the recent times that the colonial masters are being questioned in their historical specificity for its dreadful initiation. As Ahmad [11] would point out, with the death toll of five million, this unparalleled event of mass annihilation has been coined by the historians as a 'forgotten holocaust'. The wide-spread disaster and exodus of death in Bengal has been widely discussed by Dr. Gideon Polya:

With the entry of Japan into World War 2 and its conquest of South East Asia, including Burma, the British authorities took strategic steps that affected the availability of food in Bengal. Food was required for soldiers, workers in industrial cities like Calcutta and for export to other parts of the Empire. The grain import requirement of nearly 2 million tons to make up for deficiencies in Indian production was progressively cut back to a disastrous degree. [12]

Often attacked as Marxist propaganda film, IPTA's *Dharti Ke Laal* became extraordinarily significant in two ways – firstly, its blatant and direct addressing of the Bengal Famine in the form that was yet to be absolved by the mainstream popular, a subject that the Indian audience never thought of to have existed outside the newsreel footages. And secondly, the film's denouement which endorses collective farming as the Samaddar family returned to the village claiming their land without the intervention of any authority or any statist agency. As Rajadhyaksh would rightly observe about the film –

...their struggles towards collectivity, and their faith in a socialist future. [14]

The trajectory of land relations that binds *Do Bigha Zameen* and *Dharti Ke Laal* in the same historical knot is felt in two major ways. The first is the impact of colonisation on peasant life and its capitalist logic of physiocracy as delineated by Ranajit Guha, one of the greatest early subaltern studies historians in India, in his book *A Rule of Property in Bengal*. [15] Physiocracy evolved in 18th Century France and believed in the doctrine of surplus production of land. This surplus production was crucial for the physiocrats as it contributed to the wealth of nations through the utilisation of land as a property. Guha suggested how the same worked on Indian land relations during British rule leading to the present condition of landlessness among the peasant class leading to forced migration. [15] Narratives of *Do Bigha Zameen* and *Dharti Ke Laal* have stemmed out of this carefully conducted historical crisis showing displacement of peasants from their own lands not only due to colonial policies but also because of the industrial policies of a modern capitalist nation-state-in-making in early Independent India. This very objectification of land in the Indian economic system brought about by colonialists and Indian industrialists stripped off the Indian sensibility of

treating land as an organic entity and instead establishing it as a property meant for revenue generation. The second factor that helps us to view *Do Bigha Zameen* and *Dharti Ke Laal* on the same plane is the mode of realist representation that both the filmmakers KA Abbas and Bimal Roy preferred to implement.

Unlike *Mother India*, where the melodramatic trope is not limited to its mere representation, but is also found in the narrative gestures of coincidences, Shambhu's relation to land is that of a kind of large scale solidarity of loss for the peasants, and a failure of the state and the modernist intervention that could not resolve the issue of a peasant's right. Bimal Roy puts the fate of other peasants as similar to that of Shambhu through a beautifully shot song sequence 'Mausam Bita Jaye'. Unlike the song sequences of *Mother India* where the peasant community is seen to be dancing in tight shots of mid close-ups, *Do Bigha Zameen*'s song sequence pays attention to the cultivable land through the exquisite use of wide angle shots with deep-focus, representing the country side. The film was deeply influenced by the technical aesthetics of Italian Neo-Realism - a film movement prioritising a new kind of realism that was started after the WWII in Italy to create a new cinematic language representing reality as a whole. [16] Bimal Roy, being a staunch realist, does away with the choreography and renders to the bare minimum expressions of the fellow peasants while Shambhu leaves his village for Kolkata to earn money for retrieving his land. It would be relevant enough to say that Bimal Roy is interested in representation of the peasant community, more than expressing the individual as it was done in *Mother India*. At this juncture of the discussion, I would like to refer to Homi K. Bhabha's ideas of the essentialist readings of nation as a holistic entity -

Nations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind's eye. Such an image of the nation — or narration — might seem impossibly romantic and excessively metaphorical, but it is from those traditions of political thought and literary language that the nation emerges as a powerful historical idea in the west [17].

Bhabha opines that there have been incessant attempts to define a Third World nation. It is imperative that the idea or the term should be addressed and enquired through a historical analysis through his influential essay "DissemiNation: Time, narrative and the margins of the modern nation". [17] When these two important films of post-independent India project a nation embodying themselves through the fabric of land and its people, a certain kind of national allegory is plausible, and even a blatant representation of large-scale solidarity overrides other emotions. Let us say for the sake of looking at India as an emerging nation through a rubric of ideas of land relations, Bhabha's idea of "large-scale solidarity" [17] can be put forward as a key area to look at Indian popular cinema of the time. As Bhabha would put it, this idea of "large-scale solidarity" as a nation presupposes itself as a past as well as a present, keeping the common life to its consent. [17] Nation, as seen by Bhabha as something both "new" and "historical" at the same time (although it is typical of a post-colonial condition of a country), it would only be sufficient to interject at this point that the term 'nation' has a radical and deep connection with the term 'native'. [18] This is only to say that human beings are born into a matrix of relationships which have their settlements in a particular place, in this case it is the land that is used for subsistence farming by the peasant community. This form of existence as a primary and 'placeable' bonding, according to Williams, is fundamental to human as something of greater and natural significance, which the capitalist culture will fail to comprehend or feel. And it is also discussed and opined by the scholar that an arbitrary jump from this condition of living to the designated and utilitarian structures of the modern nation-state is 'entirely artificial'. [17]

The newly formed state of India coming to terms with modernity and the much elusive idea of national development is bestowed through the metaphor of *Mother India*'s Radha and is legitimised through in rubric of the state machinery. But Shambhu's life becomes starkly different from that of Radha's, although both of them are treading the same path of saving their land as peasants. Shambhu's organic relation to his land is seen to be jeopardised by the artificial equations of the capitalist order, formerly through the regressive policies of the Raj and the Company, and even after the independence, the policies of the newly affirmed state and its machinery is failing to realise the cultural and the natural relation of that of the peasant with his land.

Cinema, as a cultural form has been an agent in reminding us of a crisis of land relations and its access, but has never been able to see the satisfactory face of a peasant's respite. The nation succeeded in building its economy with a focus on industrialisation by failing peasants like Shambhu Mahato, as the Second Five Year Plan invested in and prioritised industrial growth at the cost measure of land reforms. In an article published in *The Telegraph* on September 14th, 2018, Prabhat Patnaik summarised the condition of the peasant society analysing its precarious condition for the last three decades. According to Patnaik, over three lakh farmers suicides have been registered in the last thirty years and over

fifteen million peasants have left farming between 1991 and 2011.[19] This article had been written in the context of the historic Kisan Long March that was organised by the All India Kisan Sabha, the peasants' front of the Communist Party of India in the wake of neo-liberal agricultural policies that have forced thousands of farmers to commit suicides in the last few decades. To comprehend the present condition of the peasants, Patnaik had used a Marxist thought - "reserve army of labour". One of the biggest conditions of discomfort for an agrarian-based country like India is that of the peasant's deplorable state of existence is caused due to loss of land ownership for small and medium-scale industries. According to the article, these displaced farmers who eventually lost their lands and the occupation of farming, is actually consolidated into the reserve army of labour, but as Patnaik writes, "The question of absorbing the displaced peasants simply does not arise".[19]

The displaced peasants and small scale farmers ultimately increase the size of the labour force, and in a country like India, this excess of labour is a comfort zone for the those who control the means of production in a capitalist and consumerist society, especially after economic liberalisation. Shambhu Mahato, as one of the most prominent characters of Indian cinema of the late 50s, mark the beginning of the creation of this reserve army of industrial labour. Shambhu returns with his family in Do Bigha Zameen only to find an ugly factory rearing its head on his land that he considered to be his mother. The precariousness of the peasant community is portrayed vividly in the film when the camera carefully pans and uses deep focus to show the anxious groups farmers working on the field when Shambhu makes his way to the city to earn odd jobs that would fetch him easy money and help him save his land. The problem of land relations that was realised by Shambhu in Bimal Roy's Do Bigha Zameen as early as 1953 is yet to be resolved and is still being felt and represented by more recent films like Matru Ki Bijli Ka Mandola (2013), Peepli Live (2010), Kaala (2018) and Asuran (Tamil, 2019).

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