

Tracing the Nehruvian Ideology through the Lens of Hindi Cinema

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ABSTRACT

In the early 20th century, India saw turbulent times with freedom struggle and the tragedy of partition. Amidst this scenario after independence, the first Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru's role, became critical in constructing a new modern India. This article explores the cinematic portrayal of Nehru's ideals while also taking cognizance of the films that are critical of Nehru's ideology. The second segment focuses on the reflections of the Nehruvian ideals in some contemporary filmmakers' works.

Keywords: *Cinema, Idealism, Jawaharlal Nehru, National Building, Pluralism, Secularism.*

Introduction

In the early 20th century, India saw turbulent times, with far-reaching impacts on its society, polity, and economy. The challenges faced by India were immense, the arduous freedom struggle against the British Empire, the dreadful Jallianwala Bagh massacre, India's independence that came simultaneously with the tragedy of partition and integration of princely states, followed by the Kashmir imbroglio, the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi, the father of the nation, the list is overlong. India was in a state of struggle in the early years of independence. The social fabric was torn apart, and economic resources dried up due to colonial exploitation, presenting significant challenges for the emerging nation.

Amidst this historical background, the first Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, had to steer the country through the first decade after independence and not let it fall apart. It was miles to go for India to cross the 'era of darkness' (Tharoor, 2016) to the 'era of hope'. Prime Minister Nehru gave much-required hope, desire, and dreams to the young generation of a new nation to walk forward on the path of democracy and development. In these formative years, Nehru's role in shaping the national narrative by constructing a new modern India based on the values of

nationalism, secularism, democracy, and goals of rapid economic development and radical social change became critical (Chandra et al., 2002, p. 1).

Popular culture, such as films, literature, music, and TV, mirrors and shapes a country's social and political context. Indian cinema has consistently reflected the political journey and values of India's Prime Ministers, from Jawaharlal Nehru to Narendra Modi, while also endorsing government policies. These films also have a certain level of influence on public opinion regarding government policies and acts. Some of the recent films that map the government programmes, policies, and actions are *Toilet Ek Prem Katha* (Swachha Bharat Abhiyan), 2017; *Uri: The Surgical Strike* (Surgical Strike of Indian Army on Pakistan), 2019; *Mission Mangal* (ISRO launching Mars Orbiter Mission), 2019.

In particular, the present paper focuses on the most important era of nation-building. The paper first aims to discover the portrayal of Nehruvian ideas like modernisation, state-led economic transformation, optimism, or faith in humanity in the Hindi cinema during the 'era of hope'. Second, the paper does examine how Nehruvian ideals are portrayed in the works of certain contemporary filmmakers. Third the paper takes cognizance of the films that have been critical of Nehru's ideology.

The paper combines both analytical and descriptive research approaches. The literature review is based on secondary sources. Scholarly works of Mukherjee, M. (2009). *The Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*, Rajadhyaksha, A. (2016). *Indian Cinema: A Very Short Introduction*, Desai, M. (2004). *Nehru's Hero: Dilip Kumar in the Life of India*, Gokulsing, M. and Dissanayake, W. (1998). *Indian Popular Cinema: A Narrative of Cultural Change*, Dingwaney Needham, A. (2013). *New Indian Cinema in Post-Independence India: The Cultural Work of Shyam Benegal* Films are extensively referred to.

The Era of Hope -Nehruvian Idea's Influence on Cinema

Post-partition Indian cinema was undergoing a phase of transition. Many Muslim actors, singers, and filmmakers left for the newly formed Pakistan, which created a void and led to a gloomy

atmosphere in the vibrant film centre in Bombay. For instance, when Noor Jehan, the famous actor and singer of the Hindi film world, announced her plans to move to Pakistan, it caused shockwaves across India.

It was an enormous loss to the Indian film industry. During this tumultuous period, Nehru's optimism, sheer faith in humanity, and vision gave the film industry a ray of hope. Nehru viewed cinema 'as a tool for education and a means to develop the country's identity' (Cherian, 2022). A fervent admirer of art and aesthetics, he promoted cinema and founded institutions like the Film Finance Corporation (FFC) and the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII) in 1960. Nehru sparked transformative changes in the film industry and cultivated amicable relationships with notable individuals from the film world. In particular, he was well known for his association with Kedar Sharma, Khwaja Ahmed Abbas, Harivansh Rai Bachchan, Prithviraj Kapoor, and Sahir Ludhianvi. They were more than just acquaintances of Nehru; they adored him. Dilip Kumar and Raj Kapoor were among the young stars who embraced Nehru's vision, which resonated in their films.

Many films during the era of hope effectively portray Nehru's ideals of justice, the concept of the welfare state, and his profound optimism for the common man. R.K. Films produced the 1957 film *Ab Dilli Door Nahin*, a gripping story set in a young nation-state, where Ratan, a small village boy, confronts a daunting legal battle to save his father from wrongful accusations in a murder case. In the early years after Independence Nehru had become a symbol of hope ('Era of hope' is the early years under the Prime Ministership of Jawaharlal Nehru where he gave millions of Indians hope for a progressive new India) for the entire nation. The Prime Minister's promise of justice gave Ratan hope, motivating him to travel miles to reach India's capital. Every Indian, regardless of their age, had Nehru's ideals and policies ingrained in their subconscious. Nehru was extremely popular amongst children and affectionately was called 'Chacha Nehru'. Ratan's unwavering faith in Pandit Nehru as the only one capable of delivering justice to his father enabled him to overcome numerous challenges and reach Delhi. The film concludes with the dismissal of Ratan's father from murder charges, symbolizing a triumph of hope and Nehru's principle of justice.

“Nehru’s vision of ‘modern India’ was, where science and not superstition, where reason and not blind faith, where humanism and not religious bigotry will reign supreme” (Bhambhri, 1988, pp. 32-33). The famous song “*Tu Hindu banega, na Musalman banega, insaan ki aulad hai, insaan Banega*” [You will not become Hindu or Muslim, you are a child of a human being, and you will become a human being] (Film *Dhool ka Phool*, 1959) echoes Nehruvian ideals of humanism and secular values.ⁱ In the film *Abdul Rasheed*, an elderly man finds an abandoned child. He focuses on raising the child to be a good human being, rather than concerning himself with the child’s religious lineage.

Nehru recognised the daunting nature of nation-building in a diverse nation like India. Despite challenges, he remained hopeful that India could succeed by transcending identities of caste, class, religion, and gender divisions in nation-building. The villager’s spirit of sharing and camaraderie united in the task of nation-building, is exemplified in songs such as “*Saathi haath badhana, ek akela thak jayega, mil kar bojh uthana*” [Fellow partners give a helping hand as a single person will be tired while carrying a load, so many people should come together to lift the load.] (Film *Naya Daur*, 1957) (Gosh, 2009).

After the Independence, India adopted a democratic form of government. Nehru understood the constraints of the prevailing global dominant models of capitalism and communism. He embraced the ideology of socialism, specifically Fabian Socialism, as he saw it as a fitting partner to his vision of a liberal, humane democracy that could address India’s poverty, unemployment, and underdevelopment challenges. Cinema played a crucial role in popularising the Nehruvian concept of democratic socialism. During the 1950s, films went beyond entertainment and became a tool for promoting Nehruvian socialism through filmmakers like B.R. Chopra, Chetan Anand, Khwaja Ahmad Abbas, Raj Kapoor, and many more. Besides industrialisation or the construction of big dams, Nehru’s socialism prioritised a planned economy that aimed to incorporate the marginalised groups and enhance the quality of life for all individuals in India. In 1954, two films, *Boot Polish* by Raj Kapoor and *Taxi Driver* by Chetan Anand, showcase marginalised characters as the story’s focal point. The film *Boot Polish* revolves around a brother and sister duo living in extreme poverty, who reject begging and instead choose to work as boot polishers in order to live with

dignity. The film *Taxi Driver* portrays an Anglo-Indian community character prominently in the film depicting Nehru's policy of accommodation of diversity in the new India.

Nehru was also aware of the possibility of economic inequality and the concentration of wealth in a few hands with industrialisation, so he preferred a mixed economy. Likewise, Nehru understood the struggles and sufferings of Indian farmers and advocated for agrarian reforms. Abolition of the Zamindari system, rural Community Development Programmes, food-grain, and labour cooperatives were some major steps taken under his leadership. Indian cinema in the 1950s reflected the socio-economic tensions in emerging India and Nehru's ideals. Nehru believed that addressing social reforms and ending untouchability was crucial and needed to be prioritised.

Bimal Roy's *Do Bigha Zamin* (1953) and *Sujata* (1959) spoke for the "voiceless and defenceless without resorting to polemics" (Salam, 2022). While one film highlighted "class politics, the other focused on the caste divide" (Salam, 2022). If *Do Bigha Zamin* brings the stark subject of farmers' plight, greedy landlords, and the rural-urban divide, the film *Sujata* seeks to create public awareness regarding the age-old complex issue of untouchability and caste discrimination in Indian society. Against the backdrop of the harsh realities of rural India, Mehboob Khan's film *Mother India* (1957) challenges the stereotypes by portraying women in rural India as resilient, rather than weak and sacrificing. The film narrates the story of Radha, a woman from an Indian village who endures immense hardships when her frustrated husband abandons their home, leaving her to raise their children alone. The protagonist is portrayed as a survivor who eventually takes on the role of the 'Mother' for the entire village. In the opening scene of the film, Radha, an old woman, is called upon to ceremonially inaugurate a newly constructed canal in her village; as the film progresses, it becomes evident that she is the "woman who will usher in the new period of prosperity and development that stretches ahead" (Bagchi, 1996). The film's title 'Mother India' (translated into Indian language as *Bharat Mata*) and its symptomatic equation with 'Bharat Mata' created hope amongst people that one day India will also lift to growth and prosperity. In an emerging independent nation, Mehboob Khan depicts the plight of a woman in the traditional patriarchal society, highlighting her as a representation of both Indian traditions and values as well as taking a courageous action of sacrificing her son to protect a woman's honour.

Raj Kapoor's films, *Awara* (1951) and *Shree 420* (1955) present the city as a paradoxical landscape of exploitation and hypocrisy, while also serving as an enticing backdrop for dreams and opportunities. Raj Kapoor's films not only captivated Indians but also overseas audiences, particularly in the Soviet Union, as they reflected the innocence, romance, and optimism of Nehru's young India.

In B. R. Chopra's *Naya Daur* (1957), the classic clash between Man v/s Machine and tradition v/s modernity is portrayed, capturing the essence of the newly independent nation's desires and social consciousness. This film highlights the triumph of the human spirit and the collective victory of the underprivileged. *Naya Daur* echoed Nehru's ideas of economic planning, rooted in social and economic equality. In the end, the film raises questions about who benefits from development. It started the development discourse six decades ago, advocating for inclusive and sustainable development, which is still significant today. The popular song in *Naya Daur*, "*Ye desh hai veer jawano ka...is desh ka yaro kya kahna, Ye desh hai duniya ka gahna*" celebrates the bravery of Indians, and the main protagonist Dilip Kumar in the song expresses vociferously that India is the jewel of the world. "This was an India that Nehru was to establish on a high pedestal in the international arena so that Indians could hold their own with anyone in the world as a country which was poor but proud, working towards a better future" (Desai, 2004, p. 131). In *Jagte Raho* (1956), the story of independent India is told through a critical lens, exposing the hypocrisy of the social system at that time. The film concludes with the song "*jago mohan pyare.....navayug chume nain tihare,*" representing the idea that after darkness comes a new beginning, motivating individuals to strive for a better future, in the true Nehruvian spirit.

Nehru's ideas of secularism, particularly after the Partition, were reflected in the cinema through the depiction of Muslim culture and cultural harmony between Hindus and Muslims. Films from the 1950s and 1960s predominantly portrayed Muslim presence largely through social, cultural, and historical film themes. The richness of the Urdu language and poetry, along with the veil culture, has prominently reverberated in films *Chaudhvin ka Chand* (1960) and *Mere Mehboob* (1963). Whereas historical drama-based films, *Anarkali* (1953) and *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960) showed the grandeur of the Mughal Empire. During this period, the Hindi film industry had many Muslim artists whose contribution helped lay a solid foundation, making this era the 'golden period

of Hindi cinema'. The Indian audiences were captivated by the works of actors like Dilip Kumar, Madhubala, Meena Kumari, Nargis, and Waheeda Rehman; Directors Mehboob Khan, K. Asif, Kamal Amrohi; playback singers, Mohammad Rafi, Talat Mahmood, and Lyricists Kaifi Azmi, Saheer Ludhyanvi, Shakeel Badayuni, and Music Director Naushad.

Nehru's vision was effectively portrayed in songs penned by lyricists of that era, which became popular across India. Mohammed Rafi expressed the sentiment of the time in a song: "*Hum laye hain toofan se kashti nikaal ke, is desh ko rakhna mere bachchon sambhaal ke*" [We have brought the ship out of the storm. My children, now you take care of this country] (during the song the way the camera focuses on Nehru's photograph it appeared as if he is addressing to the nation in which he describes the hardships that India faced during the freedom struggle and expects that the youngsters should own the responsibility of India's future), Film Jagriti (1954); song "*Pyaar hua, ikraar hua*" [Love happened, and its acceptance happened] (Film Shree 420) is as much about love as is echoing the story of emerging India. The lyrics "*Kehta hai dil rasta mushkil maloom nahi kahan manzil*" [The heart is saying that the path is difficult and no idea about where the destination is] depict the adversities faced by the protagonists and the anxieties of a nascent nation.

The song "*Mera joota hai Japani, yeh patloon Englishtani sar pe laal topi Roosi, phir bhi dil hai Hindustani*" [My shoes are Japanese, the pant is English, and I have a Red Russian cap on my head, yet my heart is Indian] (Film Shree 420) reflects the uncertainties that prevailed in the post-Independence era due to varied complex challenges such as food scarcity, inflation, unemployment, corruption, etc. The song became famous almost akin to an informal national anthem! It was proudly sung by the young generation of an independent nation as they could experience the humbleness, simplicity, and patriotic pride, the spirit of hope and idealism of Nehru in the song.

Sahir Ludhianvi's song "*Woh subah kabhi to aayegi ... bitenge kabhi to din aakhir, ye bhook aur bekari ke.....ab ek anokhi duniya ki, bunyaad uthaai jayegi...who subah kabhi to aayegi*" [That morning will come someday, these days of hunger and unemployment will someday pass away, now a wonderful world's foundation will be laid down, and that morning will come someday] (Film Phir Subah Hogi, 1958) exemplifies sheer optimism of Nehru amidst the tough times that India was undergoing in the early years after Independence; "*Chodo kal ki baate, kal ki baat*

purani, naye daur mein likhenge hum milkar naye kahani, Hum Hindustani” (Film *Hum Hindustani*, 1960) resonate progressive thoughts of Nehru. The song urges us to leave behind the past and history and work towards a new future for India; young people in India are enthusiastic about connecting to the new global world.

Nehru’s Legacy—A Source of Inspiration for Generation Next

Many scholars in India believe that India’s transition from an underdeveloped country to a vibrant, developed democracy would not have been possible without the vision of Nehru. Nehru’s ideas enthralled the nation during the period of nation-building. Even after he died in 1964, his personality, iconic figure, and insistence on the principles of equality, social justice, socialism, secularism that included anti-casteism and anti-religious sectarianism, and liberal modernist approach have inspired filmmakers such as Shyam Benegal who came in the second phase of filmmaking in the post-Independence India. Fascinatingly filmmakers like Mani Ratnam, whose work came much later in the third phase that emerged after globalisation in the post-1990s are also to be seen as awestruck by Nehruvian ideals.

Shyam Benegal, through his films *Ankur* (1974), *Nishant* (1975), *Manthan* (1976), and *Bhumika* (1977), embraced the centrality of the nation-state in bringing social change peacefully and became known for making some of the best ‘parallel’ or ‘middle of the road cinema’ in the decades of 1970s. Nehru thought that for social progress in India, the empowerment and liberation of women is a prerequisite. Benegal has echoed this by “introducing ‘Nehruvian Women’ in film *Ankur* in the subaltern character of Lakshmi who is not shown living in a victimhood syndrome, instead, Lakshmi empowers herself at every turn by challenging the feudal lord by speaking up for herself and her mute husband” (Cross, 2010, pp. 108-109). The film *Bhumika* is a tale of Usha, an actress with many failed relationships. Benegal’s film challenges the then-prevailing societal norms in India where women were often restricted by tradition and culture in relationships. In the film, Benegal strongly portrays the idea that women have the freedom to make their choices, a thought which is also distinctly present in the 2016 film *Pink*.

The essence of Nehru’s political philosophy is the empowerment of every individual, irrespective of class, caste, or gender. He believed that the basis was the participation of all citizens, for which

empowering individuals by protecting their right to live with dignity was essential. Nehru believed in a participatory form of democracy, which involved power decentralisation at the grassroots level. Film *Manthan* is a classic example here that narrates the ‘white revolution’ in Gujarat that transferred the power to the local villagers by setting up a milk cooperative society. Shyam

Benegal, in his films, “endorses the Nehruvian ‘idea of India’ which is based on liberal mindset” (Dingwaney, 2013, p.3). Benegal’s film *Welcome to Sajjanpur* (2008) in the opening scenes explains how when Pandit Nehru visited the village he changed the name of the village from ‘Doorjanpur’ (village of evildoers or devils) to ‘Sajjanpur’ (village of noble-minded or genteel people). The scene represents the social and economic transformation that Nehru was foreseeing for the villages in India. Shyam Benegal was so influenced by Nehru’s persona that he produced a 53-episode epic for television *Bharat Ek Khoj* in 1988, which was based on Nehru’s renowned work ‘The Discovery of India’. Today, it is regarded as a classic document in Indian history. Shyam Benegal’s film, *Mammo*, released in 1994, subtly depicted Nehru’s liberal humanist ideas. The film’s main protagonist, Mammo, very effectively depicts the pain of a Muslim woman while also showing strength as she embraces the reality of life in post-partition India.

Nehru’s ideas of pluralistic, secular democratic India are more relevant in contemporary times. Nehru had a liberal modernist approach to secularism, wherein religion played no role in public life. The films of renowned filmmaker Mani Ratnam are considered prime examples of Nehruvian secularism. Mani Ratnam replicates Nehru’s idea of secularism in both his films *Roja* (1992) and *Bombay* (1995). In the film *Bombay*, the main protagonist Shekhar, a Hindu journalist, marries a Muslim village girl, Shaila Banu. They transcend their religious identities and take a secularist approach while raising their children. When communal riots break out in *Bombay* post Babri Masjid demolition the hero Shekhar when faced with a violent mob demanding to know whether he is ‘Hindu’ or ‘Muslim’, replies ‘Indian’ (the idea of Indian national identity above the Hindu religious identity) (Gaur, 2011, p.79). In the film *Roja*, the popular song, “*Bharat humko jaan se pyaara hai, sabse nyara gulistaan hamara hai*” [We love India more than our life, it’s a unique country] also highlights nationalism and the importance of national identity. Further the lyrics of the song “*Assam se Gujarat tak, Bengal se Maharashtra tak...Kashmir se Madras tak...khai do*

sabhi hum ek hai” [From Assam to Gujarat; Bengal to Maharashtra and Kashmir to Madras, say we are all one] exemplify the desire for national integration and a pan-Indian identity that transcends religious loyalties and ethnic affiliations in multi-racial and multi-religious India (Gokulsing, 1998, p.26).

Conclusion

Nehru’s contribution to establishing India’s foundation, instilling hope in millions and a sense of pride in the new foreign policy of non-alignment in a divided world during the Cold War has had a profound and lasting impact on three generations of filmmakers and viewers in India. Yet, we cannot overlook the fact that Guru Dutt and Hrishikesh Mukherjee, both legendary filmmakers, have portrayed a deeply critical stance towards Nehru’s ideology in their cinematic works. They have made a stark commentary on the deferral or failed promises of social transformation and the economic policies of Nehru. *Pyassa* (1957), a cult classic by Guru Dutt, critiques Nehruvian idealism that disregarded the harsh reality of city life, the erosion of moral values in pursuit of liberal westernised culture, the obsession with money in an emerging capitalistic society, and the loneliness experienced by individuals in a crowd. In the song “*Yeh mehlon, yeh takhton, yeh tajon ki duniyaye duniya agar mil bhi jaaye to kya hai?*” [This world of palace’s, thrones, and crowns.... what even if I get this world?] the disillusioned poet critiques a society driven by power and wealth in post-Independent India. Sahir Ludhianvi raises disturbing questions from the song of the film *Pyaasa*, “*Jinhe naaz hai hind par woh kahan hai*” [Those who are proud of the country where are they?] Through the song, he fearlessly criticises the fast-emerging elite money culture in India that is leading to a growing wealth gap in society and sheds light on the dire conditions of women, especially sex workers.

Hrishikesh Mukherjee’s *Satyakam* (1969) presents a counter-narrative that critiques the limitations of the Nehruvian vision, showcasing the corrupt administrative structure and hypocrisy in post independent India. Its development can be attributed to the rise of corruption, red-tapism, and hypocrisy. *Namak Haraam* (1973), another film by Hrishikesh Mukherjee, explores the issue of unionism in mills and workers’ strikes, highlighting the class conflict and divide resulting from flawed industrial policies adopted by India after Independence. India’s development is put under the spotlight not just by the mainstream Hindi cinema but even by some documentaries made on

the 20th anniversary of India's independence like S. Sukhadev's India 67, and S. N. S. Sastry's, I Am 20, which raised unsettling questions about the state of India's development.

Filmmakers in Hindi Cinema have extensively discussed Nehru's socialism, development model, and principles for over fifty years. India, along with its cinema, has undergone a significant transformation in the last seven decades. One significant concept from Nehru that filmmakers today should consider is pluralism, to emphasise unity among civilisations instead of conflict.

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