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**Cinematic Commitment: A Study of Thematic and Technical Markers
of Third Cinema with Special Reference to
*Lal Salam, Fandry and Khwada***

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Abstract:

Socio-political commitment of artistic creations has always been an issue of academic deliberations. There have been different strands of thoughts that either liberate artistic creations from performing political functions as in 'art for art's sake' movement or assign them an exclusive political role. Cinema as an art is no exception to it. The films either entertain or perform a political function. The landscape of Indian cinema is often defined by the dominance of Bollywood. Its hegemony however, is challenged by the emergence of alternative cinematic forms such as Parallel and New Wave Indian cinema. These categories of Indian cinema allude to numerical categories the first, second and third cinema at international level.

*The term third cinema designates the film theory and filmmaking practice committed to social and political emancipation. It challenges mainstream narratives, ideologies and themes. Hence it is imperative to probe whether the New Wave Cinema fulfills the criteria to be called as third cinema of India or not? In this context, the present research article set out to examine the thematic and technical markers of third cinema through analysis of three Indian films: *Lal Salam (Red Salute)* (2002) directed by Gaganvihari Borate, *Fandry (Pig)* (2015) directed by Nagraj Manjule, *Khwada (Obstacle)* (2015) directed by Bhaurao Kurhade.*

Key Words: Cinematic commitment, third cinema, new wave cinema, parallel cinema

1. Introduction:

As far as Indian cinema is concerned, it has grown into one of the world's largest and most vibrant film industries with Bollywood as its most recognizable face. Mostly, Bollywood movies are designed to entertain the audience and has commercial appeal. Rarely, there appear films like *Lal Salam* (Red Salute) (2002) directed by Gaganvihari Borate, *Fandry* (Pig) (2015) directed by Nagraj Manjule, *Khawda* (Obstacle) (2015) directed by Bhaurao Kurhade and *Jai Bhim* (Victory to Bhim) (2021) directed by T. J. Ganavel that take a political stance to provide justice to the oppressed and marginalized communities. These films depict issues of caste, class, and socio-economic disparity, aligning with the movement's ethos. Along with these sporadic films the hegemony of Bollywood has been challenged by cinematic movements that include Art or Auteur and New Wave Indian cinema. These cinematic categories of India allude to numerical categories the first, second and the third cinema at international level. In the Indian context, however it is imperative to know whether New Wave Cinema fulfills the criteria to be called as the third cinema of India. Third cinema as revolutionary filmmaking practice was originated in Latin America. It critiques socio-economic inequalities and dominant ideologies through experimental aesthetics and grassroots storytelling. As film theorist Teshome Gabriel states 'Third cinema is not merely an aesthetic practice but a socio-political commitment'.

This politically committed cinema emerged in late 1960 and early 1970 in the third world countries such as Argentina, Cuba and Latin America. The work of small film groups such as Newsreel, US New Left film group, the Cinegiormali of Italian students' movement, British and Japanese student's movement and New Wave Cinema in India were significant adventures of socially and politically committed moviemaking. During the colonial period, the third cinema filmmakers had to work underground like guerrilla militants. According to Solanas and Getinao third cinema moviemaking itself was a guerrilla activity in which 'camera was our rifle'. (p.9). India as a nation however, did not impose such restriction on filmmaking. Perhaps, the Indian New Wave cinema was inaugurated in the year 1969 i.e. almost 20 years after Indian independence. Hence, insertion of Indian movies within the body of third cinema would lead to examination of thematic strands and technical specificities embedded within selected movies that adhere

to the third cinema film theory and practice. It also requires the identification of common markers that define third cinema. Theorists like Mike Wayne and Teshome Gabriel, on the basis of their close reading of the body of available third cinema film theory and practice have suggested some common thematic and technical markers. The socio-political commitment, tracking rising revolutionary consciousness, cultural specificity, and popular memory that led to open end articulation of common themes viz. class, culture, religion, armed struggle and individual hero as a collective subject are major thematic markers invariably found in the third cinema movie. Whereas imperfect nature, documentary style, dialogue between film and audience are some technical markers that distinguish the third cinema form its first two counterparts.

Generally, the third cinema movie of a third world country advocates or rather supports the liberation struggle against European imperialism and seek to refute the cultural colonization. In the Indian context, this liberation struggle is not against the imperial power but rather targets the insiders, those who inhabit the center and marginalizes the others on the basis of class, religion, culture or caste. It is a struggle against the bureaucracy, capitalism, exploitation, and repressive ideologies. The Indian movies *Lal Salam (LS hereafter)*, *Fandry* and *Khawda* are viewed as microcosm of the anticolonial struggle in its wider context.

2. Thematic Markers:

Following thematic markers illustrates the concept of third cinema. They also help in understanding the true nature of third cinema movies. These markers clearly hint at socio-political commitment of the cinematic art.

2.1. Social and Political Commitment:

Third cinema is specially designed for the social and political emancipation. Its very existence as cinema of the masses itself characterizes a political act. According to Solanas and Getino

“With each showing the third cinema like a revolutionary military incursion provokes a liberated space, a decolonized territory. The showing can be turned into a kind of political event, which according to Fanon, could be a liturgical act, a privileged occasion for human being to hear and be heard (1970, 9)

In this fashion screening and understanding of *LS*, *Fandry*, and *Khawda* is a political act in itself. As a spectator one feels an irresistible urge to act for withdrawal of the exploitation and discrimination based on class, race and caste. The movie *LS* advocates armed struggle and violence as a means of averting the violence and exploitation initiated by bureaucrats, capitalist and industry owners together. It tracks the transformation of meek and submissive tribal villagers into extremely committed individuals who are ready to sacrifice their lives for the cause of liberation. As one of the characters named Ghisu says “rather than facing the humiliation and starvation, it is better to be martyr for the cause of liberation”. Tribals as menial laborers undergo the ordeals of physical, economic and sexual exploitation. Police inspector Deshpande (played by Sayaji Shinde) sexually exploits tribal women whenever he wishes. One such victim Rupi (played by Nandita Das) after being raped by Deshpande determined to avenge him flees to the forest and becomes Naxalite.

The face of village politics in Independent India is displayed over and over again in *Fandry*. The members of the upper caste ruthlessly dehumanize Jabya and his family, who co-operate in the act due to social marginalization, poverty and rigid caste hierarchies. Caste, within the existing social organization of village India constitute the base of discrimination. Meek, submissive and shy protagonist Jabya, who hates to perform caste allied jobs, explodes in an impulse driven backlash against the oppressor. On screen oppression though fictitious, hints at real oppression of such marginalized groups in village India. The director Nagraj Manjle, himself an underdog states

“My personal experiences of contemporary India inform my scripts” I am not an overtly political person, but when you are part of a system doing nothing is also a political act, so I reflect my reality in my scripts and my films (www.hindustantimes.com web- 2/2/2018 at 4.59 pm).

Unlike *LS* and *Fandry*, *Khawda* condemns the feudal mindset that led to economic and physical exploitation of the Nomadic tribes. Particularly, it portrays the sufferings of the nomads who are displaced by the government's policy to reserve the private land for sanctuaries and forest. Raghu Karhe (played by Shashank Shende) the head of the family has been fighting a legal battle since last decade to win his reserved land back from the government. But, for sure falls to the whims of lawyer who exploits him economically. A village Sarpanch (head) takes away his livestock and brutally butchers them. Protagonist Balu unable to tolerate humiliation and exploitation chops Sarpanch (village head) down with axe. In short, the movie under discussion explores how both government and upper caste makes lives of tribals and semi nomads harder. Political and social commitment of the movies also find expression in their resistance to the emergence and rise of the bourgeoisie and privileged caste in independent India. Which according to Frantz Fanon is most necessary political ordeal newly liberated natives should perform. He says:

“But we must repeat, it is absolutely necessary to oppose vigorously and definitively the birth of a national bourgeoisie and privileged caste. To educate the masses politically is to make the totality of the nation a reality to each citizen (1963, 200)

And, the movies in all its manifestation opposes the exploitation of the bourgeoisie and upper castes.

2.2. Raising of Revolutionary Consciousness:

Through realistic depiction of the abject subhuman conditions the marginalized groups the third cinema movie generates revolutionary consciousness. It also provides an innovative model of liberation. *LS*, for example, provides two models of liberation: one refers to the Fanonian model of violence and the other evokes Gandhian model of non-violence. Fanon continuously reminds that since the violence is inbuilt into the colonial process where one country captures the resources of another and subordinates its people, it should be refuted by violence only. According to Fanon violence will be the component of the native's struggle to end the violence of colonialism. He argues

“At the level of individuals, violence is a cleansing force. It frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction, it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect” (Quoted in Mike Wayne, 2001, 19)

Unquestionably, the selected movies like *LS*, *Fandry* and *Khawdaends* with retaliated violence. For tribal victims, armed struggle of the Naxalites headed by Rajayya (played by Makarand Deshpande) is a means to free themselves from the inferiority complex. Rajayya states that the rifle in the hands of Naxalite is not only a weapon but a manifestation of determination and confidence to resist the exploitation in every walk of life. Killing of village officer, a forest guard and manager of a paper mill by Naxals pleases the villagers. This pleasure itself marks the generation of revolutionary consciousness that consequently culminates in joining the Naxalite movement as Ghisu and Rupi do.

On the contrary, Gandhian model of liberation-based non-violence and satyagrah suggest tolerance and patience. Kanna a tribal boy, of *Knadavadi* village, despite hardships, successfully completes his education to become the first tribal doctor. He advocates a legal and non-violent struggle for liberation. After completing his degree from Nagpur he goes back to village to serve the deprived tribal population. He warns people that *Lal Salam* movement is an antinational act, and they should not support it. But in any instance, he is unable to eke out the manifestation of his vision in reality. Hence, movie ends leaving audience to decide which model to follow. Audience, based on the personal experience, it appears, would prefer the Fanonian model of violence, principally for two reasons. One is that people would feel that at least they are doing something concrete for the cause of liberation. They would also not die in humiliation but will be considered as martyrs. Another reason is that violence is an immediate way of attaining the catharsis of the emotions such as anger and quest for revenge.

Revolutionary consciousness of Jabya in *Fandry* is the outcome of his hatred for own cultural identity, that subjugates him and his family. In the end, however, same ‘culture strikes back’ powerfully. The very identity he wanted to hide from others, particularly Shalu (his school crush) once revealed, puts him in the rank of those peasants who according to Fanon are principal force behind the liberation movement in the third

world, with “nothing to lose and everything to gain” (1963, 61). Even his insistence to attend school regularly, to wear modern clothes viz. Jeans and T-shirt, and his one-sided love for an upper caste girl reflects an urge to be equal.

Daydreaming and rowdy attitude of Balu in *Khawda* constitute the roots of revolution. Like the village head Ashok dada, Balu is also a wrestler who dare to defeat the wrestlers more powerful than him. When it is not expected, Balu dares to ask money of his lambs Ashok dada has taken forcefully. It reflects his attitude to confront the oppressors. Balu’s father Raghu and elder brother Panda choose to plead Ashok dada to release their livestock while Balu seeking help of other shepherds kills the oppressor and his companions.

2.3. Cultural Specificity and Popular Memory:

Third cinema assigns weightage to the question of culture. Culture is a crucial domain in which identity, beliefs and values are forged. Third cinema perceives culture as a site of political struggle. Culture in question is primarily oral culture that gets articulated through songs, stories, poems and music. The oral nature of popular memory however, establishes the primacy of printed word and educational institutions that disseminate official history. That in turn as Teshome Gabriel writes

“Official history tends to arrest the future by means of the past. Historians privilege the written word of the text- it serves as their rule of law, claims a center which continuously marginalizes others. In this way its ideology inhibits people from constructing their own history or histories”. (Gabriel, 1982, 53).

Popular memory on the contrary, does not close off the future by closing the past, rather treats past as relevant to the changing needs of the present. Therefore, third cinema accommodating changing stories of popular memory assert its open ending quality. The movies under discussion are open ended in this context. The stone thrown at the end of the movie *Fandry* questions the official history that claims that India has done away with the caste hierarchies long ago and it does not serve as the basis of discrimination. The stone however, is not only directed toward the eulogies of secular society but also toward the popular memory that provides upper classes an opportunity to align themselves to the feudal history, whereby these classes had enjoyed unquestionable authority. Similarly,

the songs articulating the cultural traditions of the *Madaviadivasis* serve as the source of inspiration and determination to fight the battle for liberation. Ancient culture characterized by rituals, songs dances and inherent rowdiness comes to rescue when the situation forces. Otherwise, meek and submissive tribals assert violence as necessary for the survival. In a way movies rightly treat culture as the site of political struggle.

2.4. Class Antagonism and Cultural Identity:

Discussion of the various forms of oppression forms the core of third cinema movie. It particularly articulates as Teshome Gabriel notes in his book 'Third Cinema in the Third World: The Aesthetics of Liberation (1982) the themes of class antagonism, unaltered culture as a source of identity, religion and spiritual life of natives, participation of women in all aspects of liberation struggle, and Armed struggle against the oppressor. Tribals being denounced at the lower position of the social hierarchy are subjected to the exploitation of the upper classes. *Jabya* and his family had to suffer this class antagonism. Being members of the *Kaikadi* community a nomadic tribe, they live on fringes of the village in a crumbling shack. At the same time, had to serve the village in general and village *Patil* (head) in particular to do the dirtiest possible jobs such as killing a pig. In the same fashion, Ashok dada treats Balu and his family. He expects to take off the lambs free of cost, while the other members of the village treat them with indifference.

Under colonial experience the imperialist culture destroys national culture and attempts to replace it with that of foreign. Hence, protection and preservation of the native culture constitute the major area of concern for a third world filmmaker. Satyajit Ray for example, turned to village as the setting of his films with the belief that it was the only place where national culture had survived under the colonial rule. Ray's Apu trilogy represents the harsh realities of village life that finally succeeds in destroying a family. *Fandry* also represents the realistic face of village culture. It shows how it has gone away from the values of co-existence and cooperation; that India celebrated as 'unity in diversity'. Yet, the film fails to bring up the vivid aspects of *Kaikadi* culture. Rather its focus is on the current situation of tribal in the existing hierarchy of mainstream society. The movies *LS* and *Khawda* on the other hand, specifically situate both *Dhangars* and

Madavi tribes in their respective cultural contexts. The songs and dance in the *LS* foreground the democratic cultural roots of the community. The younger generation are free to choose their partners and enjoy every sort of liberty before the marriage, leading to construction of happy society. Whereas the culture of *Dhangars* largely revolves around their religious rituals and visits to the shrines of *Kuldevta* (family god). The rituals known as *Khel* (play) is accommodated in the structure of the movie as the newly married protagonist Balu visit shrines of God *Khandoba* at *Jejuri* and *Babir* at *Rui* village in the Pune District of Maharashtra.

2.5. Individual Hero as a Collective Subject:

Individual hero in the third cinema is a trans-individual or collective subject. Unlike, classical Hollywood model, one is not endowed with individuality. The characters in the movies are not individuals but rather types. Type according to George Lukacs is

“the convergence and intersection of all the dominant aspects of that dynamic unity through which genuine literature reflects life in a vital and contradictory unity- all the most important social, moral and spiritual contradictions of time... through the representation of a type, the concrete, universal and essential qualities, what is enduring in man and what is historically determined and what is individual and what is socially universal combine.” (1970, 78)

According to Lukacs something quite different from the ordinary, the everyday and average is typical. The typicality of the characters encompasses historical perception, social status, and universality of submissiveness of the tribals and nomadic tribes living on the fringes of the village. Their transformation into the agents of revolution, however, subverts both the socio-historical perception and universality of subjugation. It rather puts them in the paradigms of the newer types demanding new methods of socio-historic perception. The characters *Gehsu* and *Rupi* in *LS*, *Jabya* in *Fandry* and *Balu* in *Khawda* subvert the historical perception of tribals as meek, submissive, superstitious barbarians entangled in the rituals. They on the contrary, emerge as pioneers of revolution and thereby represent the newer generations of the tribals who have learnt to register the voice of protest.

3. Technical Markers:

Following technical markers well illustrates the nature and structure of the third cinema movie.

3.1. Imperfect Cinema: The Cuban filmmaker Julio Gracia Espinosa's essay 'For an Imperfect Cinema (1971) foregrounds the idea that revolutionary cinema must be 'imperfect'. The term imperfect or incomplete in its wider historical context refers to the imperfect or incomplete new man in post-revolutionary Latin America under newly established socialism. In the sense, the imperfect cinema is a cinematic manifestation of the idea of "unfinished or imperfect aspect of society." (Quoted in Taylor, Anna Marie, 1979, 27) He is particularly interested in asserting the idea that art in general and film in particular should not be purely aesthetic or detached from the struggle of liberation, but rather needs to be committed. The idea of imperfection also evokes the technical imperfection. The imperfection of third cinema is due to the reason that the third cinema filmmaker alone have to manage every aspect of filmmaking process and experiences the lack of money required to keep abreast of technical perfection of Hollywood or European art cinema. It may also refer to movies that communicate the social and political statement more directly than is customary in film language.

In the light of this argument the movies selected for the present study are imperfect in some or the other way. They directly articulate the social injustices and discrimination on the base of caste. Film artists speaking against caste oppression and participating in protest is something unheard of in India. Even the movie *Khawda* brings out most realistic portrayal of day-to-day struggle of the entire shepherd community. It records how established oppressors make their lives harder. Despite being a Bollywood mainstream movie, LS is extremely politically committed. It depicts the physical, economic and sexual exploitation of tribals living in forest and end up naturalizing violence as a means to avenge the repression and injustice.

3.2. Documentary Nature:

According to Solanas and Getino Documentary film making practice would serve as the main basis of revolutionary filmmaking against fantasy and fiction of dominant cinema. They argue that

“The cinema known as documentary, with all the vastness that the concept has today, from educational films to the reconstruction of a fact or historical event, is perhaps the main basis of revolutionary filmmaking. Every image that documents, bears witness to, refutes or deepens the truth of a situation is something more than a film image of purely artistic fact, it becomes something which system finds indigestible” (1997, 46)

Documentary should not only reflect everyday life passively but should situate it in its wider cultural context. The movies *LS*, *Fandry* and *Khawda* aptly situate the *Madvaadivasis*, *Kaikadi* and *Dhangars* the nomadic tribes in their respective cultural context. Freezing frames, long shots and slow pace of the narrative reflect the slowness of the very life of tribals. The rustic and abusive language, realistic appearance, use of appropriate costumes and amateur actors enacting daily chores of life in real locations validate the originality of tribal life in documentary fashion. Factual recording of the forms of oppression and specialized forms of cultural manifestation that stimulates the revolutionary consciousness among the tribals further enhances lived reality.

3.3. Dialogue between Movie and Spectator:

Unlike its first counterpart, the third cinema assumes the role of spectator as a participant in the making of history. Spectator of third cinema does not feel detached from the wider socio-political, economic and moral world outside the screen. Perhaps it demands the creative and critical responses from the spectators. Such dialogic relationship between the spectator and a third cinema movie adhere to Mikhail Bakhtin's contentions related to theory of dialogic discourse by which he condemns the formalistic approach to language and literature on the ground that “the formalistic approach closes off a literary work from the social life of discourse outside artistic study” (1981, 259).

Bakhtin states that any form of communication always maintain, whether implicit or explicit, relation with other forms of communication or utterances actually in existence.

As Bakhtin puts it

“The living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around to given object of an utterance, it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue” (1981, 276)

Obviously selected movies have deep grounding in present socio-political, economic and ideological situations. They intersect with and try to refute the existing dominant ideologies, inherent repressive structures within the present Indian social organization. The movies perhaps provoke spectators to criticize the existing socio-economic situations that stimulate the oppression of marginalized groups and consequently ground their argument in the Marxist ideology. The name *Lal Salam*, for example, is suggestive of the possible criticism of the existing capitalist mode of production and consequent exploitation of laborers. Whereas the movies *Fandry* and *Khawda*, condemning social exclusion, oppression and dehumanization of marginalized nomadic tribes in post-independent secular and caste free India again advocate the Marxist ideology. Through spectatorial identification these movies aim to percolate the revolutionary consciousness in the world beyond the screen. Spectator is no longer a consumer product but rather a creative agent who actively participates or initiates a struggle against liberation within the socio-economic sphere one inhabits.

4. Conclusion:

The thematic and technical elements of *Lal Salam*, *Fandry*, and *Khawda* exemplify the principles of Third Cinema. These films transcend traditional cinematic frameworks, offering profound insights into the socio-political challenges faced by marginalized communities. As tools of resistance and advocacy, they reaffirm the transformative power of cinema in addressing inequality and fostering social change.

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