

CHALLENGES OF THE INDIGENOUS MOVEMENTS THROUGH CINEMATIC LENS: STUDYING PRAKASH JHA'S 'CHAKRAVYUH'

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Abstract

Indian history is tainted with episodes of bigotry towards the socially, economically, and politically downtrodden indigenous. In order to perform a fair exploration on the extent of this discrimination and the rise of the movement called Naxalism, a film was produced in 2012 by Prakash Jha titled 'Chakravyuh'. The paper aims at intensively analyze the subject of the challenges of the indigenous movement in the backdrop of the film. The film puts its spotlight on the so-called Naxalites drawing parallels between the movement and the great Indian epic of Mahabharata. The film portrays that to protect what is rightfully theirs the indigenous majorly the scheduled tribes and castes as they are referred to today, have turned into Naxalites who are forced to use violence against their own countrymen in order to fight against abject poverty and relentless exploitation suffered by them for ages mutely.

Key words: Cinema, India, Indigenous movements, Naxalism, Chakravyuh

Introduction

"Politics of condemnation will not end the violence but the politics of condemning government, state government and the central government. You question the intentions of the government; you question the legitimacy of the state power, you question the objectives that government has set for itself in these anti-Naxals operations. But you won't condemn "deliberate, cruel and heartless violence" that has happened yesterday"- P. Chidambaram (to media post the 76 CRPF jawans massacre by the naxals)

"Having dispossessed them and pushed them into a downward spiral of indigence, in a cruel sleight of hand, the government began to use their own penury against them. Each time it needed to displace a large population—for dams, irrigation projects, mines—it talked of "bringing tribal into the mainstream" or of giving them "the fruits of modern development". Of the tens of millions of internally displaced people (more than 30 million by big dams alone), refugees of India's 'progress', the great majority are tribal people. When the government begins to talk of tribal welfare, it's time to worry."- Arundhati Roy (on the indigenous turned naxals).

The indigenous turned naxal rebellion and the way life is in the Red Corridor areas are today engraved in our collective consciousness. It is an issue that raises concerns about our identity

as an independent nation. Engaged in this war are India's first people, and if or why this war could be acceptable, has strained intellectuals to position themselves morally and take sides.

The social discrimination faced by the indigenous has been shaped on the basis of classicism which forms a social hierarchy stratifying the society into classes based on their occupations whose burden has been carried on for generations. These first peoples were further subjected to economic discrimination which came from a pitiable working environment, pigeonholed by unending working hours, foul labour stations, and paltry salaries. Political bias was enforced with an almost zilch representation of these discriminated classes in the legislative bodies for years to the extent, of them being called untouchables. This paper tries to comprehend how the magical quality of Indian Cinema has worked in forming people's opinions about the challenges of the indigenous movements of India studying Prakash Jha's 'Chakravayuh.' The paper argues that contemporary and popular cinema in particular, has a phenomenal quality of rendering the key issues of the indigenous and highlighting them to the masses. It is capable of playing a major role in changing mindsets and reforming societies.

The first perspective the film highlights is the Indian sovereignty represented by the security forces of the nation voiced by P. Chidambaram former home minister and the face of the Government of India and the second of the indigenous of the country turned naxals finding concern in articles of the likes of Arundhati Roy. Based on data on events retold in the film and a closer understanding of the plot of the story the work would recognize Chakravayuh as a fictional narration of historic events rather than a documentary. I accept as true that it is vital to take this extreme view since popular culture, mainly Hindi films from the Indian perspective, have the power to affect the masses in a tremendous way and at times in an unbelievable manner. Hindi films have a unique quality of influencing people's opinions and beliefs which may form or change existing opinions or beliefs of the common man about those at the margins of that society, in this case, the indigenous of the country who have taken up the course of violence for reasons they accept as true, following which they have been branded as naxals. Jha's film targets to undertake the presentation of the cause of these indigenous and the trouble faced by the security forces in combating their unlawful activities through the eyes of its maker. The film clearly specifies that the Naxals are the local indigenous whose human rights have been crushed mercilessly time and again by the government on one pretext or the other. The indigenous have thus chosen to "Do or Die" in order to protect what is rightfully theirs and claim their share in much propagated national development.

The central focus of the film is the ongoing tussle between the government and the indigenous turned naxals. The film retells some major encounters between the naxals and the security forces that have hit national headlines. In the retelling of the events, Jha's film can be

interpreted as giving voices to the two different perspectives that will be talked in the course of this paper.

The Beginning

To get a real picture of the history and the portrayal on the screen it is imperative to talk since the very beginning. The history would support the arguments as well as the film. The infamous Naxalbari incident in which peasants of this small village in West Bengal took up arms to fight their oppressors triggered the beginning of a struggle that was put on the Indian revolution agenda and has changed the Indian socio-political scene forever. Twenty years after, what some considered 'fake independence' India still found itself disillusioned. This was the time that Naxalbari happened and this was symptomatic of a larger chaos prevalent globally. Smaller countries raised major attacks at the mightier ones. In such a scenario the whole world was compelled to take sides and be a part of the great debate with either the ideology of China or that of the Soviet Union. Naxalbari was an outcome of this ideological-political commotion happening everywhere across the globe. It is more significant to note that Naxalbari restored the radical soul of Maoism on Indian grounds which had been deformed, stained and shattered by the revisionist semantics of certain political groups. Naxalbari stood as an answer to this both ideologically and virtually. Naxalites are considered far-left radical communists, supportive of Maoist political sentiment and ideology. Their origin can be traced to the split in 1967 of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), leading to the formation of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) Kumar, V. (2017).

It countered the revisionist fundamentals of the Communist Party of India (CPI) and Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPM) which perceived India as a nation that was semi-feudal along with seeing it as principally a consumerist country with 'feudal remnants'. It also targeted the revisionist theory that was rampant in India which had a character that was national and that said that Indian independence was genuine. It plainly propagated the ruling capitalist class as an agent of the colony and that India was still a semi-colony. It sketched the New Democratic revolutionary platform. It found enemies of revolution in feudalism, bureaucrat capitalism, and imperialism; but friends in the peasant workers and the working class.

Strategically it stood against the 'peaceful transition' put up by the CPI and CPM, and stood by their own path of extended people's war. It forwarded the idea that the only way to liberation was the adoption of guerrilla warfare and the erection of an army of the people. The immediate goal was identified in establishing a democratic dictatorship of the people which aimed as a transition to socialism and the final goal was communism. It ideologically stood by Maoist ideas. It overthrew parliamentarism and asked for a boycott of the elections.

Though afterward the movement lost its hold given the offensive by the enemy led attacks to a short-timed setback, Naxalbari made a deep-rooted impact on the revolutionary movement in India. The movement has continued till date in its own way in time. At times things have gone out of hand from both sides. The issue had gained interest of writers, film makers and orators with their own motives. The language of film has a structure or form consisting of texts, visual cues and sound that requires special attention. Shaw, A. (2020). Prakash Jha's Chakravyuh is also one such attempt dealing with the current situation on both sides of the fence. The ubiquity of the ethnic identity in India cannot be overstated. Neither can the importance of Bollywood cinema in the cultural spectrum of the country be discounted. Roy, S. (2005).

The concept of Chakravyuh.

The film derives its name from 'Charkavyuh', which means a lotus or discus formation, which is considered of great importance in early Indian legendary warfare, often said to be the most fearsome war formation ever. Chakravyuh is best related to the blood-soaked face off in the Battle of Kurukshetra where ace archer Arjun's valiant son Abhimanyu was murdered in cold blood by supreme Kaurava warriors after being trapped in the Chakravyuh formation by none other than the great Drona and the mighty Parsurama. This brazen incident stoked utter chaos and is considered to be the turning point of the historic battle as it is the one that changed the apathetic Arjuna into a madman on an individual revenge to retaliate the death of his dearly loved son. Prakash Jha's Chakravyuh relates to a similar turmoil that has turned into a plague and which needed to be redressed urgently, failing which it could engulf the whole nation. The tribals and the small farmers are poor today in the same way as earlier times. But the significant change is that there has been change and progress in the process of exploitation. Roy, S. (2005). The crisis that Jha has selected to put his limelight on in his latest film is woven around the Indigenous turned naxal movement. Jha has been active at sketching parallels with a special favour to the Mahabharata. In the epic battle of Kurukshetra, the virtuous Pandavas were put on to fight their own cousins, the depraved Kauravas, in order to guard their rights. The Naxalite movement shares an identical start: the subjugated indigenous peasants of Naxalbari were strained to take up violence to struggle against utter helplessness and ruthless abuse. Jha's perspective comes from his in depth understanding of the Indian socio-political setup and that of his native state of Bihar - the second most prominent state in India's political parlance. Chakravyuh can be considered as the first full-fledged attempt representing naxalism in commercial Indian Cinema.

In the movie, Jha takes us on an untamed ride to the core of an indigenous settlement, makes us loathe the barbaric ways of the lives of the indigenous turned naxal and evokes in us an intimate emotion of empathy for the pathetic Naxalite dilemma.

Plot summary

As much as Chakravyuh deals with particular historical events it does remain very much within the mainstream Bollywood cinema style through its representation of the age old commercially successful formula of the story of two best friends, one ditching the other for a cause he believes in. Adil (Arjun Rampal) and Kabir (Abhay Deol) play the leads. Adil Khan, a highly dedicated police officer takes over as Superintendent of Police, Nandighat after 84 policemen get killed in a horrifying massacre by the naxalites. He soon discovers that the area is effectively controlled by the Naxals, led by the ferocious and hypnotic Rajan (Manoj Bajpai). They are able to expeditiously baffle each of Adil's most dogged efforts. The enormous power of the position as the SP of Nandighat, fails Adil as he has never experienced such helplessness in his career.

It is then that the capricious Kabir re enters his life, a long lost friend. His friendship with Adil has been the only grapnel in his life and his loyalty to his friend is exemplary. To help Adil achieve his target, Kabir comes up with an outrageous plan. He proposes to infiltrate Rajan's group, and help Adil nail him and destroy the Naxal organization in Nandighat. Though apprehensive of the proposal, Adil agrees. Sure enough, Kabir smartly gets in and wins over the confidence of Rajan and party, as only he can. Adil's endeavors court success and he starts attacking the naxals following information provided by Kabir. Within weeks things take a U turn and it's the Naxals who are on the back foot now with a massive cache of arms seized, an arms-training camp smashed killing 63 naxals with two top national leaders and Rajan himself trapped.

The plan hits a blow when Kabir discovers a change of heart. He realises the abject misery of the hopeless poor who have been savagely thrown out of their own homes in the name of development. They have never tasted the fruits of this development promised to them by their own government, instead the basic resources of their livelihood, their land, forest and water have been snatched from them so as to allow huge business enterprises to further exploit the area and its people. To free themselves of the humiliating poverty and desperation rises the naxal cry of anger convincing him that taking up arms is the only way left to get back his rights and fight for their honor.

To weaken his plans further Kabir starts identifying with the activists: Rajan, Babu, Venu and the others. An activist true to her cause Juhi (Anjali Patil) has seen lots of pain in her life. She can't help falling in love with Kabir. A police inspector rapes Juhi and Kabir is badly hurt. He in turn kills the inspector, the naxal way. It is then that he finds himself in a Chakravyuh from which there is no retreat. Events get the better of the Adil -Kabir friendship before Kabir makes a final impassioned effort to resolve his concerns with Adil and he chooses to support the naxals and declares war against Adil. He loses his and Juhi's life

attempting to save the lives of Rajan and Babuji (Om Puri) the lead protagonist of the film. Reha (Esha Gupta) appears as Adil's wife helping him in his endeavors.

Chakravyuh provides for a canvas through the eyes of Jha who has the propensity for lashing up a flurry of crowd sequences, mob frenzy, massive political rallies and beacon-topped government vehicles meandering their way with urgency cutting across dust filled roadways, but the strong narrative never lets loose its grip on the plot's basic theme.

Jha is in absolute command of his huge canvas, making sure that the storytelling never falls to be a slave to the political gimmicks that fans would look at. His characters do justice as they're put into roles of the outcasts, into an agitated lot of activities that highlight and somewhere arrange altogether differently the socio-political accordance of democracy of India which is mutating rapidly.

Jha easily enters an area that is dark and unexposed, which talks of the Naxalites fighting for their lost dignity and braving all odds including that of an apathetic system of governance, cops who fail in their jobs, and bureaucrats who are corrupt, a betrayal which comes from within their own Naxalite ranks and avaricious entrepreneurs who are more of land grabbers. Jha brings to life a complex setting of morally faltering world that is wayward, spoiled with treachery and stressed with issues of loyalty. The well-researched matter is culled into what is a condensed but brightly considered screenplay by Jha, Sagar Pandya and Anjum Rajbali.

The reality versus the cinematic representations of the indigenous movements.

Though fifty years post the Naxalbari rebellion the issue has found many portrayals but it is worth noticing the total nonappearance of any direct depiction of the movement in Hindi films produced during the 1970s to 1990s. It is only in the last two decade that Hindi cinema has taken up to the issue of Naxalism, or Maoism, as it is more popularly known in modern times. Films made in the backdrop of naxalism include Hazar Chaurasi ki maa, Hazaaron Khwaishein Aisi (HKA) Red Alert: The War Within, Rakht Charitra, Rakht Charitra II and Raavan and a few more. This swift surge of curiosity in the issue is majorly mysterious. Different filmmakers present the realistic situations happening around us on the screen from their perspectives showcasing the good, the bad and the ugly of the community and delivering a message through the film. Vemulakonda, S. S. (2020). A careful look into the issue may bring to light that the opus of films based on Naxalism, are directed by the likes of Prakash Jha, filmmakers who have tried to break the rules of commercial Hindi cinema though being very much a part of the system, so to speak. Also, another reason could be the quest for newer topics of interest for an ever evolving film industry like the Hindi film industry.

In a way, Chakravyuh is an important film not only because it represents the challenges of the indigenous movement from the view point that the indigenous of India turned naxals but also from that of the security forces who at times lack a free hand and have to work under political pressures. Chakravyuh shows a protagonist going amongst the tribal insurgents in order to gauge their nerve and the reason of their revolt. Khan, M. H. (2018). Repeatedly naxal activities and their outburst against the government have been talked of endlessly in the media. The film tries to make an attempt to replicate some of these incidents. The film draws 'inspiration from contemporary happenings such top CPI (Maoist) leader Kobad Ghandy's custody, the infamous massacre of Dantewada which witnessed the killing of 76 CRPF jawans and the corporate land grabbing policy and the exploitation of natural resources by business minded corporate. Naxalism has entered the discussions of the common man with Prakash Jha's Chakravyuh. The film is aimed to be a social commentary on the issues of distress of tribal people and their long negligence by the government. Mukhopadhyay, R. R (2018).

Chakravyuh is the case in point. The promotions of the film try to pose it as a film dealing with a 'grave issue' by making use of punch lines like "In the World's Largest Democracy" and "A War Has Begun". It also uses a map of the areas hit by Naxals marked out in red. Chakravyuh's advertising also ran into a hullabaloo, after Jha was served a legal notice by the Birla Group of companies over the lyrics of a song of the film.

The reviews of Chakravyuh in the media have also laid emphasis on the film being innovative, substantiating it by mentioning the cast of the film as non-mainstream and that the film carries a critical "social message". Chakravyuh constantly talks of true incidents. References in Chakravyuh to actual life events contain that of a Naxalite top gun being interviewed covering his face by a gamchha (clearly indicative of Naxal leader Kishenji), the MNC called Mahanta (a finely disguised mention to Vedanta), the personal armies of business houses (Salwa Judum) etc. Representation from the print and electronic media reports, the film exploits the common illustrations and imageries of Naxalism. This record of the frenzied political situation of modern India, as seen through the modes of popular media, has become a trademark of new 'non-mainstream' Hindi cinema a term very much a part of Bollywood. Such films based on the subject of Naxalism are marked a lot by novel strategies, but what gets ignored, is the politics of these films ,perhaps every time .

In general in all these films, Naxalism is set only in the backdrop to relate conventional stories. Chakravyuh, too could not escape this and though, the film moves to contemplate the Naxalism issue; though in closing stages it turns more into a moral dilemmas of the bonds shared by the two friends. Jha sees Naxalism as ethically fascinating, being compassionate to the fundamental cause , that have lured filmgoers in all areas. Chakravyuh constantly refers to real happenings—at times even trying to fetishize the 'real', through provoking dialogues

and the way violence is portrayed even when it remains ingrained in the cinematic realism of Bollywood cinema: spinning around the tale of two friends and their emotional saga. It sets itself in rural India, where revolutionary leftist Naxalites take up violence against the policemen and politicians who are serving big businesses men to gain huge profits at the cost of displacing villages and exploiting the land and its natural resources which belong to the indigenous of these places. Like the majority of Jha movies, Chakravyuh is for the wise common man in the spectators. The film adopts a tone that is serious in its temperament and stays devoted and staunch to its subject. Chakravyuh is thus a fresh film which clearly knows that a point rings loud and obvious if it's conveyed with a spellbinding plot and appealing characters that the common man expects from conventional popular cinema.

Amidst all the fanfare of pre-release activities for Chakravyuh branding it as an issue-based political thriller, the launch of an online comic series, by Jha based on the film, Chakravyuh has not fallen prey to the action-cinema stereotypes. The film along with addressing the core issue includes all elements of a Bollywood potboiler action stereotype found in a predictable Hindi film— an honest police officer, a left-wing protagonist, a typical middle-class rolling stone who changes loyalty, crooked politicians, an insatiable industrialist and eroticized indigenous. By following the regular stereotypes, and missing out on any grey shades, the film falls prey to the commercialisation of cinema. Chakravyuh shows good and bad people on both sides but the good people stay good all along and bad people stay so. Apart from the cinematic compulsions of a commercial Bollywood film Chakravyuh acquaints its audience with more than just headlines reported in the media, and brings them face to face with the real picture of the happenings in the very heart of their nation (even quite unexpectedly citing the Arjun Sengupta Committee Report in the final voiceover), Chakravyuh can be said to be a film on 'Friendship', 'Love', 'Duty' and 'Honour' pioneering to present those facets of the indigenous movement in this cinematic representation which till now have been untouched in Bollywood.

Conclusion

To sum up, Prakash Jha's "Chakravyuh" is a stimulating cinematic representation of the challenges of the Indigenous movement. Charkavyuh is very much a quintessential Bollywood film which leaves viewers with ample food for thought. The film's heart-wrenching portrayal of the indigenous movements in India is sure to edify the masses, who till now look up to Naxalities as simply a terrorist group obsessed with violence and the challenges faced by the security forces to maintain peace and law and order in the areas of the indigenous movement. The film provides a viewpoint of the harassed indigenous and is a mouthpiece for them along with foregrounding the viewpoint of the security forces who face immense pressure from their political bosses. Both the naxals and the security forces are pitched against each other by the political mafia for petty personal benefits. The film stands as an insight for the common man to look through this sheet of illusion and understand the

real picture of the turmoil that is faced every day by the Naxals and the forces. The film though a Bollywood entertainer catches the audience's imagination and makes them ponder on the challenges that it talks of. Jha has been successful in creating hype and delivering to his fans a very relevant issue. The audience has been presented by him with a completely new dimension to look at one of the most serious internal threats to national integrity – the naxal movements in India.

Filmography

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