

Cutting Edge: Senseless Censors

S V Raman

We claim to be living in an era of reforms. Yet, when it comes to questions of 'morality' or 'criticism', we prefer status quo. We exhibit a mindset that is anything but reform-friendly, a mindset that has stagnated through centuries in the swamp of colonized indoctrination. And the worst victim of this has been the magical art form of moving images, which has revolutionized every walk of life for over a century. Since not very long after Dhundiraj Govind Phalke's offering Raja Harishchandra (1913) right up to the just released Hatath Neerar Jonnye (Suddenly, for Neera) by Subrata Sen, the censor's scissors have been constantly haunting Indian cinema like Damocles' sword, more often for the wrong or even irrelevant reasons.

Ironically, a couple of years after D W Griffith had created waves with his Intolerance (1916) at the peak of the First World War, the then rulers of our subcontinent gave vent to their intolerance towards unbridled freedom of expression in cinema by promulgating the Cinematograph Act in the year 1918. At that time this Act had two parts. One part was meant to regulate the licensing of cinemas, while the other part made provisions for censorship. However, this censorship part was made a state subject, with the responsibility entrusted to the five centres at Bombay, Calcutta, Madras, Rangoon and Lahore. In the year 1922, entertainment tax was introduced for the first time on cinema tickets. It started in the state of West Bengal as educational cess, a term that has been haunting us for other reasons since the Finance Minister P Chidambaram presented the budget in Parliament on 08 July 2004. The Cinematograph Act in its original avatar was however rather liberal in the censorship regulations, as one can see in the films made in the 1920s and 1930s.

Historical developments led to the partition of the country, but also to the emergence of an independent India facing the challenges of self-governance and self-regulation. With the Nehruvian brand of socialism gaining momentum, several changes became necessary. Consequently, on 21 March 1952 the earlier Act gave way to its successor - The Cinematograph Act, 1952. The bitter truth is that despite some cosmetic revisions to the guidelines in 1983 and 1994, the original manual still continues to be the guiding bible for the mandarins who rule the roost in the Central Board of Film Certification. On paper though, the guidelines amended up to 07 May 1983 clearly laid down that the Board of Film Censors shall be guided by the following principles:

- The objectives of film censorship will be to ensure that -
- a) the medium of film remains responsible and sensitive to the values and standards of society ;
 - b) artistic expression and creative freedom are not unduly curbed ; and
 - c) censorship is responsive to social change.

Incidentally, it was also the year 1952 that ushered in the first edition of the International Film Festival of India, giving our filmmakers and film buffs exposure to cinema from different parts of the world. The seeds for a countrywide film society movement had also already been sown in 1948 with the formation of the Calcutta Film Society through the initiative and under the stewardship of Satyajit Ray, Chidananda Dasgupta, R P Gupta and a few others. The subsequently founded apex body of film societies in the country, the Federation of Film Societies of India, with Satyajit Ray as the President and the then Minister of Information and Broadcasting Indira Gandhi as one of the Vice-Presidents, succeeded in extracting some privileges from the Central Government. For one, it could apply for and obtain exemption from censorship for films to be screened for its members, a privilege that it enjoys even today. Also, on par with other foreign films, Indian films being entered in the International Film Festival of India and other recognised festivals in the country were exempted from the mandatory censorship certificate otherwise required for public screening.

All this received a severe jolt when the guidelines for entry to the Mumbai International Film Festival for shorts and documentaries scheduled for February this year made it mandatory for Indian entries to have a censor certificate. The reason was that the film *War and Peace* by Anand Patwardhan, which had won an award at the last edition of the festival, had subsequently run into problems with the censors, resulting in a long-drawn court battle, which Anand won, thanks to the judiciary. Following countrywide protests, signature campaigns and boycott threats the organisers relented and withdrew the stipulation, only to use dirty backdoor tactics to keep out specific films with the endorsement of a selection panel constituted, tutored and instructed by them. Which brings us to the basic question of the credentials, competence and integrity of persons who are appointed to such panels and committees.

As we are more specifically addressing the issue of censorship here, let us restrict ourselves to this area. Having had the 'privilege' of serving as a 'distinguished' member of the Central Board of Film Censors at the regional level for two terms in the late eighties and early nineties, I could share a few thoughts with you. The task is certainly not an enviable one. One has to often sit through hours of mindless torture inflicted by the filmmakers. After a couple of such sessions, truly competent persons conclude that it is not worth their while. The ones who do go willingly and regularly are people with time in their hands - among others, senior citizens and retired academicians who take a nap while the film is running, only to wake up in time to side with anyone initiating some objections. These initiators are often 'planted' people catering to the vested interests of the powers that be. It is a vicious circle. Which is why I fervently believe that in today's scenario in the 21st century, when almost anything and everything is only a few mouse-clicks away and easily accessible to young and old alike, it is high time we do away with institutions like censorship, which may or may not have served some purpose in the past, but is certainly redundant today.

We have embraced globalisation, we talk of fulfilling the Millennium Development Goals by the year 2015, we nurture dreams of becoming a developed nation in the near future, we move around with an air of 'Hum kisi se kam nahin'. Well, let us then shed our inhibitions and hypocrisy, let us not merely grow old but grow up, let us start believing in the capability and maturity of our new generation of filmmakers, who with their wide exposure in the global context will soon develop their own check-valves according to the needs of the day. Or else, the path of reforms we tread will be a treacherous and slippery one and progress would be like the monkey climbing up a greased pole - four feet up and then slide two feet down.