



Investigating the Manifestation of Socio-Political Reflection in 'Jagte Raho' (1956) : A Case Study

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Abstract

Upholding an honest and stark poor Villager, 'Jagte Raho' despairingly has addressed the issue of social apathy. Set over the events of a single night, the film is a brilliant comic yet critical manifestation of the life of the middle class of the City of Calcutta. The Camera looks at the city as a nightmare. The film narrates the naked truth about various challenges faced by the life in the city, especially for the poor, downtrodden, innocent, honest human beings who enter the city for searching a job to earn two square meals of a day. Every second of the life of a human being is a struggle even if it is for quenching the thirst. A poor peasant coming from the village arrives in the city for search of work. The poor Villager is looking for drinking water to quench his thirst. But he is mistaken as a thief and stumbles into an apartment complex searching for an appropriate hiding place to save him from the grip of a vigilante rowdy mob. In this struggle, he inadvertently exposes the venality and dishonesty of the residents of the apartment complex belong to middle to upper-middle class. The poor Villager eventually is able to leave the apartment complex without getting the required drinking water but finally his thirst is assuaged by a woman. While running away from the vigilante group of young men this poor man discovers closets full of skeletons in the flat of a middle class. A drunk's fetish of making his wife dance to excite him, a so-called respectable man's 'honest living' of producing fake currency, a young boy and girl's secret romantic effort while the girl's parents become asleep are some of the shocking incidents that the poor Villager notices behind the closed doors on one night. Finally, the poor Villager does an outburst from the frustration that a poor man has faced in a hypocritical society. 'Jagte Raho' is one of the exceptional films which have passed the yardstick of the time when it was made and is equally relevant even today. The film with a heart touching narrative, powerful script and variety of meaningful and sensitive songs has provided a deep message to the urban middle and upper-middle class society.

Keywords: Investigating, Manifestation, Socio-Political, Reflection 'Jagte Raho', Case Study

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Introduction

Based on the Writing of Khwaja Ahmad Abbas, Raj Kapoor starrer Hindi Film 'Jagte Raho' (Stay Awake or Stay Alert) (1956) is directed by Sombhu Mitra and Amit Maitra and produced by Raj Kapoor. The film deals with the trial of a poor Villager (Raj Kapoor) who arrives in the city in search of a better living. However, the poor villager soon becomes trapped in a web of the greed and corruption of the middle-class. It was produced in Bengali as 'Ek Din Raatre', starring Raj Kapoor, Chhabi Biswas, Pahari Sanyal, Nargis Dutt, Daisy Irani and others.

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Aims and Objectives:

The aim and objective of this Paper is to investigate about the Manifestation of Socio-Political Reflection in the Hindi film 'Jagte Raho' (1956).

Methodology :

This Paper has followed the Qualitative Method based on Observation and Analysis and has drawn the conclusion. The Paper has identified 'Jagte Raho' (1956) as a representative Case Study and the DVD of the film has been treated as the Primary Source of this Study.

Business, Awards and Recognition :

The film, 'Jagte Raho' appeared an overseas blockbuster at the Soviet Box Office, drawing 33.6 million audiences in Soviet in 1965,¹ due to Raj Kapoor's popularity in the Soviet Union. In 1965, the film earned an estimated 8.4 million SUR (US\$9.33 million or Rs.4.44 crore) in the Soviet Union.² The Film won the Crystal Globe Grand Prix at the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival in Czechoslovakia in the year 1957.³ At the Fourth Annual National Film Awards, the Film won the Certificate of Merit.⁴

The Narrative :

A poor peasant coming from the village arrives in the city for search of work. The poor Villager is looking for drinking water to quench his thirst. He enters an apartment, whose residents considers him as a thief and chases him. The poor man runs from one flat to another for saving himself. In this way, he witnesses many shady incidents in the flats where he hides. These misdeeds and crimes are being committed by the so-called 'respectable' citizens of the city and the urban society, who by day, lead a life diametrically opposite to their nighttime deeds behind the closed doors.

The poor man is shocked by witnessing these events and tries to escape from the grip of the search parties patrolling the entire apartment in search of an elusive thief. The poor villager is unfortunately seen and the residents of the apartment chase him to the roof top of the building. The man is able to provide a strong resistance and then descends by the water pipes onto the porch of a flat. He meets a little girl (Daisy Irani). She talks to him and arouses self-confidence in the peasant. She tells the poor man to be fearless because he does not do any misdeed or commit a crime. Though convinced by the little girl, still the poor villager thinks to face the adverse situation waiting outside. But when the poor man gets out of the flat, he is surprised to see that no one takes notice of him. He gradually leaves the apartment building but his thirst still unquenched. The man listens a beautiful song and searching for its source arrives at the doorstep of a woman (Nargis) feeding the birds. The woman feels that the man becomes thirsty and ultimately the man's thirst is meted by the water from the pitcher of the woman.

Analysis of the Narrative :

As the night matures, the glittering lights on Esplanade and Chowringhee Road, the business and cultural heart of Calcutta (now Kolkata), dims and the city witnesses the ubiquitous cry of night watchmen - 'Jagte Raho!' (Stay awake!). The streets of the city which once full of cars and their bright headlight gradually become empty. During the

midnight, the streets become the exclusive constituency of the night guards, who alert the people. A poor, villager roams these streets searching for water to quench his thirst. When the outsider enters into an apartment complex after seeing a dog lapping up water in a puddle under a leaking tap, the guard on duty labels him as a thief and raises an alarm. A group of jobless young men and boys living in the complex is assembled to search for the intruder. Gradually, this search turns into a baseless enquiry. The vigilante army searches everyone's house in the midnight and claims money to buy snacks for themselves and beat up anyone they suspect. The poor Villager (Raj Kapoor) hides in different apartments of the complex and witnesses the corrupt lives of the residents. For the society, most of them are respectable people but in the personal domain, they are gamblers stealing their wives' jewellery, drunkards, makers of spurious liquor, printers of counterfeit currency.

This is the premise of the Hindi Classic 'Jagte Raho'. The team behind the film comprised socially committed artistes critiquing all that had gone wrong with India's socialist dream within the first decade of Independence. The film is directed by Sombhu Mitra and Amit Maitra. Sombhu Mitra, a doyen of the Bengali Group Theatre Movement was a member of the Cultural Wing of the Communist Party of India, Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), like the Music Director, Salil Choudhury. The Writer, K. A. Abbas, has upheld the stark reality and contrast between the lives of the rich and poor people in the city. Lyricists Prem Dhawan and Shailendra were also the members of the IPTA.

In 'Jagte Raho', the apartment complex has represented the nation; its residents, the citizens. In the film, the different apartments appear as similar from the outside but are vastly different from inside. When the vigilante army enters at the house of currency counterfeiter Ram Malik (Nemo) for the first time, they are startled by the rich interiors. One of them says that Ram Babu was in the US for a long time and has learnt there how to earn money.

Rashmi Doraiswamy in her Essay on the Films of K. A. Abbas, 'New Narratives for the New Age', comments that 'Jagte Raho' is unique in Hindi Cinema. She explains that the moment of outburst in the climax by the Protagonist in the film does not lead to any change in the society. 'The passive and silent observer speaks and the crowd continues to hound him as before.' The common man, the poor village peasant, is not an agent of change as seen in other contemporary narratives; he is merely an interrupter for the nefarious deeds in the building.⁵

The inability of the individual to be an agent of change has appeared as a poignant conclusion. The film has orchestrated with finesse how an entire society can easily be transformed into a blood-thirsty mob by means of an injection of panic. The mob has no patience for the rule of law. They do not want to wait for the police to come, instead they are willing to catch the thief themselves and lynch him. The narrative ends at dawn with a beautiful Bhajan. This is, however, not a positive ending still it is an appeal to wake up.

The film narrates a single night's events in a middle class apartment complex in Calcutta, is a brilliant comical and critical take on the hypocrisies of the middle class life of the city.

The film has exhibited the director duo's pre-occupation with social justice and is a denunciation of the cruel and entitled petit-bourgeois, who will not even offer a glass of water to a poor Villager, lost by night, in the big city. In this film, the city has been portrayed as a cold and heartless nightmare. The closed nature of city life is opposite to the openness and simplicity of village life, where everyone knows everyone. In fact, the film is an allegory to the inhuman nature of the city.

'Jagte Raho' is a sort of allegorical film dealing with darkness and light. An allegorical narrative that applies darkness and light to rip off the mask of respectability worn by the moral pillars of society. Here, darkness appears as the cloak of respectability under which a city supposedly sleeps in peace but in reality it is the time of committing crime and evil. It appears as a night without end but like always, there is an end, the arrival of a dawn at which the poor Villager discovers that the terrible darkness of the night is only half the reality but apart from the suffocating darkness the other half of the reality is the dawn of a new day of truth, honesty, empathy and justice.⁶

The film has showcased an irony that while the poor Villager is suspected to be a thief and is chased by the so called petit-bourgeois vigilant army, what he sees in the flats are far bigger crimes - moral, hypocritical and physical, committed by these 'respectable' middle or upper middle class people behind the four walls of their homes.

To many, 'Jagte Raho' is perhaps Raj Kapoor's best film. The film has exhibited one of Raj Kapoor's most remembered and iconic performances.

Besides Kapoor, credit also goes to Motilal, playing the role of a drunk debauch with wicked relish. The rest of the ensemble cast of this film provides fine support.

'Jagte Raho', sadly, also witnesses the last appearance of Raj Kapoor and Nargis together on the silver screen. Here, Nargis appears as a cameo at the end of the film and she is finally the woman, who quenches the poor Villager's thirst and thus ends the film with an element of romantic humanism.

Critics are of opinion that this mordant satire must rank among the masterpieces of the popular mainstream Hindi Films of 1950s. The entire credit goes to R. K. Studios and its key person Raj Kapoor, here teaming up with Bengali Theatre greats like Sombhu Mitra and Master Lyricist-Composer Salil Chaudhury as Music Director. Kapoor appears in this film at the height of his powers as actor and risk-taking producer. His character has traded a skimpy dhoti, to portray a terrified poor villager who has just arrived, in the mid night, in the big city (unidentified and generic though the scenes of the streets of Calcutta appear during the opening credits) and who is in search of the most basic of all amenities - a sip of water. He quickly runs from the night guard who patrol the city's streets periodically crying 'Jagte Raho!' or 'Stay awake!'. But he is befriended by a stray dog who leads him to a leaking tap inside a massive and gated apartment complex.

The presence of this alleged thief results a chaos. Running from one flat to another to save himself from the furious mob, the poor peasant witnesses and exposes a range of vices that masquerade as bourgeois respectability and mercilessly reveals how, in the status and security-obsessed society of the middle class, only a thin line may separate domestic civility from petty crime, tawdry scandal, idiotic vendetta and indeed mindless mob vigilantism. Besides, the film's sensitivity to the range of middle-classness and its political ramifications has reflected. In the panic that follows the rumour of a thief in the apartment complex, the wealthier residents quickly organize (with financial incentives) the poorer ones into armed youths to trace the offending subaltern.⁷

The poor peasant coming from a village barely speaks throughout most of the film, conveying his emotions through slapstick and pantomime but abruptly offers one fervent denunciatory speech at its climax. In this moment, the reverent montage of national heroes follows. The coexistence of patriotism with social critique is of course the characteristic of this film. In the apotheosis-like finale, accompanied by a beautiful song 'Jaago Mohan Pyaare' (Wake, O beloved Enchanter), might suffice to end this dark dystopia into a bright new day. To create the ambience of a serene sunrise, Salil Chowdhury created song 'Jago Mohan Pyare' in raga Bhairavi.

Other songs are sparingly yet beautifully used to advance the narrative. The opening 'Zindagi Khwab Hai', (This life is a dream), sung by a drunken bon vivant, establishes and celebrates the cinematic sur-reality we are entering even as it prefigures the heavy ironies that it will shortly reveal. The ludicrous 'Maine Jo Lee Angdai' (When I stretched my limbs) is a send up of raucous cinema love songs with nonsense refrains and is played as an HMV phonograph record by a debauched husband who wants his own wife to mimic the erotic dancing of film actresses. While the bourgeois spouse hides in respectability in the bedroom, the poor villager, clutching a skirt, is hallucinated into her dancing forced by the husband and the actress appears in this role looking perfectly fetching in the 'sinful' adornment of a courtesan.⁸

K. Damodar designed the vast yet claustrophobic set which is another of the triumphs of the film. The locked gates, receding hallways, scurrying residents and three-digit flat numbers that are mindlessly reeled off add to the inescapable message that this comfortable upscale development the sort of housing to which many Indians aspire is not only a warren of iniquities and sorrows concealed behind every name plated door but also a vast, self-policing prison that traps its denizens in their prejudices and fears.

The film appears as significant since it features a veritable who is who of Hindi Cinema character actors of 1950s. Part of it is due to Salil Choudhury's superb music. And besides that, this is a well-scripted story, socially relevant in a tongue-in-cheek way.

The night watchman is not a sympathetic person and shoos the Villager away. Disheartened, the Villager's still plodding through the streets, when he encounters a Drunk (Motilal), singing '[Zindagi Khwab Hai](#)', waking up pavement-dwellers and generally having a whale of a time. When the Drunk accidentally drops his wallet, the Villager returns it to him and is the recipient of much gratitude so much, in fact, that the Drunk insists the Villager come home with him. But the taxi driver shoos the Villager away and drives off with the Drunk.

The Villager panics and runs straight into the apartment complex, where he takes shelter in the kitchen of a small household. Kailash Babu (Rashid Khan), the householder, sleeps when the watchman's cries awaken the neighbourhood. Shortly after that, the hot tempered young men of the neighbourhood, headed by two fellows (Iftekhar and Krishan Dhawan) have armed themselves with clubs, tennis racquets and curtain rods and commence to comb the area for the thief.

Within this turmoil, the Villager manages to hide in an empty oil drum though Kailash Babu's daughter Sati (Smriti Biswas), with her lover (Pradeep Kumar) gets caught. The thief-hunters satisfy themselves that the thief is not hiding in the flat of Kailash Babu, they exit and the Villager runs from the flat of one wealthy and supposedly 'respectable' man to another. The poor Villager meets once again the Drunk and notices that the Drunk has a self-sacrificing wife (Sumitra Devi), a woman who, in an attempt to keep her husband at home, agrees to sing and dance for him, even though she considers the very idea repulsive.

Then, there is Shashank Babu (Pahadi Sanyal), whose best friend is a staunch Brahmin residing as his neighbour, who has interest in horse race. Shashank Babu has shortage of cash, so he steals his wife's jewellery while she sleeps. His wife, Meenu (Sulochana Chatterjee) has become so fed up that their home appears a battleground. And there is the wealthy philanthropist Ram Narayan Mullick (Nemo), who offers a gold medal as prize to the man who will catch the thief who has entered inside the apartment complex. Mullick is well-respected and much admired in the society. His neighbours and the people consider him a man who spends all his wealth on the welfare of the poor and needy. He has, for instance, made a small charitable hospital within the apartment complex which only a few insiders realize is the main conduit for Mullick to distribute the currency he forges.

A criminal philanthropist, a priest who gambles, a man who steals the jewellery of his own wife, a man who has no qualms about making his wife sing and dance for his pleasure. All these people try to find the so-called 'thief' they are sure is hiding in the apartment complex.

'Jagte Raho' is really not much a story rather a loosely knitted little episodes from the lives of people who have only the passing of relationships with the others. In a matter of one night, the camera follows through the eye of the Villager as he looks for a little water to quench his thirst. The resultant story is socialist, sarcastic ridiculing the superficially 'respectable'.

The film is well-scripted and efficient with almost no superfluous narrative elements. The acting is by and large good. And Salil Choudhury's music is excellent. 'Jaago Mohan Pyaare' (Lata Mangeshkar and Chorus) is probably the best-known of the songs but other favourites include 'Zindagi Khwab Hai' (Mukesh), 'Maine Jo Li Angdayi' (Haridhan, Sandhya Mukherjee), 'Main Koi Jhoot Boleya' (Mohammed Rafi and S. Balbir), 'Thandee Thandee Savan Kee Phuhar' (Asha Bhosle).

In a beautiful scene that sets the tone for the rest of the film, the poor Villager makes friendship with a street dog, the only friendly face that he finds. He shares his handful of channa with the dog.

A delightfully drunk (Motilal), offers him alcohol much to the Villager's bemusement. When he returns the wallet of the drunkard, the cynical city dweller is surprised. The Villager neither drinks nor smokes nor gambles only wants some water to quench his thirst. He comes across his canine friend again, this time lapping water up in the courtyard of an apartment complex.

Taking shelter in one of the flats of the apartment complex, the thirsty Villager is overjoyed to see a bucket of water but before drinks, he is interrupted again. It is a pair of lovers who are caught in a conundrum.

The feared man runs through one corridor to another, climbs one floor to another like a cornered rat and faces obstruction at every step. It has already been established by the residents of the complex that he is a thief and this vigilante mob does not provide him a chance to prove his innocence.

Raj Kapoor playing the character of the poor, Villager has very few dialogues in this film. His fear, his pain and his helplessness were vividly etched on his face and mirrored in his eyes. In some scenes Raj Kapoor's acting is over the top. There is one scene towards the end where the Villager fears that he is finally going to be caught and the minute-long 'panorama of expressions' that follows is theatrical. This was a class acting of an actor who also had the guts to produce this modern fable. He has been supported by a fine ensemble cast of whom special mention has been gone to Motilal, playing the drunk with his acting prowess and Iftekhar, playing Sandow, the hot-tempered leader of resident youth.

'Jagte Raho' is one of the few R.K. films that did the musical score by Salil Choudhury, and the music was used sparsely and with great effect. The film opens with 'Zindagi Khwab Hai' and ends with 'Jaago Mohan Pyaare'. Each song helps the narrative to proceed smoothly and convincingly and the background score is perfectly in sync with the narrative.

Based on the Bengali Play 'Ek Din Ratrey' and directed by Bengali Greats (Actor-Director) Shombhu Mitra and Amit Maitra, the Bengali version (also titled 'Ek Din Ratrey') had Chhabi Biswas playing the role that Motilal played in 'Jagte Raho'.

Conclusion :

In this film, a bumbling peasant, the grubby and nameless Villager who searches for water in the big, bad city is the focal point, the man through whose eyes the viewers get to see so many stories unfold. The Villager is a sympathetic character. The viewers feel sorry for this man, who is being labeled as a thief for no fault of his own. The film has upheld him as a selfless human being when he carries a jug of water to splash on the face of an unconscious woman but never even takes a swallow from it.

And then there is the general demeanor of the Villager. He is, of course, nervous even downright scared, resorting to lame disguises and subterfuge to escape notice. But, the poor Villager has abled to overcome the hurdle appearing in his way.

The Protagonist in 'Jagte Raho' is, at first glance, a far cry from the hero of films like 'Anari', 'Awara', or 'Shree 420'. In 'Jagte Raho', Raj Kapoor's character is rural, illiterate, simple, singularly upright and honest.

This film is considered amongst one of the best of not only the performances of Raj Kapoor but also among one of the best Hindi films of any time. The film has expressed a satirical look at the then Bengali society.

'Jagte Raho' is one of the exceptional films which have passed the yardstick of the time when it was made and is equally relevant even today.

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