

The Effect of Censorship in Movies

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Introduction - Back in the day, the film stock used to be violently flammable. The fashion of film screening had just started in the west. In 1897 during a film screening in Paris, the stock caught fire and a massive fire broke out killing 126 people. Following the event, similar incidents took place at several other places during screenings. This resulted in the world's first cinematograph legislation in Britain in 1909, intending to improve safety standards by controlling the issue of cinema licenses. The 1909 act made license compulsory for public screening and with this also came the regulations on the content. Soon after in 1912, the British Board of Film Censor was formed.

In 1928 censorship court was started in our country. We were a colony of Britain in those days. A person related to mass medium, particularly cinema was considered a powerful entity as it was a time of the nationalist movement and the British considered anything said against them as being sedition. Though on-screen kissing was quite popular in the cinema of 1920's and 1930's, Britishers were concerned only about sedition and that no political sentence was allowed to be made against them. 1928 onwards sexual attraction in the cinema was reduced because social groups objected by saying that it was not a part of Indian ethos and new norms were decided for the films. Sex and violence were the only concerned points of the social groups. The first movie to get banned in India was Bhakta Vidur in 1921. One of the main reasons was the actor who played the role of Vidur had a resemblance to Mahatma Gandhi. The second film to be banned was Tyag Bhoomi because it was connected to the independence movement in India and was designed to mute the political descent.

The whole process started to develop historically and several committees were made and which led to the creation of the cinematographer act of 1952. But there were constant differences between filmmakers and committees. Initially, the Khosla committee and then the Mudgal committee submitted their report to the government to look into the matter. Finally, a committee was set led by Shyam Benegal and submitted a report to the government. The report says that the government has no right to interfere in

the creative work of any individual and if there is any change to be made in the film, the decision lies in the hands of the maker of the film and nobody else has this power.

Unfortunately, this lineage is still prevalent in today's time. Filmmaker Jayant K. Cherian's movie Papilio Buddha (2013), went to revising committee and then to the tribunal. While tribunal asked Cherian to mute a quote from Dr. Ambedkar from the film about the Yerwada jail Satyagrah of Mahatma Gandhi. It is not explicit nor it has sexuality. The issue is purely political. Buddha Papilio is about a band of displaced untouchables in the Western Ghats who embrace Buddhism to escape from caste operations. His other film Ka Bodyspace (2016) was denied screening at film festivals by the information and broadcasting ministry. Ka Bodyspace is a film about 3 young people Haris, a gay painter, Vishnu, a rural kabaddi player and their friend Siya, an activist who refuses to conform to the dominant norms of femininity, struggle to find space and happiness in a conservative city of India.

Film director B. Unnikrishnan in an interview explains the story of Saijo, a physically challenged filmmaker from Kerala. In his film Kathakali (2016), Kathakali is compared with society. Many people have been ejected from society due to various reasons. Some of these people live on the shores of the Bharathapuzha river. There are people in search of wealth, old people, physically challenged people, and people orphaned by birth. The movie depicts the story of a young man who tries to join and create an address with society. But he fails to do so and returns to the river whom he considers his mother, to discard all the fabricated deceitful illustrations of society. The film ends strongly emphasizing the old saying "kathakali is not meant for the poor and the underprivileged". The main character strips himself, throws away his Kathakali apparel, and walks into the river to commit suicide. This is shown in a wide shot which has nudity not from the front but from behind (in a wide shot). The censor board officer denied the certificate after having cleared the committee. The problem is not with the set of rules, the rules are very generalized but each point of the rules is interpreted by the committee and

bureaucrats. That is the most unfortunate part of the game. Often the decision is suppressed by the regional certification officer. Art never happens in consent with the law. The regional certificate officer cannot overrule the committee. Their job is to see that the guidelines are maintained, they can only point out those guidelines which are not been followed but cannot overrule the committee.

Whether we say it is censorship or certification, both are contrary to the right to speech. Perhaps there is a kind of censorship at the back of the mind of a filmmaker while conceiving a film that if he might make a certain kind of a film, it would face trouble. We have forgotten the plight of the common people and we don't care to raise our voices. There are several questions that a filmmaker seeks - How not to get misunderstood? People might take it otherwise. The more things change, the more they remain the same. The year was 1973 when Mahesh Bhatt began his career as a filmmaker. His first film *Manzilen Aur Bhi hain* came into a problem with censors. It was refused a certificate for trying to subvert the institution of marriage. After a long 30-year career, in the year 1998 when he again hung the gloves as the director for his acclaimed movie *Zakhm* which was autobiographical, it also ran into trouble with the censors. He had to fight the government of the day and finally released the film. Subsequently, the film won the national award for the best film on national integration and Ajay Devgan won the award as well. The year is 2023, and India has entered a new age. There are many young people today who speak a different language and are globally connected, they dream larger dreams, having aspirations to match the mightiest nations of the world. All our thoughts of growth and progress are futile if the perfume of freedom that our founding fathers gifted to us is taken away. A society that does not respect free thought sows the seeds of its own destruction. Films hold the mirror which shames society. Every freedom-loving individual must articulate his anger against this practice. Society at large has to see beyond the films where all our narratives were reduced to a boy meeting girl and they live happily ever after. Freedom is a plant that we need to water individually every day. As a generation, we all need to contribute to preserving the freedom to free thought. The issue with the CBFC is that it behaves like the censor, which is not its job. They certify films and they can say – 'U/A or A' (unrestricted public exhibition & restricted to adults, but they cannot say 'A' (restricted to adults) and then suggest cuts in the movie. They are saying to the adult population that they are not equipped and can not process the movie properly. There is a constant denial of what is going on in the country and they treat a problem as if it does not exist. To fix a problem you first have to address it. Freedom of expression is important because the sole purpose of an artist at the core is to hold a mirror to society. It's an audience's choice to not buy the ticket because some films have to release as it is. A filmmaker has to address the stuff that going on around

us.

The cinema which is produced today is about society and what happens in society is there in the cinema. Filmmakers do not imagine the facts and put them in their movies. CBFC should keep an open mind and not moral schools and judgments. Let society decide what they want to see. Some of the best films are the result of innocence and sometimes the censor kills that innocence. In the process to get the certificate the filmmaker becomes so much aware of what one can write/ speak and what one can't write and speak, what will not be allowed, what you have to fight for, and in between all this the innocence of his thoughts dies and the innocence never comes back.

Many things affect and shake a creative person and then they try to show it on Celluloid. Sometimes you simply want to subvert a situation to see how well a certain thing looks when it's upside down. One should have the right and freedom of subverting the norms To see things from a different lens. Sometimes the censor board bullies the filmmaker and their films are sent to the tribunals to get clear. The process delays the film and as the release date comes closer, under financial pressure creator has to accept the cuts and release the movie ultimately. As an audience if I don't want to see a so-called vulgar film I will not buy a ticket, I will not waste my money and time on that film, it is as simple as that. But I have no authority to control what others want to see. How can we decide what is the right expression and what is wrong? We have different sensibilities, we might admire sports movies and criticize sex comedies but both films are on the same equation. Films have their audience and it is their right to reject the film. The censor cannot decide moral boundaries, the audience have to decide their moral boundaries. Some may have narrow and some might have broader moral boundaries and sensibilities. A lot of producers are not attempting, and supporting the cinema that makes sense. To have the ability to say what one wants to say and to be taken and considered with dignity by society, just because one is a filmmaker he does not need a stamp or approval from anyone. Problems should not be ignored and must be brought to the light of the day by a filmmaker. Ignoring only means that we are preventing progress. Filmmakers who raise the question should also try to provide a solution to the problem. The best type of censorship is no censorship. The film industry should set rules about what kind of speech and writing is acceptable in the movies. That's not censorship it's common sense.

The question is – does a movie die on the censor board table? Who likes to watch a movie with cuts, beeps, warnings, captions, and tags? Is there an attack on the freedom of expression of the filmmaker? Is censorship even relevant in 2023?

We face censorship because it is regulated by the government. We even face censorship when the movie is out in the market for a variety of reasons. On contrary, we

have witnessed many anti-establishment movies time and again without many hues and cry from all sections of society. At CBFC, there is no censorship. The very idea has gone but as they rightly say – old habit remains.

India is a diverse country with many languages. A normal word in a language in one part of the country might mean something offensive in a language spoken in other parts. When people experience the creation of a filmmaker they see reality from a different point of view. The filmmaker has to understand the responsibility that comes with it. There comes the need for some kind of regulation. A filmmaker is a very good person but is he able to function with other human beings? A filmmaker has a personal sense of what is moral, immoral, and amoral. Shyam Benegal explains it beautifully. He says, “a man is good” (is positive), “but a man is able to function well with others” (is normative). Filmmakers doesn’t necessarily think in normative way, they think in positive and negative terms.

Are we living in an ideal world today? In an ideal world, a lot of things are not required. Imagine a world with no borders dividing countries, no difference, and perfect order even in disorder. Where we can understand each other without verbal communication. Where all are spiritually connected. But we are a work-in-progress society. We have different education levels and we are all exposed to the world in different ways. We have different processes. We must try to improve the world we live in. Speaking of the complexities of the time we live in, a lot of things are needed at the hour. There arises the need for a kind of body or board or a stage of dialogues or a filter where we can discuss what one wants to say might mean something else that he might have not thought of. I never say that creative people do it out of the intention to hurt someone’s sentiments. Creative people are very sensitive people. They have immense love for society and people. Sometimes you just get carried away with creativity. I wrote a story, read it out loud to a friend, and close my diary - I wish things were this simple. But the content goes out in the market through public distribution platforms and reaches its audience. The world is not the same and the same thing can mean something else from a different vantage point. No one can ensure a well-rounded absolute.

when a camera focuses on anything, consciously or subconsciously we get the impression that it is objectification or portrayal. By seeing how or the way in

which the scene has been shot even a common man can point out the intention of the filmmaker. What is your intent when you are creating a work of art? If the very intent is wrong, it is just cheap publicity. Sometimes there is no harm in correcting something. For e.g, language and attitude towards children, women, elderly people, LGBTQ. You can’t keep on criticizing like an armed chair critic but somebody has to go and make a difference out there and a sensitive creative person understands such things. Great intent would be a good beginning. In a democracy, dialogues have immense power. Collectively we have to see where we are heading and what are we interested in. We are interested in sharing our stories. It might sound lofty but to reach the ideal state where there is harmony, peace, and love, one has to have intent and it is a collective exercise.

It’s a commercial industry where creations are done for the market. It impacts many lives. Content is not created for film maker’s inner circle. The writing and portrayal should be subtle and sensitive and not necessarily sensational. With freedom comes responsibility and if one has the freedom to express oneself, consumers have also the freedom to reject that creation.

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