A 'State' of Anxiety: Nehru's Spectral Presence in 1960s War Films

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Hindi films have latently carried India as a spectral presence, reflected in cinema's visual, aural and narrative codes (genres, characters, etc.). Through the decades, cinema has been a tool for nation-building, a mirror to the country's promises and betrayals, and a belligerent cultural art form with the potential to align or rebel vis-à-vis the State in building a mass national consciousness. Cinema has thus been a site of nationalist anxieties. The 1950s harboured the hopes of social welfare in a newly independent nation through films like *Awara* (1951), *Shree 420* (1955) and *Mother India* (1957). The 1960s saw the growth of overt political messaging in a volatile landscape with works such as *Haqeeqat* (1964), *Shaheed* (1965) and *Upkar* (1967), which later gave way to the hopelessness, collective rage and individualist heroism of the Angry Young Man era in the 1970s with *Zanjeer* (1973) and *Deewar* (1975). The frustration of middle-class struggles dominated the 1980s in films like *Aakrosh* (1980) and *Ardh Satya* (1983), while the 1990s witnessed the emergence of a new global mobility in a post-liberalization India with *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge* (1995) and *Pardes* (1997). In the 2000s, there was a return to the socio-political reform film with *Swades* (2004), *Rang De Basanti* (2006) and *Delhi 6* (2009). More recently, since the 2010s, there has been a revival of patriotic and historical films such as *Padman* (2017), *Padmaavat* (2018) and *Uri: The Surgical Strike* (2019).

This essay looks at the complex task of national integration through cinema by mapping the rise of the Hindi war film genre in the 1960s, and by focusing on the images and legacy of India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, which loomed large over these film texts. Through invocations of his vision and policies in the dialogues and montages, and by insertion of documentary footage, political newsreels and visual signage (photographs, busts, street signs), the spirit of Nehru is frequently invoked in films like *Haqeeqat*, *Upkar*, and the relatively obscure *Tu Hi Meri Zindagi* (1965). Rather than seeing these as abrupt interruptions, I argue that these films present the leader and his pacifist nationalism as a constant character. They bring out the tension between reality and illusion and grapple with the limits of representation in an era when the nation turned to heightened militaristic nationalism.

This interplay in the texts emerged against key historical developments such as the Sino-Indian War of 1962 and the Indo-Pak War of 1965, along with the second and third Five-Year Plans (1956-1961 and 1961-1966) that foregrounded the industrial and military focus of a new India. Nehru's demise in 1964 and the transition of power to Lal Bahadur Shastri and later Indira Gandhi within a span of three years marked the most volatile phase of the 1960s. These years also saw popular Hindi cinema transition from black and white to colour, and from themes of social realism to more exhibitionist works. Writing for *Sight and Sound* about *Aan* (1952), India's first technicolour film, British film critic and researcher John Gillett mourned the arrival of "gaudy song and dance, frenetic violence, and full-bodied action." [1] However, it took Indian cinema another decade to standardize colour filmmaking and the accompanying regimes of mobility, escape and modernity it offered. [2] The State expressed its new anxieties by setting up regulatory bodies such as the Film Finance Corporation. Before Hindi films seemingly departed from the socialist task of nation-building to concentrate on romantic family dramas and entertainers like *Love in Tokyo* (1966), *An Evening in Paris* (1967) and *Aradhana* (1969), the war film genre flourished and reflected a cinema and nation caught at a critical historical juncture.

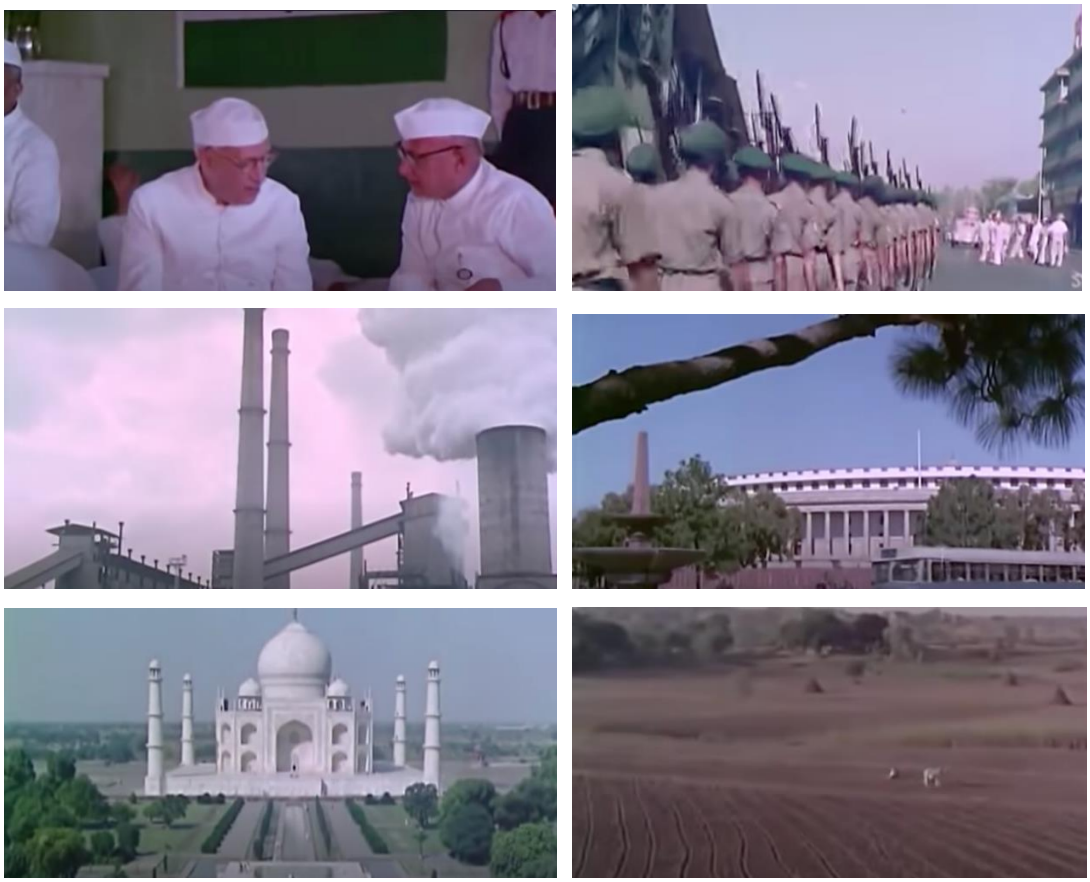
Jawaharlal Nehru's socialist vision for India and its relationship with cinema was established early on. The late 1940s and '50s witnessed State interventions to make "good and socially useful films." [3] To this end, certain institutions such as the National Film Development Corporation and Films Division, along with guidelines for permissible screen content such as the Indian Cinematograph Report of 1952, were introduced to serve as "tools for taste setting". [4] According to UNESCO's 1963 Paris Report on *Indian Cinema and Culture*, the 1952 report of the Censor Board of Film allowed the State to control and have the final say in instances of on-screen "kissing", "exhibition of feminine underclothing", "indecorous dancing", etc. By the 1960s, "display of extreme poverty" was added to this list. [5] This extent of State apprehension was, however, counter-balanced by Nehru's confidence in cinema's potential as an agent of nationalist consciousness.

To this end, Nehru remained a much-revered figure in Hindi cinema of the 1950s and '60s, as is evident in the intangible social realism of the narrative mode and through signages littered across the diegetic space. These references can be seen as early back as in Satyen Bose's *Jagriti* (1954). Here, in remembrance of India's great freedom fighters, the song "Hum laye hai toofanon se kashti nikaal ke; Is desh ko rakhna mere bachchon sambhal ke" (We have

sailed this ship through many storms; Make sure to protect this country, my children") is sung by a school for its students. Simultaneously, the camera cuts to portraits of Mahatma Gandhi, Subhash Chandra Bose and Nehru, hung on the back wall of the classroom. This frontal but disembodied allegiance to Nehru stands in stark contrast with the 1960s war films, where the pacifist and collective memory of the independence struggle is substituted with a promise of a new India and a collective reification of Nehru as its architect and saviour.

Screenshots from the song "Hum laye hain" in Satyen Bose's *Jagriti* (1954).

Even before the war films of the mid-1960s, a heady mix of old and new India is clearly visible in Ram Mukherjee's *Hum Hindustani* (1960). The film opens with the song "Chhodo kal ki baatein, kal ki baat purani; Naye daur main likhenge hum milkar nayi kahaani" ("Let the past be, the past is old; In this new era, we will together write a new story"), juxtaposed with documentary images of Nehru, historical monuments and fertile farmlands. The country's ambitious scientific and industrial temperament is also conveyed through depictions of military training, trains and infrastructural development before the opening credits roll. This idea of a robust India is set against the narrative themes of corruption and greed that appear as hurdles in nation-building. With the war film, the remnants of the past disappear almost entirely. As the country faces the challenge of telling a new story, cinema turns to the realism of documentary footage and fuses it with a melodramatic mode.



Screenshots of images infused with nationalism, that display the nation's political, cultural military and industrial achievements in Ram Mukherjee's *Hum Hindustani* (1960).

Chetan Anand's *Haqeeqat* (1964), one of the first big war dramas of the 1960s, was released right after Nehru's death and began with a dedication to the soldiers and the leader who "always was and still remains the source of inspiration". Revolving around a story set during the Sino-Indian War, Anand turns to newsreels of the battle front, infusing them with a patriotic overtone through Brigadier Singh's surging speech on the "backstabbing" Chinese. This sequence cuts to footage of Zhou Enlai's visit to India in 1960 and the stately welcome the Chinese delegation received from Nehru. The melodramatic sound design and dialogue laden with rhetorical lyricism helps Anand use "realist" images and saturate them with new ideological meaning. Even though the war ended with India's defeat, the film highlights the bravery and sacrifices made by the nation's soldiers. Anand closes the film with the iconic song "Ab tumhare hawale watan sathiyon" (Now the nation is in your hands, my friends), that plays over a montage showing the tragic fate met by some of the fictional characters (essaying the roles of martyrs and their families) along with newsreels of Nehru's visit to the

border posts in Ladakh. By mixing images of static, life-less bodies and the sorrowful gaze of widowed women with the presence of Nehru and the poetic lyrics of Kaifi Azmi sung in Mohammed Rafi's soulful voice, Anand blurs the line between fiction and non-fiction. *Haqeeqat* marks the beginning of Nehru's posthumous link with the recasting of India through militaristic nationalism.

Screenshots with newsreel footage of events that accompanied and followed the Sino-Indian War in Chetan Anand's *Haqeeqat* (1964).

This new cinematic language of celebrating military prowess came to be reflected in many films that followed *Haqeeqat*, including Rono Mukherjee's *Tu Hi Meri Zindagi* (1965). The film is a rare representation of Goa's struggle to free itself from Portuguese rule and its

eventual incorporation within India in December 1961. The film weaves together images of the 1961 United Nations Charter on Indian-Portuguese aggression in Goa, the map of Goa, and newsreels of Nehru's speech on Goa as an unwavering part of India. At the end of the film, the dying hero, Rocky, breaks into a rousing song -- "Tumhe watan phir pukarta hai" ("Your country calls on you") -- that captures the anxiety of India's future in Nehru's absence. The song goes on to say: "Gulab Nehru ke jjal rahe hain, zameen ka kyan hai" ("Nehru's rose is burning, what about the land?"). Here too, a montage that shows Rocky's death, firing military tanks and the burning of Goa is interspersed with visuals of Nehru addressing the crowds.

Screenshots showing Nehru's speech in Goa, from Rono Mukherjee's *Tu Hi Meri Zindagi* (1965).

In 1967, Manoj Kumar released *Upkar*, a film supported by Lal Bahudur Shastri's government and furthering his slogan, "Jai Jawan, Jai Kisan" (Hail the soldier, Hail the farmer!"). The film marked the return of the farmer as a national filmic hero and was buoyed by renewed optimism in modern India's military, industry and agrarian strength. While the film is dedicated to Shastri who had died before its release, the text is still saturated with the Nehruvian spectre. The statues, street signs and photographs it includes provide visual symbolism to the new ideological rendering of the nation.

Screenshots from Manoj Kumar's *Upkar* (1967), dedicated to Lal Bahadur Shastri, but with more visual signage that pays tribute to Nehru.

The long shadow cast by Nehru on these films of the 1960s reveal contradictions and factionalism within the discourse of nationalism. In the new era of digital public squares

where India's turn to Hindu nationalism is being debated, we once again see a resurfacing of the State's complicated relationship with cinema. With the revival of patriotic war films through *Rustom* (2016), *Shershaah* (2021) and *Bhuj: The Pride of India* (2021), Hindi cinema's grandiose scale, stardom and melodramatic storytelling is being reactivated to speak to a contemporary political discourse. The current crop of war films must be seen in the context of the history that has been traced in this essay, that highlights cinema as a didactic bearer of older and newer nationalisms.

Endnotes

[1] John Gillett, "The Festivals: Calvary Vary," *Sight and Sound* (Autumn 1958): 287.

[2] Ranjani Mazumdar, "Aviation, Tourism and Dreaming in 1960s Bombay Cinema," *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies*, 2, no. 2 (September 2011): 129-155.

[3] B.K. Karanjia, "Interview with I.K. Gujaral on Film Policy," *Close-Up*, 3, nos. 5-6 (1970): 36-37.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Baldoon Dhingra, "Indian Cinema and Culture," UNESCO, Programme and Meeting Document WS/1163.125/CUA, Paris, December 27, 1963, 7. As of 2023, the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) has mentioned that the government will oversee that "visuals or words which promote communal, obscurantist, anti-scientific and anti-national attitude are not presented." For more on this, see: https://www.cbfcindia.gov.in/main/guidelines.html (accessed March 1, 2023).

Additional Reference

India 50: The Making of a Nation, edited by Ayaz Memon & Ranjona Banerji (Bombay: Book Quest Publishers, 1997).