

The 'Reel' Meets the 'Real' in Vikramaditya Motwane's *Jubilee*

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Abstract: Cinema mirrors the society. It reflects the social and cultural milieu. Ella Shohat feels that cinema “could tell stories and chronicle events, like the historiographer.” Vikramaditya Motwane's web series, *Jubilee* (2023), depicts the Golden Era of Indian Cinema when a new India was emerging from the shackles of colonialism, only to witness a genocide of unimaginable proportions and dealing with the problems of a nation trying to survive in the post-world war political scenario. Motwane has presented this India rising to the new dawn after independence from more than three-century old British rule, only to wake up to the horrors of Partition and faced with the challenges presented by the rapidly changing world scenario in the post-world war world. The paper shall explore Motwane's presentation of India and Indian Cinema with all its complexities. It shall also study the technique of Cinema within Cinema, a text within a text, that Motwane has used to present the evolution of the craft of filmmaking in India, and how the 'reel' meets the 'real' as Motwane's 'story' is intermixed with 'fact'. The paper shall analyse how far Motwane has succeeded in presenting India and the Indian Cinema of the 1940s.

Keywords: Indian Cinema, History, Motwane, *Jubilee*, Memory, Historical Document, India 1950s, Partition

Cinema, a combination of the 'real' and 'reel', also serves as a socio-historical document of the contemporary world. As a mirror to society, it continues to serve as a significant historical account, even if not the most authentic one. Indian Cinema, more specifically the Hindi cinema in the post-independence era, grappled with numerous social, political, and economic issues looming large over

the sub-continent. India's independence has lent itself to varied stories on patriotic fervour, communal tensions, trauma, and human relationships.

Jubilee (2023), a web series created by Vikramaditya Motwane and Soumik Sen, depicts the Golden Era of Hindi Cinema from 1947 to 1953, when a new India was emerging from the shackles of colonialism, only to witness a genocide of unimaginable proportions, dealing with the problems of a nation trying to survive in the post-world war political scenario. It also showcases the impact of changing world politics on Indian Cinema, as the nation defined its position *vis à vis* America and Russia. Sarkar believes that the re-telling of the events of 1947 is a difficult task, and even after the passage of so many decades; “the corporeal, material, and psychic losses, the widespread sense of betrayal, the overwhelming dislocations—in short, the deep lacerations inflicted on one's sense of self and community—bring up intense and consuming passions” (Sarkar 9).

In *Jubilee*, Motwane has chosen to tell a story based in post-Independence India and narrate the story of Indian Cinema as it grew in the initial years after Independence. When you check out Indian Cinema in the 1940s, the first information that pops out on the internet is “1940: Film Advisory Board set up in Bombay to mobilise public support through war propaganda films. Himanshu Rai dies. Devika Rani takes over production control of Bombay Talkies.” No wonder when Motwane took to telling a story of Cinema in India in the mid-20th century, he weaves it around the lives of Himanshu Rai, the founder of Bombay Talkies, and Devika Rani, a leading lady of Indian films and wife of Himanshu Rai. *Jubilee* takes the audience through the paces of the Indian Cinema in its nascent stage. These were the years when India and Indian Cinema witnessed rapid changes as India emerged out of colonial rule in the post-World War world. The Partition was:

the single most traumatic event that witnessed insanity, surpassed only by the Nazi genocide. The bloody killings, the senseless violence, and the cruelty perpetrated by one another defied all norms of sane human behaviour. For decades, the subcontinent continued to harbour the wounds inflicted upon itself. Families were uprooted, individuals were left scarred, and an entire generation was forever doomed to live in the shadow of fear. (Rathor 8)

Ironically, this monumental tragedy, which impacted parts of Northern India, Punjab, and Bengal, also provided writers and filmmakers with a rich source of experience and might have even fired their resolve for a deeper commitment towards a newborn nation.

Motwane's canvas is huge, and he casts a wide net. The space afforded by the web series allows him to present post-independence India. It goes to his credit that Motwane makes full use of the scope of the OTT platform and presents a comprehensive view of the 'golden years' of Indian Cinema, the socio-political changes, the growing technology, and the class struggle as he weaves a story inspired by the lives of Himanshu Rai and Devika Rani.

For this purpose, Motwane brings in a masterful use of technology, cinematic technique and cinematography, music, locations, colour palette, characters, and carefully chosen innuendoes that take the audience back into the world of Cinema of the 1940s, both onscreen and offscreen. The result is that the 10-episode series, which was telecast in two parts seems a socio-historical document besides being a skilfully woven saga of the Indian Cinema as it grew in the first few decades after Independence.

Jubilee unfolds the story of Indian Cinema as it tells the tale of Binod Das and Jay Khanna, whose fortunes become inexplicably intertwined. Just a few weeks before India gains independence, Binod Das is sent by Shrikant Roy, the owner of Roy Talkies, to bring Jamshed Khan, an actor who has been chosen to be launched with the screen name "Madan Kumar" as the hero in Roy's upcoming production, *Sunghursh*. Motwane's presentation of the auditions for "Madan Kumar" in black and white, the costumes, the camera positioning, the entire process of shooting, and the reels that are systematically numbered and stored give the audience a view of behind the scenes well as transports the viewer to the cinema of the 1940s. Later, the picturisation of the song for *Sunghursh* with Madan Kumar and Sumitra Devi is undoubtedly a reminder of Himanshu Rai's *Achhut Kanya* featuring Ashok Kumar and Devika Rani, a tale of the relationship of a Brahmin boy and a girl from the untouchable caste. As destiny would have it, Binod Das meets Jay Khanna, a scriptwriter whose family owns a theatre company in Karachi and who is a friend of Jamshed Khan, on the train and

saves him from the police. Little do they realize that both have come to meet the same person, Jamshed Khan. Jay Khanna wants Jamshed Khan to come to Karachi to work with his theatre company. Jamshed Khan, who has been having an affair with Sumitra Kumari, wife of Shrikant Roy and the leading lady in his films, has also decided to leave for Karachi. A drama of deceit and manipulation unfolds as Sumitra Devi is forced to return to Calcutta, while Khan is killed by the rioters, but not before he realizes the true identity of Binod Das, and the latter unscrupulously leaves him at the mercy of the rioters to fulfil his ambitions to be Madan Kumar. Das succeeds in convincing Roy and gets launched as the superstar Madan Kumar.

Motwane recreates the 1940s with nuanced details. His characters remind one of the real-life film artists as he reveals the deep dark secrets and cinema's power to entertain and enchant. Radio and Cinema were the two major sources of entertainment and information. Indian cinema was dominated by Khannas and Kumars, and Motwane names his protagonists similarly. The actors chosen to play these roles are very much reminiscent of the simplicity of Ashok Kumar and the charm of Shashi Kapoor and Dev Anand. Ronak Kotecha feels that Motwane's:

careful recreation of that world through top-notch production values, detailed set pieces and art direction (by Priti Gole and Yogesh Bansod), elegant and relevant costume design (by Shruti Kapoor), and telling cinematography (by Pratik Shah) simply just enhance the overall experience, making it an immersive one. (Kotecha)

The Partition of India sees Jay Khanna arrive at the Bombay docks with his family to the challenges of living in the squalor of a refugee colony segregated into the 'Sindhi' and the 'Punjabi' quarters. Many films and TV series have been made on the struggles of the refugees at the time of Partition. *Buniyaad* (1986) and *Tamas* (1987) were major series to capture the trauma of partition. Motwane's story is not just about Partition but also Cinema. So, he presents the deprivation and trauma of the uprooted as Nilofer, a courtesan from Lucknow, escapes prostitution as she reaches Bombay only to grab opportunities in films in exchange for sexual favours, and Jay's struggle to find a job gets him involved in a crime. Jay Khanna's passion for filmmaking and his deep-rooted conviction in his script

see him through the toughest of times. His unbroken spirit in the days marked by hunger, shame, and an undignified existence speaks of the resilience of millions. It is his conviction that makes Shamsheer Walia agree to produce the film *Taxi Driver*. Jay Khanna and Shamsheer Walia are pitted against Binod Das are pitted against each other Shrikant Roy and Binod Das. Binod's film *Raj Mahal* with Nilofer is a flop, while Jay's *Baiju Awara* with Sumitra Devi is successful. Binod Das tries every bit possible from dealing with the Soviets behind Roy's back to betraying him to the government. He ends up losing everything as the sordid details of his role in Jamshed Khan's killing come to light, and his younger brother who runs away to escape falling prey to Binod's ambitions ends up begging on the street. Jay Khanna pays his debt to Binod by standing witness in his favor. But many lives lie ruined as Khanna is forced to make choices, Nilofer is left waiting at the altar and Binod ends up losing everything. The world of cinema seems to have left them deserted to deal with the betrayal of their promised dreams. One man's overriding ambition to become the superstar 'Madan Kumar' has disastrous consequences.

Motwane's multilayered and complex characters are caught in the vortex of a rapidly changing world where their desires, motivations, dreams, strengths, and vulnerabilities create a destiny that seems a forgone conclusion. *Jubilee* covers a lot of contemporary issues as it narrates the story of Indian cinema. In Jay Khanna's struggles to get a foothold in the film industry, his unwavering passion to make a film true to his convictions and his script, Motwane highlights the struggles of a newcomer, the shady deals, and the crime and politics in the world of film making. Binod Das has no qualms in leaving Jamshed Khan at the mercy of the rioters. The series also shows the murkiness behind the glamour associated with the world of cinema: the shallow relationships, the betrayals, and the disappointments. The piracy of film reels, the publicity gimmicks, the involvement of criminal elements, and the emotional breakdowns ending in painful suicides are presented side by side with the joy of creating magic on celluloid, with the passionate intensity to tell a story, the origin of Radio Ceylon, and the important milestones in filmmaking—the introduction of playback singing and cinemascope. The characters remain true to the director's vision of a complex portrayal of human

nature as Binod Das can save a stranger, Jay Khanna, and also cold-bloodedly witness the killing of Jamshed Khan. Nilofer easily shifts allegiance to Binod Das, leaving Jay Khanna after a hugely successful opening of Khanna's *Taxi Driver*. The world of popular commercial cinema comes alive with inflated egos, rivalries, publicity gimmicks and scandals, and the dealings with the black marketeers. It takes off the masks to reveal jealousy, greed, love, betrayal, guilt, extra-marital affairs, revenge, and compromises.

The series presents women from various strata of the Indian society. The docile wife Ratna Das who chooses to ignore the escapades of her husband but does not hesitate to help her brother-in-law, presents the Indian woman devoted to her husband and the family. Kiran is similarly the obedient daughter and a very middle-class girl whose dreams do not go beyond marriage. The two ambitious women, Sumitra Devi and Nilofer, further the thought that women cannot have it all and have to sacrifice love and even dignity for the sake of success. But the tragic outcome of manipulations and greed has no respect for individuals whether men or women. Sumitra Devi and Himanshu Rai meet a similar fate, as do Nilofer, Jay, and Binod Das. Ratna and Kiran, without many options, are the passive observers whose lives are forever changed by the decisions that men make. They seemed to have resigned to their fate. These women characters are no doubt reminiscent of the Indian women in the mid-20th century. But they remain mere stereotypes, and the 'reel' does not present the reality of women who played crucial roles in the freedom struggle, nor does it showcase the cinema of the 1950s when films like *Mother India* (1957) were being made.

In the first few decades after the Independence, India witnessed an inclination towards Nehruvian Socialism. The Hindi film industry was enriched by the contribution of many members of IPTA, the cultural wing of the Communist Party of India, and the Progressive Writers' Association. Raj Kapoor's *Barsaat*, *Awara*, *Shri 420*, and *Jis Desh main Ganga Behti Hai* not only propagated the 'leftist' ideology but even benefitted with the very successful musical score, which was in no small measure adapted from the Russian folk music, and became hugely popular in the erstwhile Soviet Union and the Soviet Bloc. In *Jubilee*, Jay Khanna's *Taxi Driver* is a homage to this kind of cinema.

Motwane goes further than merely paying homage to successful Hindi films Raj Kapoor's *Awara* and Bimal Roy's *Do Bigha Zameen* and reveals a deliberate attempt by the Russians to control Indian film production houses to spread their ideology and the lengths to which they could go to sideline the Americans. All along the series, Motwane has alluded to various incidents and events associated with the film industry, like the making of *Mugal-E-Azam*, which almost gives the series a feel of a well-documented historical account. Motwane disclosed that in *Jubilee*:

there are a lot of Easter eggs planted throughout, but the tribute comes from a sense of nostalgia of like, oh, this character can be based on so and so but also looks like so and so but also feels like so and so. That is deliberate, to evoke that sense of nostalgia. Otherwise, all of them are unique personalities who could have been there at that point in time.

(Jhunjhunwala)

Motwane's *Jubilee* is more a drama set in a particular period, and the director himself agrees that the movie world is "just a backdrop that propels the story forward. The drama is primary. It is a drama set in the movie world; it's not a show about the movies with a certain amount of drama." (Jhunjhunwala).

A photograph speaks a million words, and these moving photographs in cinema create a deep impression. So much so that, sometimes, the 'reel' overshadows the 'real'. Cinema is a fine blend of the real and the imagined. It is not merely a re-created memory but a re-creation of a past moment through the vision of its creator. The popular media might present a seamless blending of the lived and the imagined realities, but it is a matter of debate if mere historical accounts or academic discourses can do justice to the plethora of emotions, fears, and anxieties, the collective consciousness, the sense of loss, the emotional distress, as well as, the hope, the opportunities and the changing social and political paradigms which marked the initial decades in the post-independence India. The present generation that has not lived the trauma of Partition and not experienced the world not facilitated by technology and resources experiences the emotional reality through these cinematic documents. Bhaskar Sarkar suggests that "memory now consists of not just the fragmentary

impressions in our minds, tinged with our fantasies, but also the myriad traces in archival documents, recorded testimonials, film footage.” (*Mourning* 12). The impact of cinema is such that the trauma of the Holocaust and Auschwitz finds a very 'real' documentation in Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993) and Mark Herman's *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* (2008). Cinema, as such, becomes a popular medium through which people experience and even attempt to make sense of the experienced situation. Popular visual culture, films, and television series are necessarily 'created realities' and, as such, cannot have the legitimacy of historical documents, news reports, autobiographical writings, and letters. But they certainly bring forth those dimensions of experience that remain unsaid and undocumented. *Jubilee* is a story set in the first decade after Independence, and post-independence India is merely the setting for the story. Like the series *Tamas* or *Buniyaad*, it is not based on the Partition and its aftermath. But it attempts to draw a realistic picture of the times, even though the 'reel' deviates from 'real' at times. *Jubilee*, with its meticulously created sets and the attention to the finest details supported by a retro soundtrack, comes very close to a 'real' experience of India and Indian Cinema of the 1940s.

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