



Policing the Celluloid: Censorship in Indian Cinema as a Colonial Legacy

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Abstract

The interplay between Cinema and the Indian Legal system plays out in numerous interesting ways; cinema makers and cinema-goers routinely find themselves at the crossroads between the two. Cinema censorship in India is the only medium where the state exercises pre-censorship on thousands of films released throughout India in numerous languages. The censorship regime in postcolonial India has its roots in the colonial administration, which was wary of the medium as it found it to be highly influential among the impressionable masses. Colonial anxieties manifested themselves in strict censorship laws regarding Cinema, as it was believed that cinema gave access to colonized people into the lives of the colonizers; it was also felt that cinema could become a medium where ideals of independence might find an outlet. Colonizers' outlook towards the colonized as subjects to be controlled has, interestingly, found an outlet in post-colonial censorship laws, which still infantilize cinema-goers, denying them the autonomy to judge what is best for them. The Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) routinely denies certification and release to many films across languages, often demanding numerous cuts. Any film rooted in a social or political context is treated with circumspection by the CBFC and finds itself in troubled waters. While upholding pre-censorship in Cinema, the judiciary has interpreted strict censorship laws in myriad and often conflicting ways.

Keywords: Central Board of Film Certification, Pre-Censorship, Freedom of Speech and Expression, Public Exhibition, Cinematograph Act.



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Introduction

Phule (2025), directed by Anant Mahadevan, is a biopic depicting the lives of Savitribai Phule and Jyotirai Phule, two prominent 19th-century social reformers who vehemently campaigned against caste discrimination and regressive patriarchal practices. The film was given a "U" certificate by the Central Board for Film Certification (CBFC) after demanding several cuts and words acting as caste identifiers, like *mang*, *mahaar*, and *peshwai*, were omitted (Press Trust of India, 2025). *Thug Life* (2025), a film starring actor Kamal Hassan, faced widespread protest and backlash in Karnataka after the actor made a speculative statement about the Kannada language. The Karnataka High Court sought an apology from the actor, after which the petitioners approached the Supreme Court, asserting their right to release and watch the film. The Supreme Court granted relief and emphasized that the rule of law mandates that threats of violence can't be a valid ground for refusing the film's release (Rajagopal K., 2025). *Empuraan* (2025), a Malayalam movie directed by Prithiraj Sukumaran, depicting the 2002 riots in Gujarat, faced severe backlash from religious organizations, following which twenty-four "voluntary cuts" were made by the producers after receiving valid certification by the CBFC (S.R. Pravin, 2025). *Santosh* (2024), a movie directed by Sandhya Surithat, received widespread international acclaim but was denied a theatrical release in India by the CBFC, as it objected to its portrayal of police, caste-based discrimination, and misogyny (Bureau, 2025). *Janaki v. State*, a Malayalam movie, was asked to modify its title by the CBFC and change the character's name from "Janaki". CBFC opined that the reference to the name Janaki has the potential of hurting religious sentiments, as the character Janaki portrayed in the movie is a rape victim, and the name "Janaki" is also the name of Sita. According to CBFC, the film's release could potentially cause public disorder. Subsequently, the makers of the film modified the title to "Janaki V. State", and the character's name was changed to Janaki V (Bureau, 2025).

These are among the many instances where filmmakers and actors have found themselves at the crossroads of Law and Cinema. Cinema not only deals with laws and institutions traditionally associated with it, such as the Judiciary, law enforcement agencies, and CBFC, but it also involuntarily engages with extra-state actors. Though the former may step in to curtail the latter, as in the case of *Thug Life*, the problem with demarcating the one from the other is certainly laden with problems when both of them have the same effect on the filmmakers, i.e., jeopardizing their right to express themselves and make cinema in a fearless ecosystem freely. When understood in the context of film censorship, the law must include both for an effective analysis. From the aforementioned cases, two trends emerge that are symptomatic of larger concerns in cinema censorship.

Firstly, Cinema is expected to circumnavigate in a depoliticized space where any reference to real-life social issues like caste and gender is better avoided, lest they invite disaffection from any group. Cinema, as a medium of mass culture, is always tasked with maintaining public morality. Although individuals can experience personal unhappiness, nonetheless, the personal is always circumscribed by the Law and morality (Braudy & Cohen, 2009). This dissatisfaction is never allowed to spill into the public space; thus, Cinema as a medium is bound to conform to the notion of public good. Directors and producers are expected to make cinema that conforms to the dominant ideology; any deviation is severely punished through legal actions such as denial of certification or court cases, and extra-legal actions like boycotting of cinema halls (Harpreet, 2024). Secondly, filmmakers must pre-emptively

assess the legal and political hurdles the film might face to ensure a smooth release and commercial success. Cinema in the Third World encompasses the ideas and concepts related to the functioning of the nation-state. This ensures that movie producers who rely on financial returns from the audiences are tied up in an intricate and complex web of connections with state actors like censorship boards (Dissanayake,1994). This intricate relationship ensures that the economic demands of the Cinema and the necessities of the nation-state remain mutually bound to each other.

Both of these issues, as well as pre-censorship in Indian cinema, present a unique challenge to cinema that is not faced by any other art medium. Hunny Trehan is the director of an upcoming film scheduled for release in 2025, for which the CBFC has demanded 127 cuts (Bureau, 2025). The film is based on the life of human-rights activist Jaswant Singh Kalra, who investigated extra-judicial killings in the state of Punjab during the insurgency period in the 1980s and 1990s. In an interview, he points out that the CBFC has postponed the release of his film for more than two years; demanded the deletion of numerous words and statements, including any reference to the state of Punjab and the name of Jaswant Singh Kalra (Tur, 2025). The director believes that CBFC acts like a moral gatekeeper for society. One may also argue that this is partly because cinema is the most widely consumed and accessible form of media, which potently shapes popular perceptions. The narrative strategy employed by the director initiates the viewer into the "moral order of the text". The narration is a discursive part of the Cinema experience, as it shapes the viewer's attitude towards law and morality in society (Browne, 1975, p. 119). Marxist analysis of cinema posits that the camera is not an impartial body; rather, it is a tool for communicating and inculcating the "dominant ideology" of the state. The things represented in the movie are never entirely divorced from the dominant ideological messaging of the state power. The characters and objects in the movie are always viewed through the lens of the dominant ideology (Comolli & Narboni, 1969/2009).

This paper aims to assess the evolution of cinema censorship within a historical context, particularly shaped by colonial policies and attitudes towards cinema censorship. It shall also analyse the continuation of such censorship laws in a post-colonial context, while exploring how post-independence India has chosen to apply censorship laws to cinema. This shall also include judicial interpretations, justifications, and interpretations of such laws.

Literature Review

Jean-Luc Comolli and Paul Narboni, in "Cinema/Ideology/Criticism" (1971), explain the effect of Cinema in society and vice versa. They believe that cinema is another tool for shaping the mass culture and promoting the dominant ideology. Any deviation from the said function, such as questioning or criticising the dominant ideology, results in serious repercussions for the filmmakers. This article is helpful in understanding the role and attitude of CBFC in the present-day context.

Wimal Dissanayake, in *Colonialism and Nationalism in Asian Cinema* (1994) posits that cinema in the Third World is both influenced by Nationalism and influences it in return. The role of cinema in these countries is markedly different from that in Western countries. He argues that the nation-state's requirements and the financial needs of the film industry are "interlinked in complex, and at times disconcertingly intrusive, ways" throughout the

majority of Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and Latin America. This includes the regulation of content via overt and covert censorship. This article is useful in understanding the behavior of state actors like the CBFC and legislative bodies in shaping Censorship Laws.

Bruce Michael Boyd, in "Film Censorship in India: A Reasonable Restriction on Freedom of Speech and Expression" (1972), traces the historical evolution of film censorship laws in India. He argues that post-colonial censorship laws are merely an echo of the colonial policy towards censorship. A detailed analysis is drawn by the author of the laws relating to film censorship during the British Raj, wherein the roots of pre-censorship in cinema were sown. The author then analyses the development of the Cinematograph Act, 1952, where pre-censorship was formally introduced into the Indian legislative framework. Additionally, a detailed study of the decision of the Supreme Court in *K.A. Abbas v. UOI*, which is drawn by the author, is subjected to criticism for holding pre-censorship in India as constitutionally valid. This judgment is tested by the author on the anvil of the constitutionally guaranteed right of freedom of speech and expression. The author's analysis presents a useful theoretical framework for studying cinema censorship in Independent India up to the period in which the article was written.

William Mazarella, in *Censorship in South Asia: Cultural Regulation from Sedition to Seduction* (2009), provides a thorough analysis of the historical foundation of Censorship laws in India. He traces the evolution of colonial attitudes towards Indian cinema goes and a sociological understanding of pre-independence censorship laws. The author's analysis has been helpful in providing a historical context of Censorship Laws relating to cinema, which is useful for studying their expression in Postcolonial India.

Partha Chatterjee, in his groundbreaking book on postcolonial theory titled *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (1993), presents the idea that the people inhabiting a postcolonial state are caught between conflicting narratives. They are a part of a rights-based legal system; simultaneously, they are also viewed with suspicion as "subjects" to be controlled. The author's acute analysis helps understand the role of Cinema censorship Laws and state bodies associated with it from a postcolonial perspective.

Tejaswini Ganti, in "The limits of decency and the decency of limits: Censorship and the Bombay film industry" (2009), explores the discursive aspect of film censorship and how it shapes attitudes in Bollywood. She conducts numerous film interviews with actors, directors, and people working in the film industry to understand the perspective of those working in the industry. The author's work is helpful in understanding the role of CBFC in shaping the attitudes of people associated with the film industry.

Gautam Bhatia, in his book *Offend, Shock, or Disturb: Free Speech Under the Indian Constitution* (2016), presents a critical analysis of judgments relating to Cinema Censorship. He is critical of the CBFC's unrestrained use of strict censorship to protect cultural values. The author thinks that the continuation of pre-censorship in cinema is antithetical to freedom of speech and expression. The author's detailed analysis of case laws provides a strong theoretical framework for assessing recent cases involving cinema censorship. It is also helpful in understanding the legal position relating to film censorship.

Pre-Independence Censorship Regime

The advent of cinema in India began in 1896, when Lumière cinematography was first exhibited in Bombay. The first moving images shot on camera capture a wrestling match

at The Hanging Garden of Mumbai, by Harishchandra Sakharam Bhatavdekar, who had to send the reels back to the United Kingdom for processing. (Pamela Hutchinson, 2013) As cinema's popularity increased, cinema halls were constructed in major cities in the early twentieth century. Jameshedji Framji Madan, one of the pioneers of film production in India, imported films from France to be showcased in a maidan in Calcutta. He later went on to establish "Elphinstone Picture Palace" in Calcutta, Simla, and Rawalpindi (Kumar, 2022). Initially, the films showcased in these cinemas were of foreign origin; however, India got its first feature film in 1912, titled "Raja Harishchandra". Film censorship in India was formally started in 1918 with the passage of the Cinematograph Act, 1918. It mandated that no film could be shown in a theatre without the prior permission of the authorities. District magistrates in each district had the power to issue licenses to places that could screen Cinematographic films. Provincial governments were given the power to set up censor boards to examine and certify films meant for public consumption. Pursuant to this, censor boards were set up in Lahore, Bombay, Madras, Calcutta, and Rangoon in the year 1920 (Boyd, 1972). Each regional board had the power to frame its own guidelines regarding what was permissible, which British Laws heavily influenced; for instance, the guidelines formulated by the Bombay Board of Censors were similar to those of the British Board of Censors. Inter alia, it prohibited films that familiarized youth with crime, undermined the institution of marriage, depicted vice in an enticing form, suggested abnormal sexual relations, or exhibited indecorous dress or nudity (supra).

Pre-independence censorship under the colonial administration reflected the numerous anxieties of the colonizers; it was believed that the colonized, underdeveloped, impressionable, and irrational masses were more susceptible to the corrupting influence of the cinema. (Gautam Bhatia, 2016) The colonized natives would become hard to control and less amenable to administrative control under the influence of the celluloid. This was further aggravated by the fact that cinema, as a new medium, also made the administration apprehensive. The fact that American ideals that cherished individual freedom and patriotism were imported into the colonies made the colonial administration more circumspect about the medium itself. In an official note, dated 4th May, 1914, Director, Criminal Intelligence lamented that films that are merely "sensational" and "exciting in white countries" become "dangerous in eastern countries" (Bhoumik, 2007, p. 39). He was referring to a movie titled "*The Relief of Lucknow*" (1912), directed by J. Searle Dawley, an American production that valorized patriotic values. An article that appeared in The Times of London in 1926 lamented the fact that cinema in the tropical world was "diminishing the prestige" of Europeans. It also emphasized that the native is being subjected to "wholly unprecedented provocation" and is dangerous for the native since he is "very deficient in the sense of proportion" (Mazzarella, 2009, p. 68). Colonized masses could not be construed as rational, totally uninspired by the ideals of the European Renaissance; they were saved from themselves by the well-meaning colonizers carrying their white man's burden. The Indian elite echoed similar sentiments. H C Mukherjee of Amalgamated Newspaper of Calcutta worried that the thrilling scenes in the film could have "a bad effect on the nerve of youth" (Mazzarella, 2009, p. 70).

After the 1857 revolution and the subsequent takeover of the colonial administration by the Queen, the British *nabob* was transformed into the foreign *sahib*. The colonial administration maintained a willful distance from the natives, while the colonizers ruled

from a distance with minimal interaction. The lives of the colonizers were separated and not subject to the gaze of the brown native. Cinema gave the audience an insight into the lives of Europeans; the camera turned the gaze of the brown, colonized masses towards the European colonizers. The anxiety that this inculcated in the British administration was aggravated by the fact that the brown man can now intimately look upon a white woman. This access, which allowed the natives to scrutinize the lives of the colonizers without requiring any literacy, did not sit well with the colonial administration (Mazzarella, 2009). Further analysis of pre-independence film censorship in India suggests three basic governing parameters. Firstly, it was intended to prohibit Indians from accessing socialist or communist ideals through Cinema. Secondly, it aimed to disseminate the ideals of freedom to the colonized masses primarily through Cinema. Secondly, it wished to prevent the ideals of freedom from reaching the colonized masses primarily through cinema. Lastly, it sought to prevent the crystallization of nationalized ideals and values in cinema (Bhouwmik, 2003). It is clear from the above that colonizers could not view the colonized as anything other than subjects, to be controlled and their passions curtailed. Now we shall assess how post-independence India continued or altered the colonial policies and attitudes towards cinema.

Prior-Restrain in Cinema

One can trace back the roots of pre-censorship to printing licensing during the monarchical English regime. In England, these laws, which were directly aimed at stifling any opposition against the King, were duly overturned by the Judiciary and Parliament. It turned out to be an efficacious tool to stifle dissent and control the media by the colonial administration in India. The Press Ordinance, 1823, mandated a revocable license from the Governor-General-in-Council for publishing newspapers or magazines. Although this was later repealed, prior restraint came back to haunt the Indian legal system repeatedly through the Vernacular Press Act of 1878 and numerous press acts between 1908 and 1931. The question of prior restraint on the media was first addressed by the Supreme Court in *Brij Bhushan v. State of Delhi* (1950), wherein it invalidated a provincial law that mandated any publication, such as a newspaper or magazine, to submit its text for scrutiny to the administration before publication. The Court held that pre-censorship was unconstitutional, as it contravened the constitutional provision that guarantees freedom of speech and expression. It could also be construed as an expression of the post-independence constitutional court, evocative of the sentiments experienced by the anti-colonial movement against the colonial administration's choking of freedom of speech through harsh censorship laws. This judgment shaped the legal discourse around post-independence censorship laws in India by precluding any form of pre-censorship in print media. However, what remained to be seen was whether similar pre-censorship laws could be applied to other forms of media, such as film.

The Cinematograph Act (referred to as The Act) was passed in 1952. It established the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC), which was empowered to grant certification for the exhibition of films. All films meant for public exhibition has to mandatorily be submitted to the CBFC, pursuant to which it could grant a certification for "unrestricted public exhibition" also known as a "U" certificate, or it can grant a "U/A" certificate, which meant the film was meant for "public exhibition meant for adults" (Section 5 A, Cinematograph

Act, 1952). Alternatively, it could also refuse to sanction the film for public exhibition if it is against the sovereignty or integrity of India, friendly relations with a foreign state, public order, decency, or morality (Section 5 B, Cinematograph Act, 1952). If any film is exhibited without a valid certification, it would invite criminal prosecution. We can see that postcolonial India chose to continue a similar system of film censorship to that followed by the colonial regime. India's nationalistic leaders, who vehemently advocated for ideals such as freedom, justice, rights, modernism, and progress, deliberately chose not to apply them to film censorship laws (Bhouwmik, 2007). Prior restraint in Cinema was legally established after the passage of the Act.

A movie titled "A Tale of Four Cities" by K.A. Abbas applied for certification to the CBFC in 1968. The movie contrasted the lives of the rich and the poor in the four major metropolises of India, Delhi, Mumbai, Calcutta, and Chennai. It is a silent film shot in Black and White, wherein a scene takes the viewer to the red light district of Mumbai, where the camera focuses on the women working inside the brothel waiting by the door. The director applied for a "U" certification, which was denied, and was granted a "U/A" certification instead. On appeal, some scenes were asked to be omitted, including the scene shot in the brothel, for the film to get a "U" certification. This was challenged before the Supreme Court; additionally, the director also contended that pre-censorship in Cinema created room for arbitrary state action, stifling a filmmaker's right to express themselves freely. He argued that pre-censorship in any form is violative of the right to freedom of speech and expression. All these contentions were duly rejected by the Supreme Court, and it held that pre-censorship in Cinema is a "reasonable restriction" on freedom of speech and expression, marking a departure from *Brij Bhushan*. (*K.A. Abbas v. Union of India*, 1971). The court did not find any difference between pre-censorship and censorship after the film is in the public domain; it erroneously opined that the only difference is in the stage at which censorship is allowed. It ignored the fact that censorship on art, even before it enters the marketplace of ideas, hinders the development of art and new ideas itself; rather than being tested on the anvil of artistic merit, quality, and thematic expressions in a free market by the consumers, it is tested by state-appointed censor boards who decide what is best for the audience. It invites arbitrary state action and allows policing of an art form that is most easily accessible to the masses. Artistic expression becomes subservient to the state actors, reminiscent of Orwellian-type machinations. Additionally, granting such arbitrary powers to the CBFC creates a chilling effect on other filmmakers, thereby seriously jeopardising artistic expression. As seen in the cases of *Janaki V vs. State* and *Empuraan*, it curtails dialogue and discourse on specific topics within society. It expects Cinema to conform to state-sponsored *diktats*, expecting filmmakers to produce only politically correct and good cinema, while shying away from sensitive topics involving religion or politics (Bhatia, 2016, pp. 175–176).

The myth of the Gullible "Masses" and Corrupting Influence of Cinema

In its approach towards censorship in cinema, the Indian legal system infantilizes the audience and expects the state to step in and regulate the content being consumed on screen. In *K.A. Abbas v. UOI* (1971), the court has paid due homage to the idea that the state is to act as "Parens Patriae" (p. 19), thereby making it the duty of the state to ensure the welfare of the citizens. The tension between the two contradicting discourses

surrounding the subjects of state powers, wherein citizens are seen as something to be controlled, and on the other hand, they are autonomous individuals with rights, is aptly manifested in the debates surrounding cinema censorship (Chatterjee, 1993). The Cinema is also viewed by the state as a tool for modernization, thereby compromising the autonomy of the viewer by refusing to see him as a person with agency who exists outside of his experience as a consumer of cinema. The cinema-goer is caught in two conflicting narratives; at once, he is both patronized by the state and exists within a rights-based legal system (Ganti, 2009).

In *S. Rangarajan vs. P. Jagjeevan Ram* (1989), it was opined by Justice K. Jagannatha Shetty, "Film censorship becomes necessary because a film motivates thought and action and assures a high degree of attention and retention as compared to the printed word." (para 10) The idea that film has the potential to convey a message more effectively, thereby justifying the state's intervention, has found echoes in numerous court rulings; however, no scientific link or research has ever been cited. After Independence, it also became an agenda of our post-colonial leadership to uplift the masses out of ignorance and superstition, thereby continuing the civilizing mission of our former colonizers. This paternalistic oversight has been expressed in the creation of strict censorship laws, wherein the media is controlled and policed to prevent it from subjecting the masses to any corrupting influence. It is an echo of the earlier colonial attitude towards its subjects. The dichotomy between the reader and cinema-goer created by the state echoes the colonial narrative, which was wary of the illiterate population being more susceptible to the corruptible influence of Cinema. The judgment also posits a dichotomous relationship between cinema and literary work; cinema is deemed more influential, while the reader is considered a rational individual with the agency to decide what is best for themselves. This judicial reasoning applies different standards of test to different forms of media, specifically cinema and literary works. It can be construed as an echo of colonial attitude towards illiterate and uncouth masses, the majority of whom could not read or write. People equipped with letters were placed on a pedestal far above that of an unlettered native. Another manifestation of this idea is the compulsory display of "smoking warning" during a movie when a person is seen smoking on screen, also anti-smoking ads before the movie; however, no such standard is applied to any person when a similar scene is depicted in a novel, newspaper, or even a dramatic performance.

Top-down approach to such an understanding of media, i.e., something which can wreak havoc upon or modernize the Indian "masses" has resulted in some interesting trends in the Judiciary. Judges also become critics and social commentators, assessing the impact and intent of the art. One such example is *Ranjit D. Udeshi v. State of Maharashtra* (1968), where the court upheld the application of "Hicklin's Test" while upholding the validity of the prosecution of one bookseller in Mumbai selling "Lady Chatterley's Lover" by D.H. Lawrence. "Hicklin's Test" postulates that any artwork should be judged based on its corruptible influence upon the most vulnerable and impressionable members of society. In this judgment, the book was held to be "obscene", while passages were devoted in the judgment assessing the literary merit of the author and the work itself. In this judgment, the book was held to be "obscene", while passages were devoted in the judgment assessing the literary merit of the author and the work itself. In *K.A. Abbas*, the court seemed to favour the application of the Hicklin test in cinema.

Bandit Queen, a movie depicting the life of Phoolan Devi, a Dalit woman, whom men of her village sexually assaulted, was legally challenged on the grounds of obscenity and indecency; both of which are “reasonable restrictions” on freedom of speech and expression under the Indian Constitution. In one of the scenes depicting the frontal nudity was particularly in question; interestingly, the judges allowed the scene to be depicted as it fulfilled a desirable social purpose. (*Bobby Art International v. Ompal Singh and Ors.*, 1996). Cinema was again subjected to the test of social fulfilment, and nudity could only be justified if there was an underlying purpose to it. Explaining the intent of the director, the Court reasoned, “The object of doing so was not to titillate the cinema-goer's lust but to arouse in him sympathy for the victim and disgust for the perpetrators.” (para 15)

The underlying message is that nudity or other forms of indecency could only be permitted if saved by a message to be decoded by judicial scrutiny. “The Object” should override or foreshadow the seemingly obscene representation for it to be saved from legal hurdles. As discussed earlier, the cinema-goer is again denied the autonomy to view what is being depicted on screen based on his own subjective experiences; rather, he is caught between the conflicting narratives of cinema, wherein it is a means to achieve a social end as well as a corruptible influence. In such a scenario, state actors like CBFC and the judiciary are burdened with playing the balancing act, applying their own tests. The film-makers, on the other hand, find themselves in the lurch as no clear legal principles with uniform application seem to emerge.

Forced De-contextualisation and De-Politicization

Uda Punjab, a film depicting the problem of drug menace in the north-western state of Punjab, was asked to make around 89 cuts in the movie by the CBFC review board. (*Cautious Optimism over HC Verdict on “Uda Punjab,”* 2016) It wanted the director to remove all references to the state of Punjab; he was asked to omit any reference to the state's cities, politics, or elections, whatsoever. The filmmakers were granted relief in this case by the Bombay High Court, which allowed the film to be released with just one cut. References to the state of Punjab were left intact; nonetheless, there were three disclaimers that the director accepted to show in the film. First, the film was not meant to castigate any region or state; secondly, the film did not promote the use of drugs. Lastly, the film is not a reflection of anything except the social reality (supra).

This scenario is symptomatic of and epitomizes the larger trend in cinema censorship in India, as seen previously in the case of *Phule* and *Empuraan*. Filmmakers are expected to make movies that are stripped of any political or cultural references. Cinema as an art form is expected to be apolitical. Any reference to any real-life contentious issue, like caste, class, and gender, is laden with legal troubles. This brings us to the question, whether any meaningful cinema can ever be conceived if it is expected to adhere to such guidelines? Movies like *Mississippi Burning* (1958), directed by Chris Gerolamo, can ever be made if they do not refer to the geographical space whose troubled racial history they seek to depict. Can something like *The Zone of Interest* (2023), directed by Jonathan Glazer, depicting the holocaust, ever be made without any reference to Germany? Can *City of God* (2002), directed by Fernando Meirelles, ever be a meaningful film without any reference to Rio de Janeiro? These are a few of the questions that the censorship regime in India needs to confront sooner or later.

The treatment of CBFC towards cinema is reminiscent of colonial outlook towards the native, which viewed any sort of political messaging on screen with circumspection, lest any dissension be inculcated amongst the masses. The policing of cinema in the early days of the birth of cinema in India expected a similar standard from filmmakers, i.e., to steer clear of any political messaging like communist propaganda, independence struggle, or ideals of self-realization. Colonial outlook towards the celluloid is finding unrestrained expression in the post-independence censorship regime through a Govt. controlled CBFC.

Conclusion

Cinema censorship in India finds itself in a unique spot as it is faced with a pre-censorship regime that is missing for other art forms. The state polices this art with commendable alacrity, as CBFC is burdened with the task of awarding certification to thousands of movies released all across India every year. The CBFC's statutory role in awarding certification also includes the power to deny a theatrical release to any film or demand any cuts. In its role as an approver of what can be consumed on screen by the country's citizens, CBFC starts acting as a moral arbitrator, and the line between certification and censorship gets questionably thin. It becomes a moral authority that governs the ideological, political, and social narratives that are permissible on screen. The American model of self-censorship by the film industry, which developed over time, can, perhaps, be a good learning point for the Indian cinema experience. "Report of the Enquiry Commission of Film Censorship", popularly known as the "Khosla Committee Report", recommended a board of film censorship free from any government interference in matters of appointment and recommendations. It emphasized that such a board should frame its guidelines regarding film censorship, also no right should be government in such a scenario. This report, written in the year 1968, can still prove to be a guiding light for the film censorship regime in India. The autonomous Board envisaged in the report can prove to be more effective and unbiased than the present CBFC (Khosla, 1968). By and large, the censorship regime in India is still a continuation of old colonial discourse, which views its subject with suspicion, denies them autonomy, and seeks to establish effective control over them. It is in clear contradistinction to a rights-based legal system, wherein citizens are self-governing individuals. Colonial anxieties, which manifest themselves in the establishment of strict censorship laws, should not be allowed in a post-independence aspirational nation-state.

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