

Background Note

No. 5

Public Discussion on Cinema and the Voter



THE HINDU CENTRE

for

Politics and Public Policy

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Panellists

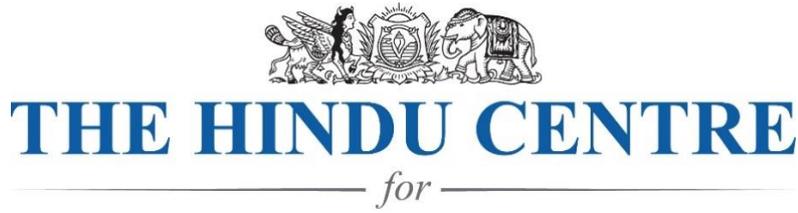
Grace Lee, filmmaker

and

Narayan Lakshman, Senior Deputy Editor, *The Hindu*; and
former Washington Correspondent of *The Hindu*

Moderated by

Sadanand Menon, Arts Editor and Cultural Critic



Politics and Public Policy
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Invite you to a **Public Discussion on**

Cinema and the Voter

Friday, February 7, 2017

Venue: Kasturi Srinivasan Hall, The Music Academy, Royapettah, Chennai.

Programme Schedule

Session	Programme
6:00 pm	Introduction to the film and the filmmaker by Ariel Pollock
6:05 pm	Screening of the film <i>Jeneane from Des Moines</i>
7:25 pm	Introduction to the discussion and the speakers by V.S. Sambandan
7:30 pm	Panel discussion and public interaction moderated by Sadanand Menon Panellists: Grace Lee and Narayan Lakshman
	Concluding remarks by Sadanand Menon

Cinema and the Voter

Politics is a discipline that touches lives every day. Representative democracies, the form of democracy in practice in India and the U.S., where voters delegate sovereignty to their elected representatives, operate through elected institutions—be it that of the President of the U.S., or the parliament and legislative assemblies under a Westminster system. What Harold J. Laski observed in 1919 continues to hold the basis for the reasoning of a representative democracy:

“The people, it is admitted, cannot directly govern itself; but it can directly delegate, through the device of universal suffrage, the business of government. The national assembly, whether Congress or Parliament, then in fact becomes the people, and it derives the right therefrom to exercise completely sovereign powers. Popular sovereignty, that is to say, implies representative government. Some institution, or set of institutions, has to be erected in which the will of the people as a whole may find expression.”¹

With voters playing the critical role of electing these representatives, for a limited period, the manner in which aspirants to political power effectively communicate their messages gains significance for the returns they yield. Given the distance between the political player and the voter, political communication gains practical relevance by bridging this distance through several modes of mediation. Of relevance to the present discussion is the role played by cinema in creating what Nimmo and Combs call “mediated political realities” as

“few people learn about politics through direct experience; for most persons’ political realities are mediated through mass and group communication, a process resulting as much in the creation, transmission, and adoption of political fantasies as realistic views of what takes place.”²

As with politics, art, and culture, represented through media forms also touch individuals and societies on a daily basis. In the last century, Marxist thinkers espoused the idea that every form of art was to be produced in service of a revolution. Such thinking drew on the Marxist idea that every aesthetic, cultural and, by extension, artistic representation emerged from a conflict between classes and, in its bourgeois form, reinforced the dominance of proprietary classes. Sergei Eisenstein, the maker of *Battleship Potemkin*, for instance, used unique editing techniques to inspire his audiences—juxtaposing and splicing images in a manner which would

¹ Laski, H. J., 1919. The Theory of Popular Sovereignty: I. *Michigan Law Review*, 17(3), pp. 201-215.

² Nimmo, D. & Combs, J., 1984. Mediated Political Realities: Review by Arthur Sanders. *The American Political Science Review*, 78(4), pp. 1117-1118.

heighten the film's political message and the emotive appeal to the audience. Similarly, one of his contemporaries, Leni Riefenstahl, was the artistic communicator behind Adolf Hitler's moving images. She was well known as a Nazi sympathiser and many credit her camera work on Hitler and his public rallies as contributing to the myth and propaganda that surrounded him.

In India, we have seen how film stars like MG Ramachandran (MGR), J. Jayalithaa in Tamil Nadu and NT Rama Rao (NTR) in Andhra Pradesh have risen in the political arena solely by projecting their on-screen characters in their off screen political life. Both NTR and MGR played the role of liberator of the oppressed in multiple films and there is no denying the fact that their film roles managed to garner political capital when they took the plunge into electoral life. NT Rama Rao, most famous for playing Krishna on screen, often dressed similar to the Hindu deity on many of his political pilgrimages, replete with a chariot. Similarly, the BJP's first *rath yatra* in 1992 was preceded by programming on Indian national television in the form of a tele-serial called the Ramayana, which effectively prepped the country and made it suggestible to the political messages of the BJP.

In the current age, film is used as a propaganda tool for establishing "soft power". Big budget Hollywood movies recreate the idea that America is the saviour of the world (*Independence Day*) and in some senses, films also allow history to be rewritten in the present by presenting war efforts as somehow heroic or glamorous. However, if cinema can be used for propaganda and political mobilisation, it can also be used for political critique. From documentary films that criticise state policy (*Sicko* by Michael Moore or *Ram ke Naam* by Anand Patwardhan), to more popular films that showcase the ineffectiveness of government or policing, cinema and films have come a long way from the simple juxtaposed moving image. Either way, the narratives and counter narratives presented by cinema and the history preserved by this art form have become an integral part of how we understand the world around us. Everyday forms of resistance to imperial or authoritarian power by the subaltern (*Lagaan*, *Peepli Live*) are documented through cinema as are women's resistance to patriarchal structures (*Osama*, *Mirch Masala*). A film like the Palestinian made *Paradise Now* introduces its audience to the idea of "rightful resistance" through the viewpoint of a radicalised suicide bomber, who has a change of heart about his role in the battle for territory and recognition between Israel and Palestine.

In this manner, the growth of regional cinema that is now accessible through internet streaming to a worldwide audience brings to mind the Foucauldian notion of little discourses challenging the bigger ones simply by existing and speaking in a slightly dissimilar language,

correcting the official “big power” narrative by attempting to replace it with the lesser-known or “hidden” transcripts.

There are, however, unique attributes of the Indian context of cinema as a tool of political communication. A strand that connects the contribution of Indian cinema to the shaping of public, and therefore political, opinion is that these derive from the moving image of a strong, and ideal hero, albeit fictional. This is in contrast with the manner in which Hollywood has used cinema as a form of political communication. Hollywood and Bollywood have both drawn on at least a 100 years of film-making expertise to explore many subjects at length, including regime change, political transitions and local level and global politics.

They differ in style and content and levels of criticism. However, there are enough film-makers in both countries that present politics and the idea of the “nation” and in doing so advance our understanding of both societies to a marked extent. Clint Eastwood’s recent focus on making war movies like *American Sniper*, for instance, is a story of a hero who meets a not very heroic end and in some senses is consumed by the very idea of war and his nation at risk—a patriot with flaws. *The Hurt Locker*, by Kathryn Bigelow, displays the masculinity of war and announces a soldier’s addiction to war. An older film like *Bridge on the River Kwai* supports the idea that all war is “madness” in the words of one character. In India, Bollywood films like *Lakshya* and *Border* (both several hours long), centre on the reluctant and accidental army officer as hero, who takes risks in the heat of battle to save the “motherland” from the enemies of the state constructed in typical Bollywood fashion complete with prejudicial stereotypes of what an enemy looks like. A film like Mani Ratnam’s *Roja* announces the arrival on the scene of common-citizen-turned-guardian-of-the-nation, as does *Dil Se* where a reporter thwarts a suicide bombing to be carried out by his radicalised female love interest.

While Hollywood films advance the idea that America is a nation that will always strive for extending the cause of liberty worldwide, Bollywood has lesser ambition. It tries to advance the idea that no sacrifice (however painful and accompanied with songs) is too great for the true patriot.

These movies are powerful because they influence new generations of people to the idea of the nation, politics and society. More importantly, they also serve as a metaphor for Indian society and politics.³ The use of film as medium in Tamil Nadu, initially by the Indian National

³ Ahmed, S. A., 1992. Bombay Films: The Cinema as Metaphor for Indian Society and Politics. *Modern Asian Studies*, 26(2), pp. 289-320.

Congress during the freedom struggle, and then by the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) in independent India are pointers to how cinema has had effectively brought political parties to power. The rise and consolidation of power by the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, built solely around the image of MGR, for instance, unravels the strong linkage between cinema and politics in Tamil Nadu. In this context, two movies are worth mentioning. One of the movies that had a transformative effect on Tamil Nadu's politics is *Parasakthi* (1952). Of more recent vintage is *Iruvar* (1997). If the former set off a dynamic that was to make its impact felt in terms of a "challenging social law"⁴, the latter, a fictional account of two political leaders in Tamil Nadu, came as a recasting of two principal protagonists of the State's politics in a binary.⁵

Films have come to set the norms for behaviour and are an important tool in political socialisation for many, who cannot access civics text books in schools. Individuals take their cues from such movies and learn how to think and act politically. In both the U.S. and in India, there is a massive political push to force the public discussion towards matters of internal and external security and to identify the "other". Cinema has had the unique distinction in both countries to be a major influencer of public opinion on this matter.

The panel discussion, Cinema and the Voter, aims to unravel some of these themes that tie media, in particular cinema, to the act of making political choices, which in our two democracies is voting.

Background note prepared by Vasundhara Sinate (with inputs from V.S. Sambandan)

⁴ Hargrave Jr., R. L., 1973. Politics and the Film in Tamilnadu: The Stars and the DMK. *Asian Survey*, 13(3), pp. 288-305.

⁵ Chakravarthy, V. & Pandian, M., 1997. 'Iruvar': Transforming History into Commodity. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 32(47), pp. 2997-2999.

About *Janeane from Des Moines*

Janeane Wilson is a conservative Iowa housewife who works as a home health aide, keeps busy in her garden, and attends a local women's bible study group. But as the 2012 presidential election draws near, she is determined to find a Republican candidate who will take America back from the Democrats, repeal Obamacare, defund Planned Parenthood and get rid of gay marriage—issues that she feels are destroying the country she loves. She dives into Iowa Tea Party politics and the lead-up to the Iowa caucus, but a crumbling economy causes her to lose everything she holds dear—her job, her marriage, her health, and her home. As Mitt Romney, Michele Bachmann, Rick Santorum, Rick Perry and Newt Gingrich criss-cross Iowa during her hour of need, Janeane presses them for answers that she and many of her fellow Americans would like to hear.

Panellists:

Grace Lee was born and raised in Columbia, Missouri. She has a BA in History from the University of Missouri and an MFA in Film Directing from UCLA Film School where she won DGA and Student Academy Awards for her thesis film, *Barrier Device*, starring Sandra Oh. Her first documentary *The Grace Lee Project* was released in 2005, broadcast on the Sundance Channel and is distributed by Women Make Movies. She also co-wrote and directed *American Zombie*, a feature film, released in 2008 by Cinema Libre.

Grace Lee is the recipient of the Henry Hampton Award for Excellence in Digital Media, a Rockefeller Media Arts grant, the PPP Pusan Prize as well as funding from the Ford Foundation, Center for Asian American Media, Chicken and Egg Pictures, and the Armani Directing Fellowship through Film Independent. Other documentary credits include *Best of the Worst*, which is permanently featured at the Currywurst Museum in Berlin and *Camp Arirang*. She is currently in postproduction for *American Revolutionary: The Evolution of Grace Lee Boggs* about a 97-year-old Chinese American philosopher and activist in Detroit.

Narayan Lakshman is a Senior Deputy Editor at *The Hindu*, and for the majority of the Obama administration was the newspaper's U.S. correspondent based in Washington DC. In this capacity, between 2010 to 2015, he sent regular despatches on a wide range of issues, including immigration, the 2012 presidential elections which is the subject of the film, the U.S. economy, and popular culture. He is therefore, witness to, and is equipped with, first-hand knowledge of the developments that were portrayed on screen by Grace Lee in her film.

Narayan holds a PhD degree from the London School of Economics and is a research scholar who has explored the politics and policy of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. His doctoral thesis in development studies analysed the political economy of poverty alleviation policies in Indian States.

This subject was also the focus of his 2011 book, *Patrons of the Poor*, published by Oxford University Press. With this background in Indian political economy, we look forward to Narayan's interventions on Ms. Lee's movie about U.S. politics, and his reflections on cross-cutting links between these vibrant democracies.

Moderator:

Sadanand Menon explores the charged space linking politics and culture through his work in media, pedagogy and the arts. He is Adjunct Faculty at Asian College of Journalism, Chennai; at IIT-Madras; and at Presidency University, Kolkata. He has been an arts editor, columnist and photographer. A long-time collaborator with the late writer/dancer/choreographer Chandralekha, he is also a leading stage lights designer. A long-time collaborator with the late artist/photographer/designer Dashrath Patel, he curated the definitive retrospective exhibition of his work for the NGMA Delhi & Mumbai in 1998/99.

Sadanand has been on the Advisory/Executive Committees of the National Museum, National Gallery of Modern Art, Lalit Kala Akademi, National School of Drama, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, the Board for Intangible Cultural Heritage, Raza Foundation, Delhi and Dakshinchitra, Chennai. Along with Romila Thapar and A.G. Noorani, he has contributed an essay to the book 'On Nationalism' (Aleph, 2016). He is managing trustee of the Arts Foundation, SPACES, Chennai.



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