

POLITICAL FILMS

Finding A Voice

POLITICAL cinema, like the new wave of the mid-'70s, has long acquired a pejorative meaning in India. At most, a political film that catches the public eye is built around a social theme that fits in with the Government's meandering philosophy. A 'successful' political film also usually turns out to be feature-length, in colour, and replete with enough oblique gimmickry to assure it an urban theatre circuit run that will help its maker recover his costs.

Simultaneously, however, a tiny 'alternative' cinema has been trying to survive within this commercial milieu. Shot in 16mm with extremely rudimentary equipment, made on budgets that would make a shoe-string look positively glamorous, these films have to constantly battle censorship laws, taxation and a myopic bureaucracy. Each of these films focuses essentially on the human condition and makes a strong statement about the injustice, feudalism and disregard for fundamental rights in various parts of the country. As such the very act of exhibiting these films is rendered political.

Bungling Bureaucracy: Recently, Anand Patwardhan's film *A Time to Rise* was subjected to a crass display of the Government's myopic attitude. Initially selected for the Indian Panorama section of the Ninth International Film Festival of India (IFFI) in January it was not listed under any category at all. Patwardhan was informed that the film would be shown in a 'special' 16mm theatre at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences. On the penultimate day of the festival, it was finally announced that the film would be shown at 7.30 a.m. on the final day, when the closing ceremony would ensure a skimpy audience.

Similar cavalier treatment was meted out to three films made by Barbara Kopple, which were not shown at all. Kopple's *Harlan County USA*, a feature-length documentary made in 1980 on coal-miners' struggles to form a union in the American mid-West, and considered a classic internationally, was among the casualties. Two other critically applauded films, *Dark Circle* and *Atomic Café*, were also shown at short notice to meagre audiences.

In the event, Patwardhan withdrew his film from the festival as a protest; but the festival directorate was aware that *A Time to*

Rise had won a Silver Dove at the Leipzig Festival in 1981 and the first prize at the Tyneside International Film Festival in England in October last year. The 45-minute colour film documents Indian immigrant farm workers' battles in Canada to unionise and demand better working conditions and wages. It takes a first-ever and dramatic look at the misery of the predominantly Punjabi immigrants in the Vancouver and British Columbia areas. It is being officially distributed by the National Film Board (NFB) of Canada.

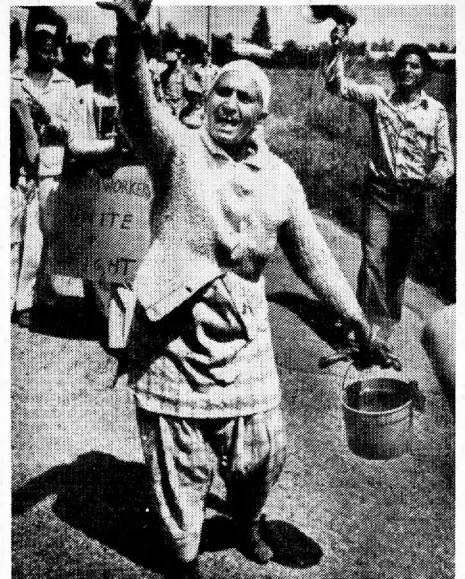
Yet, the Censor Board in Bombay first suggested some cuts in the film, and the Revising Committee said the entire film was "objectionable" because it jeopardised "friendly relations with a foreign state". Patwardhan had no option but to take his case to the Bombay High Court; in February, the court ordered that the film ought to be awarded a censor's certificate.

Censorship: The political 16mm film genre is barely a half decade old in India and shows no signs of dying out. Early last year, *An Indian Story*, another colour documentary made by Tapan Bose on the Bhagalpur blindings and repression in Bihar, suffered identical discrimination when it was excluded from the Eighth IFFI, denied a censorship certificate, and finally granted one when the Bombay High Court so ordered. Yet, Bose's film has been shown widely

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abroad and won a 'great merit' commendation at Tyneside last October.

A Time to Rise is Patwardhan's third documentary. The first, *Waves of Revolution*, was made with primitive Super-8 facilities in 1974 and later blown up to 16mm. It chronicled the Bihar movement spearheaded by Jayaprakash Narayan and had to be smuggled out of the country to be processed in Canada. When the Emergency ended, Patwardhan dropped out of McGill University in Canada to return to India. In 1978, he



Patwardhan (above): still from *A Time to Rise*

made *Prisoners of Conscience* on the continuing predicament of political prisoners.

Prisoners ran into trouble with the Janata Government's Censor Board, and only when a nation-wide chorus of protest arose did the Revising Committee reluctantly grant a certificate. The following year when Patwardhan returned to McGill to join a master's course in communications, he got involved with the Support Committee

for Farm Workers' Organising Committee in the Vancouver area. Co-produced with Jim Monro, *A Time to Rise* was made with piecemeal funding and aid from other unions and church action groups.

"THE VERY term 'documentary film' has been made odious in India," says Patwardhan, "and the audience expects a government-produced film that is boring and tells lies. An honest documentary becomes an immediate



Bose and (top) a scene from *Indian Story*

executions of two Naxalite prisoners in Andhra Pradesh during the Emergency, which won a silver Peacock at the Ninth IFFI.

"I show my films to working class audiences, civil rights organisations, activist groups, trade unions and students' and women's organisations," says Patwardhan, "and after the film, I pass the hat around. There is usually a very good reaction from the audience, and in discussions afterwards the question most often asked is: 'What can we do?'. The 250-strong film society circuit around the country also helps provide interested audiences that are preferable to the diffused urban ones. Only when a political documentary is shown to grass roots organisations does it assume direct political significance and become an effective tool."

The 16mm 'alternative film' genre grew out of Latin America, and the four-hour-long classic *Hour of the Furnaces*, made by Fernando Solanas and Octavio Gettino in Argentina in 1970, is considered the touchstone for this rebel class of films. In Africa, Asia and Latin America, 16mm documentaries have effectively chronicled and helped national liberation struggles. Many such films are made in underground secrecy or in exile, as for instance Patricio Guzman's epic, *Battle of Chile*.

El Salvador and Nicaragua have also thrown up excellent political documentaries, and *Last Grave at Dimbaza* ruthlessly exposes how every white man, woman and child in South Africa is being trained to use guns in anticipation of a black uprising. Exiled Pakistani film maker Jamil Dahlavi has made the allegorical *Blood of Hussain* in England on the repression unleashed by the Zia-ul-Haq regime.

Commendable: None of these film makers is obsessed with the technical quali-



Chakraborty and (top) a still from *Chokh*

ty of the films. They shoot with available light, cope with a host of technical problems and scrape together outdated raw stock, poor camera equipment and paltry finances to turn out their products. "In India," says Patwardhan, "a low-level alternative distribution system does exist, but it has to be expanded. There are very few 16mm projectors available. I would like to agitate for better 16mm technology and for scrapping excise duty on 16mm films."

Now working on a film on pavement dwellers in Bombay, Patwardhan admits that he is able to continue with his work because his family supports him financially. Film makers like him and Bose are always in danger of losing out to the essentially mercenary world of commercial, or even 'art', cinema. But their work in itself is an attempt to use the contradictions within the system. With the ruling-class apparatus turning increasingly towards repression and authoritarianism, the efforts of the alternative film makers assume critical importance.

—CHAITANYA KALBAG