



Do Bigha Zamin: A Realistic Masterpiece of Indian Cinema

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REVIEW ESSAYS

Do Bigha Zamin: A Realistic Masterpiece of Indian Cinema

Bimal Roy's *Do Bigha Zamin* ("Two-thirds of an acre of land"¹), made in 1953, was perhaps the first Indian film to win accolades across Europe, China and Russia, in addition to getting several awards in India.² Even today it is recognized as one of the most realistic and socialistic of all Indian films. The film portrays the evils of feudalism intensely but realistically. It is a fast-paced movie (now available on Amazon Prime and YouTube).

INSPIRATION FOR THE FILM

Roy was inspired to make a realistic film after watching Vittorio De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* (*Ladri di biciclette*, 1948), a gem of Italian Neorealism which also influenced the fellow Bengali director, Satyajit Roy (Huda 2004, 100). The story of the film, written by Salil Chowdhury, was inspired by Rabindranath Tagore's Bengali poem "Dui Bigha Jomi," which has a similar theme.³ It highlights the plight of poor farmers, and is reminiscent of similar stories by other contemporary Indian authors, such as Premchand and Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay.

THE PLOT

The movie's plot is set at a time when India was transforming its landholding system, called *Zamindari*, to capitalism. The film makes a point that both these systems are comparable in their exploitative nature: they go hand-in-hand in amassing wealth for the few with poverty for multitudes. The film starts off with a landlord, a *Zamindar*, trying to seize the poor farmer Shambhu's meager two *bighas* of land in order to construct a factory in that village. Shambhu (played by Balraj Sahni), however, doesn't just give up, but fights for his land, his *do bigha zamin*, which is his only source of livelihood. He approaches a court, but not knowing about law and his inability to provide evidence makes him lose the case. The court directs him to pay back the *Zamindar*'s loan or face the auctioning-off of his land. To earn money, as thousands do, Shambhu leaves for Kolkata to find work and get some rupees. Perhaps inspired by his own life, as he had migrated from Dhaka to Kolkata, Bimal Roy aptly portrays here the plight of migrant workers.⁴ Such workers continue to be looked down upon in their own

country to this day and are treated as second-class citizens. For instance, one of the most heart-wrenching scenes in the film is when Shambhu, as a hand-rickshaw puller, is forced to race with a fellow rickshaw puller for more money. He is even portrayed in comparison with a horse being whipped by a carter. In another scene Shambhu's son, on seeing his mother in the hospital, frets about some stolen rupees with the realization that bad karma will haunt him later. On one hand, one might want him to keep the money to pay for the hospital bills; on the other hand, one would empathize with him as he regrets his mistake. Another powerful scene in the movie is when Shambhu is leaving his wife to go off to the city and earn something. Roy has beautifully and realistically conveyed the emotions of this couple, who are so in love but now have to separate. Such scenes established Bimal Roy as a genius in portraying human emotions.

While watching the film one loses hope that Shambhu, even with all his hard work, will be able to earn enough to pay off the mortgage. When his son joins him in the city one fears that the son may either die or indulge in anti-social activities and end up in jail. When the wife Parvati (a.k.a. Paro, played by Nirupa Roy) comes to search for him and meets with an accident, one is again certain that she is going to die. Perhaps the harsh reality of living in the modern world has made us more pragmatic, and we have lost the optimistic perspective that might have hoped for success for Shambhu and his family.

In contrast to the intense scenes of their life-struggle, a few romantic moments in the film are also worth pointing out. In the first scene, after the rain song, Shambhu calls Parvati to enjoy the rain. Despite living in poverty, they look happy as a couple enjoying such little moments. In another scene, Shambhu's friends cherish that, even after ten years of marriage, Shambhu is still in passionate love with his wife, titillating the audience too with their romantic bond.

ACTING

Unlike the commonality of popular Indian films, all the actors in this film are convincingly realistic. For his stellar performance there, Balraj Sahni continues to be regarded very highly by other Hindi actors. (For instance, a well-known senior Indian actor, Amitabh Bachchan, once wrote about Sahni, "When I saw Balraj-Ji on screen, it was not the character that he was portraying I saw, but only the purity of his heart.")⁵ For playing Shambhu's role, the choice of an urban and upper-class figure like Balraj Sahni was initially criticized. Sahni nonetheless did full justice to the role by not only losing weight but also learning from a local rickshaw puller exactly how to pull a rickshaw.

Similarly, the casting of Nirupa Roy came as a surprise to many who feared that she might not fit the role, as she already had the popular image of a Hindu goddess due to previous roles in mythological films. She demonstrated her earnestness by picking out distinctly rural dress from the streets of Mumbai for her part. She once mentioned that Roy would not let her wash her outfit during the entire shoot.⁶ For a 21st-century audience it can be something of a revelation to see Nirupa Roy as a young heroine when she was later to be known for her character roles as a poor mother in films of the 1970s and after. (Her younger role

may come as a pleasant surprise to many younger audiences: Sahni and Roy appeared together in several more films, most notably in *Garam Coat* (1955) and *Heera Moti* (1959), similarly portrayals of a poverty-stricken couple.⁷)

DIRECTION

Bimal Roy presents both the good and the evil sides of rural and urban life. People in the village live a simple sort of life with their very limited resources, but are harassed by the landlord. Illiteracy and meager employment opportunities lead to a vicious cycle of poverty. On the other hand, Shambhu once in the big city loses all his belongings on the first night and finds it very difficult to talk to anybody there, yet meets up with a few people who do help him. For instance, an old lady, Dadi, provides him with a room to live in, and Dadi's adopted daughter takes care of Shambhu's son. His neighbor teaches him to pull a rickshaw and helps him get a license. Bimal Roy adopts a very balanced approach in portraying the shades of both urban and rural lifestyles. His realism comes across powerfully in some scenes. For instance, when Shambhu's son starts to work everyone is happy, including his mother. This is a very disturbing depiction of a poverty-stricken family who cannot educate the child but depend on his earnings. Another telling incident is when Shambhu arrives in the city and starts asking for work, but people reject him with a "hutt" sound, a disparaging gesture. Sadly, some Indian people do still react in such a degrading tone to workers and their female partners or kids. Another disturbing feature that Roy shows us in both urban and rural life is the way that people treat a woman who doesn't have the protection of a man. In her husband's absence Paro has to bear with the accountant's evil intentions; and on reaching Kolkata she faces a similar situation. Regrettably this bitter reality has not really changed for Indian women since 1953.

MUSIC

Today, Indian films are known worldwide for their music and dancing. This is vital for their entertainment value, and audiences always expect it. Bimal Roy couldn't ignore this critical element even for this film, although he aimed to make things as realistic as possible. At least he kept the number of songs limited: there were only four of them, a meager number for movies of that era, when it was usual for a film to have around ten songs. Here all four songs add entertainment value while moving the story forward. The music also helps locate the film in an appropriate village somewhere in the vast fertile valley of the great Ganges and Yamuna rivers. This regional influence clearly shows in the songs, which were written by Shailendra, a native of this region. His lyrics also highlight the close relationship that villagers have with nature and the seasons: the words refer to the land, the sky, the wind, the trees, the rivers, the monsoon, and nature in general. The music composer, Salil Chowdhury, who was also the author of the story *Rickshawalla* on which the film is based,⁸ does full justice to all four songs. He mixes folk tunes with some Western classical elements to create a pensive and modern ambience.

The first song, "*Hariyala saavan dhol bajata aaya*," enralls the audience with beautiful lyrics and captivating composition. The dancing is visually appealing, with simple choreography. The song is followed by the film's opening scenes where farmers are waiting for the rain. When it rains after a long period of drought, they can't control their emotions and immediately start celebrating the blessings of Mother Nature. This song may be the first rain song of Indian films; over the decades it inspired several similar songs, including "*ghanan ghanan*" in *Lagaan* (Upadhyaya 2019). This song also forms one of the earliest examples of jazz-style scat singing being used in Indian lyrics.

The second song based on *raag Bhairavi* is equally melodious—"Dharti kahe pukar ke." As Shambhu is leaving his village and is about to run into all the uncertainty of urban life, this song expresses his emotions about leaving his home, his life as a farmer and his beloved wife: "*Apni nishaani chhod ja, kuch to nishaani chhod ja, kaun kahe phir is oor, tu phir aaye na aaye.*" Lyrics also beautifully paint the emotions of Parvati, who was left behind, with her concerns about her husband's safety and her apprehension that he may never come back. The male singer Manna Dey became a household name across India through the enduring popularity of this song. In a radio interview, Salil Chowdhury mentioned that the tune for this song was inspired by a Soviet Red Army marching song.⁹

The third song, "*Ajab tori duniya*," is dedicated to migrant workers. Such people leave their homes behind in search of new opportunities but then encounter the harsh realities of city life. The song is equally melodious, with a simple beat. The composer deploys the *dholak* as the principal percussion instrument in this song (it continues to be an essential musical instrument, especially for folk songs in rural India). The lyrics, "*Parbat kaate, sagar paate, mahal banaye humne, patthar par bagiya laharayi phool khilaye humne, ho ke humari, hui na humari, alag teri duniya*", point to a depressing reality: that a worker who underpins the construction of the beautiful cities cannot enjoy the fruits of his labor but has to live in poverty.

The fourth song is a lullaby, "*Aaja ri aa nindiya tu aa*," featuring the famed Meena Kumari in a cameo appearance. This song involves two women, one of them singing the lullaby with a baby in her arms, with a calm, happy expression, while the other woman, listening to the song, is imagining her missing son. The song is also a painful reminder of Parvati's inner turmoil when missing her son and also worrying about the uncertain future of an unborn child. This was among the earliest lullaby songs in Indian cinema, one that was also to inspire similar songs in later Hindi films.

RECEPTION OF THE FILM

This film has been a subject of widespread discussion by students of Indian and world cinema, also by media experts and journalists; it has thus been mentioned in many articles and books over the years. The latest piece in this regard is by Bharat Dogra (2020), who gives credit to *Do Bigha Zamin* while pointing out that very few other Hindi films have "highlighted problems faced by migrant workers in India." He also commended Shailendra and Salil Chowdhury for the choice of songs that aptly depict the social condition of such migrant workers. Another journalist, Satti Khanna, has discussed the acting style in the film, which has

aspects of both melodrama and naturalism (Khanna 2020). He further goes on to say that Roy has used lighting in both the full lighting style of the studios and contrastive shadow cinematography. Roy's unconventional choice of cast has been discussed by Roshmila Bhattacharya (2013). Roy was supposed to cast Jairaj or Trilok Kapoor in the lead role, but when he saw Balraj Sahni perform in *Hum Log* (1951) it was clear that this was his Shambhu—a decision that met with “horrificed protests,” it was said. Similarly, when Roy revealed Nirupa to be his Paro, everybody protested. Both decisions however turned out to be the right ones, as both actors embraced their characters fully.

Another author who has recently paid tribute to Roy's direction is Amit Upadhyaya: *The Print* published his article (2019) on Bimal Roy's 53rd death anniversary. Upadhyaya has praised Roy's style of direction and commended the film for being a realistic depiction of the farmers' condition at that time. He goes on to suggest that since there has been little or no change in the farmers' situation the movie should now be remade. He adds, however: “The thing that strikes you the most while watching *Do Bigha Zamin* is Roy's near-sadistic and relentless storytelling. In his liberal and intellectual quest to tell this inherently socialism-coloured story, Roy makes it claustrophobic for the viewer, allowing not a ray of light to enter.” He has here called Roy's storytelling “near-sadistic.” The *Cambridge Dictionary of English* defines *sadistic* as “getting pleasure, sometimes sexual, by being cruel to or hurting another person.” It is a derogatory term when used for a director like Roy, who embraced honest storytelling. In all honesty, neither is realistic cinema “sadistic” nor does one who watches and praises these films derive any sadistic pleasure from them. Instead, audiences generally start sympathizing with the plight of Indian farmers. Upadhyaya goes on to say that Roy made it claustrophobic for the viewer, “allowing not a ray of light to enter.” This is also an unacceptable judgment: for no film such as this one can be so popular if it really makes the audience claustrophobic. Also we do frequently find a “ray of light” in this masterpiece: for instance, when Shambhu refuses to hand his bit of land over to the Zamindar without a fight; or when a ten-year-old boy understands the condition of the family and decides to earn and save some money, despite the harsh realities of city life; or when various urbanites help Shambhu; or when a rich lady offers financial help to Paro in the village.

A similar view has been offered by a famous film critic, Dinesh Raheja (2002). While praising this film for its realism and for creating a “seismic impact,” Raheja says that in the end Shambhu lost his land yet the film gives us hope, as the family retains its humanity. He calls this film “highly cinematic,” in having suggestive images that are more powerful than the dialogues.

Writers and critics of Indian cinema have thus commended *Do Bigha Zamin* for its realism, an epitome of socialist and humanist Indian cinema, for its relevance in the present age, for its cinematography, and for the splendid acting and direction.

THE AFTERMATH

Although Bimal Roy had earlier directed films in both Bengali and Hindi, *Do Bigha Zamin* (DBZ) was the first Hindi film that he also produced. With its enduring

legacy and influence on dozens of later Indian movies, this can justifiably be called a landmark film. Over the succeeding decades it has inspired numerous films and songs with similar themes, stories and music, most notably the Academy award-nominated film *Lagaan* (2001). Just a couple of years after DBZ, Satyajit Ray made his first film, *Pather Panchali* (1955), with a similar theme, a film that is also known as a landmark of Indian cinema in its own right, and is as powerful today as when it was first screened. Raj Kapoor seemed to have emulated Bimal Roy after watching DBZ, and went on to produce his classic *Boot Polish* (1954), using the same child actor Rattan Kumar, who is once more a shoeshine boy just as he was in DBZ. In Raj Kapoor's *Jagte Raho* (1956), we find another poor villager lost and exploited in a large city. Incidentally, Bimal Roy referenced Raj Kapoor's *Awaara* (1951) when another shoeshine boy, this time played by Jagdeep, keeps humming the title song, "*Awaara hoon.*" Later, V. Shantaram also came out with the powerful film *Do Aankhen Barah Haath* (1957), once again with similar shades, especially when the farmers are singing an identical song in the rain. B. R. Chopra's *Naya Daur* (1957) is another notable film that showed the villagers' struggle against impending capitalism and industrialization. If Balraj Sahni pulled a rickshaw in DBZ, Dilip Kumar drove a horse and cart in *Naya Daur*. However, even more reminiscent of Balraj Sahni, Dilip Kumar also ended up pulling a rickshaw decades later in *Kranti* (1981), in its climactic scene. In *Gaman* (1978), the protagonist who migrates from North India to Mumbai now drives a taxi for his customers instead of pulling a rickshaw, however.

As some observers have noted, it would seem from some of these examples that DBZ almost launched a cinematic movement in India that brought us several notable films raising social issues over the next ten years and beyond. Let us hope that this and other similar films of that decade will receive greater attention from film scholars.

NOTES

1. We are using the English title of the film from the captions on the trailer at https://www.imdb.com/video/vi1261551385?playlistId=tt0045693&ref_=tt_ov_vi. The cinema encyclopedia of Rajadhyaksha and Willemen translates it as, "Two Acres of Land" (2014, 329).
2. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iVBVpXSrXpY>; accessed 8 Aug. 2020.
3. <https://upperstall.com/profile/luminary/salil-choudhury/>; accessed 8 Aug. 2020.
4. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q6xbIrKbq0I>; accessed 8 Aug. 2020.
5. <https://www.indiatoday.in/mail-today/story/balraj-sahni-the-man-behind-the-method-1596771-2019-09-08>; accessed 8 Aug. 2020.
6. <https://www.rediff.com/entertai/2002/may/09dinesh.htm>; accessed 9 Aug. 2020.
7. <https://www.rediff.com/entertai/2002/may/09dinesh.htm>; accessed 9 Aug. 2020.
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9. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x_M-JbJPCXE; accessed 8 Aug. 2020.

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- Boot Polish* 1954. Director, Prakash Arora; starring Rattan Kumar, Naaz and David. India: R.K. Films; b & w, 90 mins.
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- Gaman* 1978. Director, Muzaffar Ali; starring Farooq Shaikh and Smita Patil. India: Integrated Films; color, 119 mins.
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