



FILM SEMINAR

THE PRIME MINISTER'S INAUGURAL ADDRESS

MR. Chairman, it has always seemed to me the sign of the remarkable synthesis which India is producing to find that the Chief Justice of a High Court is the President of our Dance and Music Academy (*Cheers*). That is a healthy sign. Normally, there are strong barriers, walls separating various types of activities, but when even the remote recesses of law come into this field of dance and song, then all must be well at least with the law, if not with dance and song (*Cheers*).

Now, I should be quite frank with you. I accepted this invitation long ago, many many months ago, to open this Seminar with an apparent hesitation, but really with considerable pleasure. One has to appear to be hesitant occasionally, not to become too cheap (*cheers*). But even if I had been hesitant, it would have been difficult to survive the insistence of Devika Rani. I accepted this invitation, and yet I forgot all about it till a very few days ago when I came back from England and was reminded of it, when I found that there was a good deal of inner turmoil in Delhi about this Film Seminar, —some brief references in the Press—I am not talking about them—, but since I heard there was some turmoil, some things were done, some things were whispered and talked about.

I did not really understand what these are all about.

Here we have a number of people connected with the film industry coming to meet and discuss the prospects and the future of this industry,—an eminently desirable thing to do. Why be afraid of them? Why worry about what they say? They might talk a good deal of sense, and they might talk an equal amount of nonsense (*cheers*). Surely they should have the right to talk nonsense as well as sense. So, why worry! I do not quite understand what all this inner ferment was, but because of this ferment I was a little alarmed. I said I had agreed to come to the opening of the Seminar not knowing any thing about it, knowing precious little about the history and development of this great industry in India or elsewhere. Of course, every person, a little awake, knows something about it but here I was coming to experts. What shall I do about it? Fortunately Devika Rani sent me a long note about the history of Indian films (*laughter*) which, in her haste, had only been revised in the first initial pages and the rest had been...(*cheers*). But so great was my eagerness to know all about it that I read through it, both the parts which I could read and the others which I could hardly understand.

Then, an eminent figure in the film world, Mr. Vasani sent me some days ago a copy of the address which he proposes to deliver at some stage of this Seminar. It is lying about with me. When I heard of these controversies, I tried to find time to read through it, although normally I would not have read it. So I read it. I did not find anything terrible in it. In fact it was quite mild, possibly if I had been writing something like that, I might have used somewhat stronger language in regard to these matters. That does not mean that I agree with all that Mr. Vasani has said—not at all (*cheers*). But the point is that these are some of the subjects which are raised which obviously deserve careful study and consideration. One subject for instance; Mr. Vasani and the industry are no doubt greatly interested, and he talks about it; in the reduction or abolition of entertainment tax. Well, about that I propose to say nothing except that I am not convinced about Mr. Vasani's arguments. I am not talking about the rate of it—even though I do not know. But I do not see at all broadly speaking why entertainment should not be taxed. To what extent this should be taxed is a different matter I cannot say more or less.

The other subject which Mr. Vasani has mentioned—there are several—is something about censorship. Now, this is a difficult subject so far as I am concerned because I start with a certain presumption in favour or rather against censorships. I am sorry to say I still affect considerably my old, 19th century traditions in regard to such matters. So I do not take favourably to too much restriction or too much censorship. On the other hand, it is quite absurd it seems to me for anyone to talk about unrestricted play in important matters affecting the public to allow people to do as they like. Suppose as might well happen that the production of the atomic bomb became cheaper and simpler. Well, are we going to allow, in the name of full liberty of the individual, everybody to carry an atom bomb in his pocket? Certainly not. In the same way one cannot allow—there are limits to what one can allow—other activities which might in other fields have the same effect. So, this question of some high principle in favour of censorship or against it has no meaning to me except that broadly speaking one should not restrict and interfere. I accept that. But one has to interfere, the state has to interfere to some extent. To what extent is another matter. Now, I do not

wish to compare or rather do not like to really speak about other countries in this respect, but, nevertheless, I might mention the case of what are called horror comics—horror comics and the like. Well I have read about them and recently I saw some of these things. In fact, a very mild—exceedingly mild—type happened to be sent as a birthday gift to my grandson. I was horrified looking at it that anyone, much less my grandson, should have that type of literature to read and this is literature and not the comic part. But the horror comics are something which I have absolutely no doubt in my mind, should be suppressed ruthlessly. There is no question of freedom of the individual or anybody. It is something which is bad, hundred per cent bad—something which is causing in some countries all kinds of developments of sadistic impulses, child murder, a child murdering for murder's sake. This is due to all this kind of horror comic business. Obviously no government or any society ought to allow that kind of thing to flourish. Therefore, it is clear that the government must take action to prevent something which it considers and the society considers evil from spreading too much. On the other hand, it is a dangerous thing for a government to become too much of a judge even of people's morals if I may say so. At any rate I do not think it is desirable for a government to become that kind or type of judge or too much of that. In between of course there is large latitude or freedom of the individual or things to develop and I do not see why there should be much argument about this matter. There might be, about where the lines are to be drawn. Anyhow with regard to that argument the best thing is to have that argument and to discuss every aspect of it and then try to arrive at some conclusion. Now it is quite a number of years since I have been connected with the government but those years have not completely suppressed my personality. Although I have no doubt they had a bad effect on it.

I do not take kindly to too much regulation and regimentation to use governmental language—to too much protocol and more specially in matters which obviously are things of the spirit—music, dance, literature and the like.

Now, the Chairman referred to my capacity as President of the Sahitya Akademi. Well, it is worthy of being there or not I do not know but I am rather proud of being there because it is an honour to be the President of

an organisation which includes in its fold the eminent writers of India in various languages. Now there too as President of that Akadami I may tell you quite frankly I would not like the Prime Minister to interfere with my work (*cheers*). It is true it is not always easy to draw a line between the Prime Minister and the President of this Sahitya Akadami but that is a different matter. My point is that these creative arts must be allowed to grow, encouraged to grow, with as little interference as possible. It is only when they manifestly become a social menace and a social danger that government must come in, and must come in with a heavy hand, because we cannot allow a social menace or a social danger to continue. People in government like myself are apt to have a natural tendency—some of us—to reform others, to improve others. I know I have that strong tendency but I try at the individual level at least to restrain myself. That is a different matter when I am addressing the masses but at the individual level I do try to restrain myself—not that the desire to reform and improve is not there—but as one grows older and has more experience, one feels more and more that this attempted individual reform in this way is rather crude; true it does not really have much effect; occasionally it might have—it is a crude approach to the individual. There should be other subtler approaches. So that kind of typical machinery of crusading zeal which comes from singleness of mind looking neither to the right nor to the left, becomes rather less crude. However, here we are dealing with this tremendous business, tremendous thing, the world of the films and cinema.

Now, it is one of the biggest things in the modern world. Let us remember it. There are many things which influence people—books, newspapers and so many other things. Well, I think it perfectly correct to say that influence in India of the films is greater than the influence of newspapers and books all combined (*cheers*). I am not at the moment talking about the quality (*cheers*). Now I suppose you thought I was clever but I was not. I will explain it. I said that I did not mean the quality, that is to say, the books for instance specially not so much newspapers will obviously have a greater and deeper influence on many individuals—obviously those who can take advantage of them. The cinema would not have that effect on them, newspapers will not have that effect on them. The quality of book reading of course has a powerful influence

provided you know how to read books and how to write books. Quantitatively first of all the number of book readers in India is pitifully and woefully small. It makes me sad to think how few people in India read books, judging from sales it is not astonishing our publishing business is backward. Our reading business is still more backward. Then we come to the newspapers. Again, it is astonishing what the total circulation of every newspaper in every language in India is. It is pitifully small compared to any country.

We have fine newspapers in various languages in India but the point is that the total circulation of all the newspapers in India in all the languages is still, compared of course with the population of India, pitifully small. Do not tell me that is due to people not being literate. It is true that the literacy figures in India are low and they are going up, but nevertheless the people who are literate in India are vast in number. They may be only 20% of the population, but 20% of the population in India is a huge number. What is it that ails our writers of books or readers of books or publishers of books or newspapers? Why this hiatus?

I am not going into this question. Now I come to this that by and large the influence of the cinema and the film—the producer influence, if I may say so—is far greater than that of reading books or reading newspapers or periodicals. Now anything that is, or is likely to have that widespread influence, is of the utmost importance. It is obvious from any point of view. You may consider it in terms of the high art—well and good—but regardless of that in terms of moulding the people of the country, the new generation in India, it is of great importance. It cannot be treated as something bad or something whatever it is. It has to be treated realistically as something of the highest importance in the life of the country and because this highest importance, the government must be intimately concerned with it. In what manner, it does not matter.

I do not wish too much government interference in artistic activities. Government must inevitably in any country be concerned with something which must have such a tremendously wide influence. Suppose our producers produce some kind of film—shall I say a war film which encourages in people a war mentality. Well, the Government of

India would come down upon it with a big thump to stop it. There is no use telling me "you are interfering with liberty of the individual". I just do not want war propaganda to be made in India which warps young people's mind. So I say there are limits. There is no reason why we should quarrel about it. The main principles I think must broadly be agreed to, whether it is government or it is the Film Seminar or the producer or whoever it is. There may be and there is bound to be difference of opinion as to where the lines are to be drawn. It may be that lines are not absolutely fixed. They may vary from time to time. It is better to consider and discuss and then to decide—nothing to get excited about and shout at each other.

Obviously it is a big industry to which I must pay this tribute. After all they built this up in the last 20 or 30 years. They did something big without much assistance and it is very creditable to them that from scratch they have built this huge industry up and undoubtedly produced from time to time some very notable films. First, taking the mere quantity and the mere size of the industry it is impressive and the fact that this has been done practically unaided, is creditable to them. Certainly, they have made progress. Obviously, the resources of India are much smaller than the resources of the rich countries of the western world. Nevertheless, they have made progress, technical progress. So, all that goes to their credit and one must acknowledge it. Of course, many people criticise the quality of many of their films from their rather high-brow point of view and their criticism from that point of view is justified, high-brow or not. I am not speaking for myself. I am not very interested in melodrama. I fall asleep. So, what am I to do? I don't want to go to see those films.

But, to some extent, we have to meet a problem here which is not an Indian problem but a common problem, it is melodrama that

interests large numbers of people, whether in India, England or America or any other country. The type of melodrama may vary. Public taste also, to some extent, moulds what is presented to it. At the same time, what is presented should mould public taste—action and reaction. (*Applause*).

One thing, I feel, India has been rather lacking in, not wholly but still largely—and that is, the children's film, and I think they are of high importance. Again, there is a tendency in our books written for children and in our films, for some persons, who consider themselves wise, giving a lecture to children as to how they should behave, telling them what virtues they should develop. Well, as far as I can remember, my own reaction as a child to such lectures, was to hit the person lecturing (*Applause*). It is not the way to approach children, or anybody, to go about lecturing on the virtues to be cultivated. Inevitably, you drive that person to evil ways by your lectures.

Don't sermonise too much. But there are other subtler ways of pointing a moral or drawing a lesson and a good children's film can be a very powerful instrument in developing the child and I hope that the Indian film industry will think of it. So far as the government is concerned, I do not know what it is going to do about the films and the rest, but inevitably, the government, not with any intention to compete, is likely to compete, with private ventures in the films. Whether it is documentaries or it is other specialised films for children and others—government might well think of producing them itself—not again with the desire to compete, but to some extent, the results might be a certain measure of competition.

I am very grateful to you for having invited me to inaugurate this Seminar and I hope that your discussions will yield fruit.