

The Mill Strikes in Bombay, 1928-29, and Munshi Premchand as Filmmaker

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(Abstract)

In 1928-29 there took place in Bombay mill industry two huge General Strikes affecting all the cotton textile mills. These led to the suppression of the radical Left leadership, the arrest of the Girni Kamgar Union (Factory Workers Union) leaders like S.A.Dange and B.T.Randive, and the Meerut Conspiracy Trials. There followed the impact of the global Great Depression of 1929, worsening of the condition of industrial workers, and in 1934 industrial trouble led to strikes in Ahmedabad cotton mills.

In the 1930s Dhanpat Rai Srivastava, also known as Munshi Premchand, was in deep financial distress. Two literary journals he founded drained his resources and in 1934 he was tempted by Bombay film industry to write scripts for a Hindi film. The theme he chose was the mill strike. One of the actors on the film, Lalit Kumar said that “It was the first film that presented, with honesty and force a major social problem – the continuous friction between millowner and mill worker. Premchand had put heart and soul into it”. When the film was ready for release, the Bombay Film Censorship Board banned the film and it was similarly banned in U.P and Central India where industrial cities like Kanpur and Nagpur were located. The ban on the film was a heavy blow to the film producer and he soon went bankrupt. The Censor Board decision to ban this film on mill strike was influenced by Mr. Jeejeebhoy, the President of the Bombay Millowners’ Association, and a prominent member of the Board. The film in the can was probably seized after the producer’s bankruptcy and has been lost for ever.

Thus our story is about a film that does not exist. We can however piece together the story in the script by Munshi Premchand, and the conditions under which that great writer struggled to reconcile the demands of realistic art and the demands of an industry catering for popular taste. Premchand wrote in a letter to a literary friend : “it is useless to expect any improvement in the cinema. This business is in the hands of same kind of money makers as the sellers of liquor. I came to this line as it offered some chance of financial independence but now I see I was under a delusion and I am going back to my literature”. Premchand left Bombay in 1935 and died a few months later.

To conclude, it is instructive to look at the tension between art as Premchand conceived it and the industry which was his medium, the tension between representation of bitter reality and production of a palatable pabulum in films, and ultimately the tension between the interests of the exploiters and exploited. The story of the first and the last film Premchand made is a parable which tells us something of his times and probably of our times.