

Privatisation of culture: the issues involved in the Film and Television Institute of India student strike

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The students of the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII) at Pune in Western India have been on strike since August 29. This is the fourth strike in the last five years. The mainstream media leads us to believe that the students of the FTII are no different from other students in the country who resort to strike at the drop of a hat. (That the others could be resorting to strike for a genuine cause is not important to them!). They lament that yet another premier institute in the country is being brought into disrepute because of the wayward attitude of the present generation!

It must be understood that students do not join the FTII as a last resort. They do not come to learn filmmaking because they have not got admission to engineering or other professional courses. They come here primarily with a passion for the medium. And they join the institute with the full knowledge that their future (in monetary terms) is rather bleak and dismal. All of them are graduates and many with work experience behind them decide to invest three years of their lives in a serious study of filmmaking.

The FTII was set up in 1961 as an autonomous institution with the aim of promoting good cinema and setting new standards in filmmaking both aesthetically and technically. The institute has provided space for thinking and learning to generations of filmmakers and many of the successful filmmakers like Adoor Gopalakrishnan have graduated from the FTII. It has provided the film industry with highly professional, focused and specialised people in various aspects of filmmaking. Along with the National Film Archives of India (NFAI), the Films Division and the National Film Development Corporation (NFDC), FTII has been one of the pillars for promoting a plurality of voices via the medium of cinema. It has been unique in the world amongst all film schools, providing ample scope for experimentation. The excellent collection of films at the NFAI has acted as a rich resource for learning. The two institutes provide a formidable base for nurturing talent. The FTII was supposed to develop as a model institute for training in filmmaking. To some extent this has happened as the FTII admits a number of foreign students. In fact this website (ifson.org) regularly receives enquiries from outside India about admission procedures!

Being an autonomous institution, the FTII is run by a Governing Council (GC) and an Academic Council (AC). Important filmmakers like Mrinal Sen, Shyam Benegal, Mahesh Bhatt, et al have headed the GC at different points of time. Ritwik Ghatak was the vice-principal in the seventies. However one cannot totally rule out political interference as the members of the GC as well as the Director of the FTII are appointed by the Central Government. Many of the members of the GC are bureaucrats

with little knowledge of cinema as an art form. In fact, one of the members is from the Ministry of Food Processing! According to reports the present Chairman of the GC, Jnanpith Award Winner and filmmaker Girish Karnad has resigned. The report also adds that the name of Vinod Khanna, a yesteryear actor from the commercial Bollywood is doing the rounds of succeeding him. (Vinod Khanna contested the elections to the parliament on the Bharatiya Janata Party(BJP)/Akali Dal ticket from the northern state of Punjab.) Filmmaker Mani Rathnam is the Vice-Chairman.

Until 1996, the FTII had four courses of study: film direction, cinematography and sound engineering for three years each, and editing for two years. An applicant had to specify which course he or she wished to be admitted to. After joining, the first year was common to all, and students were given an overview in all aspects of film-making. But even while attending these classes, students had free access to the library and could view up to nine films a week. They would also assist the senior students in their film projects, and interact with the faculty. Free access to a well-equipped library added to this process of learning. All this helped them to prepare for the particular specialisation of their choice almost from the day of joining the Institute. At the end of the first year every student made a five-minute film (16mm, B&W), assisted by his or her classmates. In the subsequent years, each specialisation consisted of lectures, assignments and a series of film-making exercises and workshops, culminating in the diploma film, a three-reeler on 35mm B&W or two-reeler in colour. A basic working knowledge of video technology was also part of the curriculum, and one of the final-year projects was a video documentary. The FTII's television wing was created in the 1970s with the expressly stated purpose of conducting in-service training courses for Doordarshan personnel, and had little connection with the regular courses of study, being tailored to DD's specific requirements.

In 1996, a committee comprising of outside experts, practising professionals, faculty and the students, prepared a new syllabus called the "Revised Syllabus". It was a much needed improvement on the then existing syllabus. It provided for increased inputs from visiting professionals and was flexible and interactive in nature. But this revised syllabus was never implemented. On the other hand admissions to the institute were put on hold. In a meeting in early 1998 of the officials of the Ministry of Information & Broadcasting, eminent alumni of the institute like filmmakers Mani Kaul and Kumar Sahani and former Chairperson of the Children's Film Society, Jaya Bachchan, and the student representatives, the then Minister, Mr. Jaipal Reddy (of the United Front Government) had directed the Director Dr. Mohan Agashe (actor and Padmashri awardee) to admit students from the following semester. But he (Mohan Agashe) deliberately ignored this directive and soon the government changed!

Mohan Agashe then prepared his own set of “conceptual proposals” whose aim was “a complete restructuring of the academic and administrative functioning of the FTII... in the light of the New Economic Policy.” (Unconfirmed reports quote him as having once said that “cinema is a subversive art.”) What resulted was the implementation of a new course with a new batch that was admitted in February this year. The present course has nothing in common with the “Revised Syllabus” but is called the “Restructured Revised Syllabus”. Some of its highlights:

Three individual courses of one-year duration each replacing the integrated three-year diploma.

Elimination of students at each yearly stage. After the students pass the first year, 48 would be admitted to a further one-year certificate course in specialisation. Upon passing this, 32 would be allowed into a one-year diploma course.

Students do not decide on the area of their specialisation. Admission to the higher courses would be at the discretion of the administration and faculty, and would be based upon attendance; professional behaviour (!) and application (with no clear definition)

Doubling the intake of students from the earlier forty to eighty without increasing the budget or resources, thus reducing the resources available to each student by half.

An increase in fees by more than seven times with provision for further increase at regular intervals.

Drastic reduction in film theory, history and appreciation. A clause called “Recognised Prior Learning” that allows people direct entry into the second year, without any clear definition what this learning entails.

Arbitrary changes in daily functioning: cutting down film screenings to a mere three, with a strict rationing of the number of world classics to be shown to the students, lest they get too many ideas about themselves as film-makers; reduced access to library books (one library card as against the earlier four).

Further, the now defunct television wing was merged with the film wing, so that its faculty could fill all the vacant teaching posts. However, since there are limitations to what they can teach, many of the film training exercises were replaced by Doordarshan training modules, with the excuse that television is an expanding industry, which the FTII must train its students to be part of.

All these measures seem to be aimed at stifling the spirit of questioning and experimentation and creating conformists. As the syllabus itself says, its “aim is to train junior level assistants for the industry”. The complete shift from aesthetics of cinema to its technical and operational requirements and denied an overall and historical perspective, a lack of knowledge of the preceding movements in arts and particularly cinema, will only ensure the churning out of “technically qualified” people to cater to the entertainment industry.

It would be rather naïve to assume that the issues affecting the FTII have no relation to the economic policy of liberalisation introduced by the Congress government in 1991, and followed by all subsequent governments.

In a very important recommendation, the Expenditure Reforms Commission (ERC) headed by former finance secretary of Government of India, KP Geetakrishnan, has proposed closing down several media units in the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting to rationalise staff strength. The Vajpayee government is examining the recommendations of the Geetakrishnan committee and the decision is likely to be taken shortly. To make Doordarshan and All India Radio leaner, the committee has suggested that the strength of these organisations be cut and government should abolish 7,752 posts of C and D categories, which are lying vacant in Prasar Bharti alone. The committee has suggested a radical reform agenda in closing down Films Division, Children's Film Society, National Film Archives of India, Film & Television Institute of India, Directorate of Film Festivals, Directorate of Advertising and Visual Publicity,

Directorate of Field Publicity and divisions related to song and drama, photo and publication. The committee has observed that the government should not get involved in national and international film festivals, which, it said, should be organised by the film industry with financial assistance (!) from the government. While suggesting the closure of Films Division, the committee has suggested that each ministry must have its own division for making documentaries for it. The committee has also recommended that the government should not directly get involved in the production of feature films and that it should support non-governmental organisations in the production of feature films for children. Several media bodies of the Ministry have outlived their utility with the advent of the new satellite based media technologies and the entry of private operators in TV, radio and films, the committee has observed. On the other hand the committee has recommended the “strengthening and modernisation” of the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC), popularly referred to as the “Censor Board”.

Decentralisation of various media activities has been suggested. It has been suggested that professionals take over the functions of closed units. The committee has also recommended the disinvestment or winding up of NFDC. The committee has projected that the centre's wage bill on the I&B ministry will be cut by over half, once the recommendations are implemented.

It is obvious that the recommendations of the ERC have been based on financial considerations alone. But issues relating to culture and the role of the State in its promotion have not been conveniently avoided. Otherwise why should the ERC recommend the modernisation (whatever that means) of the Censor Board?

The fact that Bollywood filmmaker Subhash Ghai announced in New York that he proposes to start a Rs 200 crore film and television institute gives credence to the theory that the film industry may not be averse to investing in FTII, if the government-owned FTII is privatised.

A lot has been said about the functioning of the Directorate of Film Festivals. Many (including the current Minister of I&B, Mr. Arun Jaitley) feel that the International Film Festival of India (IFFI) will be better off if it is run by the film industry. And they cite the example of the other festivals now held in the country.

This argument, to put it mildly, is spurious. The film industry is actively involved in the organisation of the IFFI. A majority of the delegates attending it are from the film industry. In fact, a constant complaint one hears is that people who are passionate about cinema are denied entry to delegate screenings.

Calcutta (in the state of West Bengal) was the first centre to start its own festival. This was followed by the state of Kerala. But governments in those states adequately fund both these festivals. And it must be remembered that Left Front governments run both the states. Bombay has now started its own festival. This is run by a trust that consists of eminent filmmakers like Shyam Benegal. The prestigious Short and Documentary Film Festival every alternate year is run by the Films division. All these festivals have added to the prestige of our country and have helped in projecting ourselves as a nation with a strong desire to promote good culture. The Federation of Film Societies of India (FFSI) actively helps (on a voluntary basis) in the promotion of these festivals.

To think of handing over the promotion of culture to private hands may be in tune with the policies of the present National Democratic Alliance disposition at the centre led by the right-wing BJP. But is this what the people of the country really want? What will be the result of this kind of en masse privatisation.

The path being pursued by the government (on the basis of recommendations of committees whose members hardly have any background in art and culture) is a dangerous path. It will result in crass commercialisation that will probably only add glamour but little substance. Such commercialisation will result in the complete destruction

of cultural values and the decay of institutions promoting them.

The strike by the students of the FTII must be viewed in this background. It is easy to find fault with a few people of the present generation. But to generalise their behaviour pattern and apply them to these students is totally wrong and devoid of any ideology, cultural or otherwise. These students in the last five years have been jailed, hospitalised and have had criminal cases filed against them.

But the BJP does not seem to be unduly worried. They seem to be keen on promoting the Hindu traditions. Are we soon going to see a “Hindu form” of filmmaking?



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