

# Social Issues Through Bimal Roy's Parakh: A Cinematic Commentary

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**Abstract:** *This article explores the social issues depicted in Bimal Roy's 1960 classic film Parakh. Using the framework of satire and black comedy, the film critiques democracy, caste dynamics, gender bias, and community health. This study analyzes these themes while highlighting the director's commentary on societal hypocrisies and the flaws within India's democratic processes.*

**Keywords:** Democracy, Untouchability, Parakh. Cinema, Malaria

## 1. Introduction

Parakh, released in 1960, is a Bimal Roy film which can be placed under the genre of Black comedy and satire. Bimal Roy has successfully peeled the shreds of goodness from the faces of the village men considered to be role models in the village but they turned messengers, it conveys.

### Social issues rose

1. Democracy
2. Untouchability
3. Community health issue
4. The issue of religion and gender

The article aims to analyze how Bimal Roy's Parakh uses cinematic techniques to present a critique of societal issues like democracy, untouchability, and community health in India.

### 1.1 Plot

The story is based in a village named Radhanagar and we meet the main characters of the film in the early scenes itself. There is the village Postmaster, Nivaran Babu (Nazeer Hussain), his daughter Seema (Sadhna), the postman Haridhan (Moti Lal), the village doctor (Rashid Khan), the village landlord, Tandav (Jayant), the school teacher Rajat (Vasant Choudhary) and a rich money lender Haribhanj (Asit Sen). The viewers also get a glimpse of the pure and innocent life of the village. Everything is shown as going fine until the postmaster Nivaran receives a letter from Sir J.C.Roy (a rich man from city) who had sent a cheque of Rs. 5, 00,000, a princely sum in those days with a clear instruction that the amount had to be given to the best man in the village only. The postmaster Nivaran Babu faces a confusing situation of finding the best man in the village. On which yardstick, one can weigh the goodness of a man was the question faced by the Postmaster Nivaran Babu. Rajat, the school teacher suggests holding an election to find the best man to receive the cheque. The announcement of the election process changes the situation and the prominent persons of the village are keen to put forward their best faces in order to win the election. The village priest who is deadly against the entry of persons belonging to the lower class in the

temple allows those people to worship the god in the temple. The village landlord forgoes the taxes of the villagers. The greedy doctor starts treating the patients for free. In this situation, only Rajat remains innocent and true to him and continues doing the community work in the villages as usual. Slowly when it becomes clear that Rajat would win the election then various permutations and combinations are made to win the elections. Alliances are put forward and various characters are assassinated in the process. In the decade of 1960's only, Bimal Roy had put the games played under the name of democracy successfully on celluloid. Parakh remains a classic in the sense that it was one of the first satirical movies to be made in the Hindi language in India. The film was not successful commercially but perhaps had the most profound social messages put forward by Bimal Roy on the screen. The film was a slap on the hypocrisy of the society. The music of the film scored by Salil Choudhary has become immortal through two songs 'O Sajna Barkha Bahar Aayi...' and 'Mila hai Kisi ka jhumka.' both the songs were sung by Lata Mangeshkar. The movie uses the format of black comedy genre to bring forward the perils of democracy. Parakh is the strongest Hindi film of Bimal Roy in the sense of social messages, it conveys.

### 1.2 The issue of Democracy

The moot point that the film raises is the democratic set up to choose the best man in the village to get the cheque for Rs. 5,00,000. The film believes in the democracy to select the most suitable man. The title 'Parakh' itself gets its name from the process of selecting such a man. But the democratic process brings about the ills associated with this system also and this has been shown by Bimal Roy, threadbare. The film is a lesson in the treatise, how elections are won in a democratic setup. Democracy has been present in India but mainly in theory. Practically, an awakening is needed to bring about real fruits of democracy and this awakening is based upon certain factors like literacy, the power of conscience, moral values, logic etc. But it is a tragedy that most of the elections are not fought taking in mind these issues. It is very easy to lure illiterate masses in favor of a specific candidate in lieu of certain rewards, in cash or kind. Four main contestants in the election fray shown in the village lure the villagers by adopting different ways:

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- The priest is able to sway women voters in his support by asserting his religious supremacy. Religious rituals and customs are more tied to women than men folk so the priest is able to take advantage of this fact. The untouchability factor hampers the entry of the persons belonging to lowest caste in the temples and the priest suddenly changes his policy in this regard so as to win untouchable votes.
- The rich man has been shown digging the tube wells for the villagers but only after the announcement of the election process.
- The landlord waves off the taxes to be collected from the peasants. He also resorts to the muscle power and goondaism to win the elections. He uses his sister-in-law to lure the villagers. He presents a dance item of his sister-in-law.
- The village doctor starts treating the villagers for free. He uses his skill and expertise in this regard to lure the villagers.



**Figure 1:** Village Doctor treating the patients for free: Still taken from Parakh (Bimal Roy Productions)



**Figure 2:** Village Landlord giving order to forego the revenue: Still taken from Parakh (Bimal Roy Productions)



**Figure 3:** The rich man giving order to dig tube wells: Still taken from Parakh (Bimal Roy Productions)

In this sense, each influential person uses his authority in one or other sense to win the election which could get them old over Rs. Five Lakh.

Max Weber has explained certain types of authorities which play a certain role in the democratic process to win over the people. In the election process, as shown in the village, the priest and the landlord uses the traditional religious and traditional feudalistic authority to influence the villagers respectively. The Doctor uses the rational-legal authority in order to lure the villagers. He uses his skill to get a promise from the villagers that they would vote for him. Such an authority is often legal in the bureaucratic systems.

How the newly found democratic system in India had got infected by the ills associated with such a system has been shown quite clearly in the film. Bimal Roy is successful in showing us the face of democracy to come in the near future.

### 1.3 Issue of Untouchability

The issue of untouchability has been taken clearly in the film. The caste system in India is very rigid and it is just impossible to penetrate this system and hit at the roots of this system. The Brahmanical order is supreme in such a system. The untouchables are at the lowest rung of the ladder in such a society. The priest as shown in the film rightly takes the advantage of this gullible position of the untouchables to win over them as he allows their entry to the temple.

The notion of purity and pollution is behind the caste system in India. If an untouchable touches someone from the higher caste, he gets polluted. The rural settlements were and are established in such a manner that the untouchables live in the separate area in the village from that of the living area of the persons belonging to higher castes. A sort of ghetto formation is there even now, especially in the rural areas. In the colonial period, the untouchables were rechristened as depressed classes or scheduled castes. Bimal Roy has touched the issue of untouchability in an indirect way in this film whereas in the film Sujata, this issue of untouchability was the main theme of the film.

### 1.4 Community Health Issue

Community health is broadly defined as the efforts of a community to prevent the whole village from certain diseases. Basically, the efforts of the villagers done in this direction can be said to be just an extension of specific policies of Government of India in raising such issues from time to time. Rajat, the schoolmaster along with certain aware individuals of the village and the students of his school has been shown involved in Malaria eradication programme and is seen along with others involved in clearing the areas in the village which could help in the breeding of mosquitoes. In 1953, Government of India had launched a national programme for the eradication of malaria and the director has taken a leaf from the Government's book and has played a role in showing this initiative through this film.



**Figure 4:** cleaning the pond and surrounding area: Still taken from Parakh (Bimal Roy Productions)

### 1.5 The issue of religion and gender

The issue of religion is a very sensitive one, especially in India. The issue of religion has the power to influence anyone especially the rural folks. A gender bias also comes in the question of religion and women are tending to be more religious than menfolk, in general. Firth observes that "Observations of Hindus suggest that on the whole women are more religiously active than are men: Puja is often carried out at shrines in the home by women".

The priest in the film Parakh takes advantage of the gullibility of rural women in the context of religion to influence them to vote for him. Goddess Lakshmi becomes the metaphor for the priest and he lures the women into believing that the Goddess would appear from the earth. The priest tries to influence the women by saying that he would construct a temple from the amount he would get. The temple and Goddess Lakshmi become the emotional point around which the priest wants to win the votes. Using religion to gather votes in a democratic set up is quite prevalent in the contemporary society also. Bimal Roy had perhaps realized this evil in the decade of the 1960's.

In Parakh, Bimal Roy masterfully critiques social and political issues using satire and black comedy. The film highlights the flaws in democratic processes, the persistence of untouchability, and the manipulation of gender and religion for personal gain. Parakh remains a timeless cinematic commentary, urging introspection on societal hypocrisies and reforms."

**Significance of the Article:** This study underscores the continued relevance of Parakh in understanding social and political dynamics, offering a cinematic reflection of societal hypocrisies and challenges in 1960's India.

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