

**Political Parody and Populist Sentiment in Amrit Nahata's *Kissa Kursi Ka***

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**Abstract**

This paper aims to explore Amrit Nahata's *Kissa Kursi Ka* (1978) as an instance of popular cinema's complicated relationship with censorship in general and the Emergency of 1975-77 in particular. The paper posits that *Kissa Kursi Ka* might seem like a pedestrian and simplistic flourish of populist sentiments. It may seemingly dabble in stereotypes and offer formulaic and reductive discourses of the Emergency and the crisis it supposedly represents, but it is in precisely this aggravated presentation of the formulaic and its carnivalesque inversions, that the film draws attention to its flawed logics. The study concludes that the film displays a pervasive distrust of political authority and state institutions alike. Political chatter is dismissed as frivolous nonsense: corporate expertise is also dismissed as complete nonsense. Political culture is seen as a perpetuation of ruses, deceptions and dissembling. The elaborate farce and the cultivated malaise, thus, continually reiterate the debilitating political culture and pervasive moral inertia.

**Keywords:** *Emergency, Kissa Kursi Ka, Amrit Nahata, popular cinema, political culture*

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This paper aims to explore Amrit Nahata's *Kissa Kursi Ka* (1978) as an instance of popular cinema's complicated relationship with censorship in general and the Emergency of 1975-77 in particular. Notably, some of the very first extended narratives to emerge in the aftermath of the Emergency happen to be in the domain of cinema. Anand Patwardhan's documentary *Prisoners of Conscience* (1978) and IS Johar's popular spoof *Nasbandi* (1978) are cases in point. Cinema effectively establishes itself as the site of the unfolding of the nation's narrative in the domain of

popular imagination: the space where narratives of the political imaginary get variously and relentlessly imagined, enacted and consolidated in collective memory.

Popular cinema's trajectory is a fitting analogy to the democratic discourse in post-Independence India, as it negotiates the dialectic between democracy and authoritarianism. On the one hand, it epitomizes the very spirit of creative freedom as exceeding discursive boundaries with an almost brazen impunity. On the other, it finds itself constantly inscribed within the various matrices of state censorship: the CFBC, the IB Ministry, government panels and committees and indeed the law of the land. In fact, the practice of pre- censorship or 'certification' is peculiar only to the cinematic mode of creative production. Someshwar Bhowmik in his book *Cinema and Censorship: The Politics of Control in India* examines these routinely 'revised' mandatory certification procedures in great detail. He illustrates in instance after instance as to how they tend to be prescriptive, though ostensibly their interventions are generally restricted to sanitizing films for overtly sexually suggestive content or violence or anti community/ religion/ nation sentiments. There is of course, nothing innocent about the often long drawn certification protocols, even though for most part they might seem to merely indulge in cosmetic tinkering of 'offensive' content and that too inconsistently and often arbitrarily.

*Kissa Kursi Ka* might seem like a pedestrian and simplistic flourish of populist sentiments. It may seemingly dabble in stereotypes and offer formulaic and reductions of the discourses of the Emergency and the crisis it supposedly represents, but it is in precisely this aggravated presentation of the formulaic and its carnivalesque inversions, that the film draws attention to its flawed logics. In its sheer inventive excess, it yields a variety of interesting interpretations, and for those reasons alone, it deserves serious scrutiny and interrogation. *Kissa Kursi Ka* is a hugely successful spoof on the power mongers of the political establishment of its times. Someshwar Bhoumik in his characteristic assessment describes it as the 'cause celebre' of governmental intervention in cinema during the Emergency (202). The curious case of this film is as follows: Amrit Nahata, a sitting Congress MP directed this political satire. The film was ready in early 1975, and was indeed submitted to CFBC for certification by April. CFBC overruled the majority opinion of the Examination Committee, and referred it to the government for approval. It predictably ran into trouble, even as Nahata approached the Supreme Court to intervene, for the film in many ways

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seemed to correctly anticipate the turn of events. Of course, before the court adjudicated, the Emergency had been imposed. Nahata was forced to surrender every bit of material related to the film- prints, negatives, audio tracks, publicity material- everything. Every bit of material was destroyed.

The film which released in 1978, was made all over again from scratch in 1977. The CFBC continued to have problems with it and its release this time around also, involved the I&B Ministry. While it still continues to be hailed as the film that anticipated the Emergency and how; how many of the specific details in *Kissa Kursi Ka* are a result of retrospective interpolation, is anyone's guess. A political satire in the 'popular' vein, the film is generally regarded as the dedicated Emergency film, clearly written to a thesis. The film is a thesis film, of course, but it is more than that. The 'Emergency' within the film, in fact, happens only during the last few sequences. This Emergency is seen as the inevitable consequence of the entire composite of a political culture, which the film sets out to enact in exacting detail. The question it seems to be grappling with is the question of just what it is in the nature of the polity that renders it so amenable to an emergency. Thus, albeit inadvertently, it seeks to assemble a narrative of the genealogy of the Emergency, and therefore, the function of the supposed countdown of events leading up to the inevitable Emergency, clearly goes beyond its assigned intent.

In *Kissa Kursi Ka* the disenchantment with the romance of the democratic promise quite literally enacted as the romance between the presidential designate Ganga Ram and the mute and gullible 'Janata', the feminized supplicant masses. The moral is hard to miss: here is an illustration of politics as seduction. The anxiety here is not just about the predictable souring of the love affair; it is about the perceived predatory nature of state intervention which violates and destroys the same people it professes to protect. The film presents an elaborate assemblage of various grids across which power, quite literally, circulates. It plays out the familiar political theme of the obsession with power, metonymically suggested by the 'chair'. *Kissa Kursi Ka*, therefore, apart from being the saga of the 'chair', is also the farce enacted in the name of representative democracy on the one hand and its ingenuous interface with technologies of governmentality on the other in a social space where the nature of power is still very feudal and sovereign oriented. There is therefore, the Jan Gan Desh, a supposed secular, socialist democracy, poised on the brink of a presidential election, with a

set of aspirants who would be king. The quintessentially feudal impulse of the supposed democratic discourse is powerfully captured, not just in terms of these aspirants, or those who would rather play kingmakers and cultivate stooges; it is captured essentially in terms of the first images of the chair in question as an elaborately ornate kingly throne.

The enactment of the political is often in terms of bizarre metaphors and superlative parodies, given the implausibility of the configurations in the political field. This is instanced in the need to spell out the very basics of political structuring, naming the polity, as in enunciating afresh, to identify, to make sense of institutions; people and indeed political discourse. The film is about many things political, vis-à-vis which it displays bitter cynicism, disenchantment and indeed total distrust. The film's narrative elaborately plays out the inherent contradictions within the given democratic political discourse: the electioneering dramas in a dysfunctional democracy, the political-bureaucratic-entrepreneurial profiteering nexus, governmental corruption, stifling of social discontent, the politics of war, murder and indeed genocide; and all of this couched in the bizarrely euphemistic posturing of political rhetoric. The film therefore tests the limits of political discourse as it lays bare the contradictions between political rhetoric and political practice in terms of an elaborately imagined political drama in the fictionalized Jan Gan Desh.

The film, per se, is remarkably straight forward: the analogical veneer wears thin and there is indeed no mistaking the kind of readings the narrative renders possible. The film opens with a Brechtian chorus' song and dance wherein the chorus offers exposition as well as comment on the current scenarios. The highly stylized dance performance is an invocation to the chair, the reigning deity of contemporary politics reverently chanting, "*Kursi ki jai*". The chair around which the worshipers gather, interestingly, is less of a chair and more of a throne, a rather telling visual clue on the perceived nature of authority in the Jan Gan Desh, where for all the talk about people, democracy and socialism, the idea of power in practice remains feudal and pre-modern. The metaphor of power is indeed literalized here in terms of the metonymic symbol of the 'chair', as suggested earlier. It is the seat of power, a veritable throne, invested with magical powers. The chair depicted in the presidential office, looks a little ordinary, compared to the ornate throne in the prologue, but it shoves off the new president when he sits in it without first paying customary

regards. It then rattles off a tally of eight principles, the ‘*ashtopadesh*’ that he must honour without fail. The ‘*ashtopadesh*’ demand total surrender and worship of the chair over and above all else. The metaphor reiterates itself: people are dispensable, so are leaders, unless they are prepared to protect the ‘power’ vested in them. The discourse of power thus enunciated establishes an idea of power as a law unto itself concerned with ensuring its own survival. Power is thus externalized as some kind of preternatural entity with absolute agency of its own, with an almost pathological impulse to destroy dissent. As a cinematic ploy, it is quite effective; but as a proposition it is disturbing as it feeds notions of power as completely insuperable, which by definition cannot be challenged.

The political drama around the chair is staged against the backdrop of *Jan Gan Desh*, a nondescript nation state, save a signboard welcoming people to it, in a scene shot among the ruins of what looks like the Old Fort area. The signboard itself is as inane as one indicating directions may be, and the boundaries between this fictitious nation state and the unnamed non-fictional one are literally nonexistent. The narrative at the outset, designates politics as a completely confounding dead end, where political rhetoric and political practice have nothing in common. Political aspirants across the spectrum vouch for revolutions and socialism, a fine sentiment which in any case can be injected as a drug or orally consumed as a pill for all it is worth. The first set of political aspirants introduced in the film belong to an elite politicking club of fashionable youngsters. Young Meera Devi, the only “man in the house” seems like the obvious choice for presidency. She refuses, dispassionately assessing her chances. There is more enterprise in being the kingmaker, and so the search begins for the man who would be the appropriate president, in the sense of being the one who would do the club’s bidding without fail, thereby empowering the club to run the government by proxy. Gangu alias Professor Ganga Ram, a vagrant street performer (*Jamoora*) is literally handpicked by Meera Devi from the road. He is personally dusted down, washed and scrubbed clean, clothed and transformed into a presidential candidate by her. He looks just right. The leadership tonic, revolution tablet and socialism injection render him perfect. No acumen, no training, no preparation required, as long as he can vociferously holler his listeners with the empty political rhetoric, swearing by socialism and delivering elaborate speeches for ushering pro poor revolution. His speeches are outright embarrassing, and that is all right, since it is apparently acceptable for ‘professors’ to be grossly stupid in public life. His stupidity only endears him to the

public which presumably loves the underdog as a political contender. He is the typical village idiot who gets installed at the helm of a political drama all set to unfold of its own momentum.

Thus, the narrative serves a rather twisted amalgam of stories borrowed from the discursive field. One, there is a telling splitting of the persona of Indira Gandhi as the suave kingmaker on the one hand and the completely crass president designate on the other: given that popular political discourse cast her simultaneously as a shrewd politician as well as an accidental upstart. Two, there are resonances of the Syndicate's veiled political ambitions in hoping to stage manage Indira Gandhi. Three, there is also a hint at Indira Gandhi pushing Fakhruddin Ahmed as her presidential candidate. Meera Devi stage manages Professor Ganga Ram's ambition to offset his ordinariness. He is no ordinary underdog: he is someone with a vision of progress. This vision is aptly represented by his party's symbol, a car. Professor Ganga Ram's political adversaries, Seth Bhikari Mal and Barrister Garibdas what with their symbols of horse and cycle are either too archaic or too pedestrian to offer any real challenge for the fancy little dream car. The initial sequences abound in parodies of electoral politics and leadership crises. If Ganga Ram has a dubious 'professor' prefixed to his name to lend credibility, the rival contenders' names are no simple matter either: Seth Bhikari Mal and Barrister Garibdas, both wealthy and influential, seem to have acquired these odd names in order to brand themselves champions of the poor. The 'seths/ barristers/ professors' are not merely thus confounded. They also fall at the feet of the wily godman, Bhagwan Bhajneesh who over and above the electoral process, is supposed to be able to predict the results. The shrill pitched Bhagwan Bhajneesh, alias Guru Gogeshwar; is also Mandrake the magician, and is indeed, many things rolled into one. He is the noted astrologer advisor to those in power, a yoga entrepreneur, a spiritual juggler with tremendous nuisance value, and when situations demand, completely capable of holding the government to ransom.

The inflection of democratic discourse by politically voluble cultural figures with their barely disguised ambitions is an elaborate trope worked right through the course of the film. The odd Godman as an essential mainstay within political culture is hardly surprising. The very idea of a messianic spiritual figure who is right by definition, and unto whom any/ all laws can be bent, is again not an emergency-specific development: the genealogy of such figures lies embedded in the earliest configurations of the nation state and those who 'guided' it. The narrative also stages the



political bureaucratic nexus in detail. In this staging, the absurdity of political gimmickry is matched and even outdone by the rut in bureaucracy. Bureaucracy unhampered by public opinion and unencumbered by the threat of the next election, sinks to abysmal lows in the face of the prevailing political culture. The civil administration is headed by inadvertently Deshpal, a rather evil interpretation of the Machiavellian Sir Humphrey Appleby of Yes, Minister fame. Ingratiating but shrewd, he puts himself to the task of house training the president with remarkable acumen: after all, he has, as he claims, trained several of them. The extended bureaucracy, which appears minimally is nonetheless painstakingly and elaborately introduced. There is the chief engineer who has polished off the funds for 1710 miles long roads, eleven power houses, twenty-seven dams and fifty-eight bridges. The director of complaints, a proud inheritor of Jehangir's legendary toll-bell, is stark deaf. The literature and art director instructs and helps the rich acquire cultural tastes and skills, and has a special talent for instructing monkeys in modern art: so much so for governmental enterprise and indeed art!

The film is surprisingly rich in its inventiveness as it plays out incident after incident detailing the making of the bungling sovereign, the acquiescence of the state machinery and the plight of the people. The most elaborate instance relates to the very first idea that captivates the president's imagination. The President declares that the largest question confronting Jan Gan Desh is of food and hunger, and crumb stealing rats, he opines, are responsible for the food crisis throughout the land. This leads to the nation-wide rat extermination programme, suitably assisted by foreign expertise. It is an elaborate money-making ruse in which all the rats get exterminated in government records. Janata, (literally the public), is the only one who does not understand the deal. She actually kills rats and promptly draws imprisonment and punishment for it, because unknown to her, the wily Godman, miffed at being denied any role in this money-making exercise, declares rats sacred and forces the political establishment to retract its orders by launching a religious stir. The President himself has to placate him with a huge rat cast in solid gold as a penalty for having caused harm to God's favourite creatures.

There is a grim warning in all of this: the everyday life of the democratic *Jan Gan Desh* is an illustration in governmental breakdown. It comprises routinely of corporate greed, money laundering, bribery, scandals, murders, wars and a steady worsening of circumstances for 'Janata'.

Eventually, the Emergency arrives. Here too, it requires legal intervention. A court, acting on the deposition of an opposition leader declares Ganga Ram's election invalid. Ganga Ram, instead of stepping down, declares 'Emergency'. His rhetorical rantings to rationalize the Emergency seem all too familiar: there is a conspiracy afoot to overthrow the government; foreign powers are out to destabilize the country; fascist forces are threatening bloodshed and rioting; democracy needs to be suspended in order to be ensured and so on. His private instructions issued to his own coterie seem familiar too: gag the newspapers; put the constitution in deep freeze; lock opposition leaders in jails; crush dissent; break the judicial system, and whoever and whatever else needs to be broken.

The sequences dealing with the Emergency present a rather evocative tableau of the President hollering away to an acquiescing audience, juxtaposed with photographic images of the excesses committed during the Emergency. These images soon turn into images of protest, and simultaneously, Ganga Ram's hollering gives way to whining, while he clutches on to his shaky chair supported and eventually held aloft by his loyalists, i.e., Deshpal, Ruby Dipsana, Garib Das et al. The quality and content of political decision making, which evoke unmistakable parallels, are rigorously parodied to indicate the abysmal levels of political discourse, and the ceremonial farce that surrounds it. An important visual image from the Emergency sequence is of Janata as she emerges in the distance surrounded by uniformed and armed men who seem to watch and escort her in a highly stylized mechanical march. She is not under protection, merely under surveillance and potentially under dire threat, as most others are. The inherent impulse in the Emergency to destroy and self-destruct, and indeed the film's inability to look beyond it is enacted in terms of the number of deaths that take place in this satirical farce as it achieves ominous overtones towards the end: Meera confronts Ganga Ram and threatens to expose him before the council and wrest power from him: she of course poisons him before this confrontation sequence begins. Threatened, Ganga Ram strangles her. He tells the council a bizarre story about how she had Gopal killed and was trying to cross the border into Andher Nagri when she was shot dead by the border security force, but not before she had shot two soldiers dead. He declares that he shall remain president for ever, but the poison served to him by Meera ensures that he is soon dead.



The film comes full circle with Ganga Ram dying at the feet of his old ‘Ustad’, ending quite like he began, with nothing. His anguished “everything is over” is countered by the master’s fuzzy philosophical “nothing is ever over.” The choral intervention at the end is neither as incisive nor as telling as it is through the course of the film: it is more of a moral lesson, lifted out of Rahim’s couplets, an instruction in kindness and compassion to the poor, the ‘Janata’. *Kissa Kursi Ka* thus explores the constitution of the secular democratic political field, as well as the manner in which it is inhabited. Not surprisingly, it unravels quite as it constructs the idea of the secular democratic modern framework as a naturalized, decontextualized category. This absolutely topical and dated melodramatic allegory successfully enacts the various contradictions inherent in the postcolonial, modern political culture which clearly fails to achieve any kind of clean break from the pre-colonial, medieval and indeed the mythic. It does this in terms of the entire fantastical and excessive spectacle of a political modernity which is many things including its absolute opposite.

The film displays a pervasive distrust of political authority and state institutions alike. Political chatter is dismissed as frivolous nonsense: corporate expertise is also dismissed as complete nonsense. Political culture is seen as a perpetuation of ruses, deceptions and dissembling. The elaborate farce continually reiterates the debilitating political culture where nothing honorable or purposeful is ever even attempted, for there are massive profits to be made by remaining completely useless. The cultivated malaise, the futility of any effort reflects the pervasive moral inertia where even imagining alternatives is no longer a possibility. There is no romance in this narrative of the nation. The verdict as it were is out: there is no meaning, no purpose, just a morbid finality waiting to unfold. The trajectory of the relationship between the polity and its politics in any case begins in the endgame mode. The total withdrawal from the discursive specifics of politics to diffused abstract philosophizing towards the very end is status quoist, yes, but it comes also from the inability to summon any moment in living memory which might offer something different. While the overwhelming sense of resignation is understandable, it is nonetheless disturbing in that its fatalism where it naturalizes authoritarian leadership/ system of governance before which the people are completely powerless, powerless to even posit an imagined alternative.

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