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A CRITIQUE OF A FILM NAMED 'HIDEKO THE BUS CONDUCTRESS'

Dhiren Bhagawati

A Japanese film of 1941 titled 'Hideko the Bus Conductress' is a short film of almost an hour duration. It was directed by Mikio Naruse and the main roles were played by Takamine and Fujiwara. A film without a narrative, a love story, a villain, violence, songs and any explicit message but based on a story that hardly could be sufficient for a conventional image of a film. The film centres round a bus conductress who along with the driver of an old dilapidated bus is struggling to sustain their livelihood by innovating ways to attract passengers. The bus plies between an urban centre and rural areas; the bus conductress resides as a paying guest in a family of the small town. Her bus hardly gets passengers on the road because other fast running and more comfortable buses win away the passengers. Still she would shout "the next stop is...." without attention that there were no passengers to get down on the point. And she would ask the driver to stop the bus for a minute near her home in the village so that she could run to present a gift to her mother carefully brought from the town. She would also call the children of her village and throw some packets of candies to them though the window of the bus. One day when she was back from her work, her house owner lady told her about a radio program on skill - development of bus conductors. She listened to it and decided to apply an idea that she would recite a narrative describing the importance of the spots on her road in order to impress upon the passengers.

Both the driver and the conductress approached the bus owner with the idea. But the owner initially declined the proposal lest it interfered with their primary responsibilities. But when he was told that other buses on the line might apply the same ploy, he agreed to it and suggested too that an expert should prepare the narrative. The bus conductress knew a poet who once left his notebook in her bus. They approached the poet and he agreed to compose the narrative. The poet composed it and instructed her to recite it in a poetic fashion. The poet even accompanied them in their journey to supervise the recitation. Unfortunately the bus met a minor accident on the path causing some scratches on the body. Learning about the accident the owner directed the driver to cause some major damage of the bus in order to claim an inflated amount from the insurance company. But the driver and the conductress in the presence of the poet did not agree to the owner's proposal. When the owner learnt that the poet was a witness to his proposal for claiming inflated insurance sum, he took a u-turn. The bus was sent for repair and a new coat of painting was done. The conductress and the driver were greatly enthralled. On the other hand, the owner negotiated with a businessman for sale of the bus. When the bus was delivered from the garage and it got a shining attractive show, both of them decorated it with flowers and took it on the road for plying. The conductress recited the poem with all enthusiasm and a few passengers who got into the bus enjoyed the beauty of her narration. A group of school going children sang a lyric adoring the coming of the new season. At that time the bus owner completed the process of the sale of the bus without a hiss to the conductress and the driver.

Without a strong story the film is bound together by the actions of Hideto, the woman character. There is nothing extra-ordinary about her, her simplicity, openness and diligence keep the audience enamoured of her. She is a simple village girl struggling for a livelihood but not spoilt by the hazards of her occupation. Another important character was the owner of the bus who counts only the earning from his old bus without any care for the two workers employed there. His lack of basic honesty is exposed in his insistence on the driver to cause heavy damage to

his car after the minor accident for getting hefty compensation. But he was gentle enough to reverse his words in front of the poet. It was natural on his part, given his class character, to sell the car after pretending to refurbish it for the interest of the passengers and satisfaction of his two workers. The poet is an interesting character ready to help the workers in their struggle to improve the working conditions and appreciate their aesthetics. He was nonchalant to the small honorarium extended by the owner of the bus for his composing the narrative. And he volunteered to accompany them in their journey and instruct Hideto in reciting the narrative. He even accompanied them to the bus owner and defended their pleas. The three sets of characters in the film represent the outlook and perception of the three classes of people - the workers, the owner and the intellectual, the third one pursuing an independent world-view but aligning with the working class in their conflict with the owning class. There is no explicit message underlying the film but an 'interpolation' can be deducted that the workers' effort to improve their working conditions yields no result till the owners keep their ultimate control over the means of production. This film is an excellent example where the artist does not create an impression that he has a political message to deliver through his art and pursues his aesthetics independently. Still truth comes out unfabricated.

Purpose of cinema is primarily entertainment. But entertainment which hinges on mere sensual pleasure is bound to be hedonistic; it rises to the status of being ecstatic when it offers another form of happiness. It is happiness in the midst of struggle for creating better conditions of life and an empathic response from the fellow human beings. The beautiful part of this cinema is the striving of the bus conductress to improve her working conditions in order to survive in the struggle for existence. Though she ultimately failed, she gave a long fight and could garner the co-operation of other persons. The audience is overwhelmed with the struggle of the bus conductress, not her defeat at last. The director skilfully uses the images to communicate to the audience what he means to say without extravagant words by the characters. It is a simple and beautiful film.