

**Negotiating the Waves of Change: A Thematic Analysis of  
*Mera Dharam, Meri Maa.***

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**Abstract:**

It has been argued time and again that film, or for that matter, any form of art is rooted in the dynamics of time and space in any given society. Consequently, different forms of art have to grapple with and mirror the changes, demands, vision and the wider currents and cross-currents of particular periods. The present paper is an attempt at understanding the dynamics of change occurring in NEFA (present-day Arunachal Pradesh) as reflected in the film *Mera Dharam, Meri Maa* (1976) directed by Dr. Bhupen Hazarika. The present paper attempts at focusing on the various types of changes taking place in the tribal society of NEFA as represented by the filmmaker while at the same time taking account of the other dominant themes in the film.

**Keywords:** *Change, modernity vs. tradition, patriotism, Arunachal Pradesh.*

**Full Paper:**

Change has always been an inevitable part of human society and history; and yet, how difficult it has been most of the times. This paper begins with the premise that change is hard; and any change that demands a re-orientation of one's socio-cultural moorings is all the more difficult. Any type of change is always marked by the death or the process of discarding a past tradition partially or entirely, and embracing of a new one. Change, therefore, whether for the better or worse, has always been accompanied with apprehension and excitement. It is characterized by pain and the hopeful dreams of a better future. This has made change, particularly social change a favourite theme for authors, poets, dramatists and film-makers. In the wide area of films, the topic of change and particularly its emphasis on the conflict between

modernity and tradition has been rendered several times in all geographical and cultural spaces in different periods of history. It may also be understood here that films, like all other forms of art – whether abstract or commercial or experimental – have their germs firmly rooted in the dynamics of history and society. Even films that allow for inclusion under the categories of science fiction and dystopias are never away from the historical matrix in which the creative artist or the author hails from.

This paper intends to make an analysis of the film, *Mera Dharam, Meri Maa* (1976) to focus on the theme of tradition vs. modernity. This theme is a necessary offshoot of the process of change during any period in history in any given culture. The film was produced by the Government of Arunachal Pradesh and directed by Dr. Bhupen Hazarika. Released on 30<sup>th</sup> of December 1976, the movie went on to become an instant hit because of several pertinent issues that it deals with. The wave of modernity is always accompanied by factors like education, scientific knowledge and the growing spirit of enquiry. In the film, these elements are woven against a story of love, patriotism and betrayal, which the characters in the plot of the film face in the society's movement towards a synthesis between the deep-rooted traditions of the past and the emerging scientific consciousness. The movie is in Hindi and the star casts include Bengia Mala, Nabam Tatu and Tadu Tayung. An interesting fact about this film is that the “negative of the 35 mm celluloid feature on the social structure of the Nyishi tribe had gone missing. It was eventually traced at the National Film Archive in Kolkata after the state IPR had launched a search, acting upon demands from several NGOs and eminent personalities. The film was preserved for 25 years by a Mumbai-based company, to which the state government had paid Rs 83,000.” (*The Times of India*, Nov. 6, 2011)

The cultural setting of the film is the Nyishi community in Arunachal Pradesh (erstwhile NEFA) in the 1960s against the backdrop of social and economic changes taking place in the region. The movie is an attempt at nation-building and inculcation of patriotism in the hills of NEFA (present day Arunachal Pradesh). It highlights the need for progress towards nationhood by the tribals of the erstwhile NEFA while still holding on to their tribal practices and culture. Set in the 1960s, it opens with images of a local bridge, some *mithuns* (*bos frontalis*) and Nyishi men in traditional attire. All these symbolically denote the culture of the people.

Central to the film is the character of ‘Tikababu’, a compounder-like person who stealthily moves for one village to another, vaccinating children by luring them with toffees. He is assigned the task of vaccinating children against small pox. He has to do so with great caution because if he is caught in the act of vaccinating children (or anyone for that matter), he runs the grave risk of being beaten brutally, as is shown once when he is beaten up by the village shaman and his two accomplices as they view modern scientific medicines as a threat to their religious practices. The tribal people also believe that these diseases are the wrath or the work of God, and act to control its outbreak is taken as an offence to their deity. Vaccination is also an extremely new process to them. The film thus, introduces the theme of the conflict between traditionally inherited and scientifically acquired modern knowledge in the very beginning itself. Of course, at the later part of the film, the villagers realize that the child who had been vaccinated did not get affected by the disease and those that were not vaccinated suffered. So, they agree to allow their children to be vaccinated. The change of attitude of the indigenous people towards scientific

innovations is carefully discussed in various scenes. The character Tado uses scientific techniques and his maize cultivation gives better yield leading to higher profits. The change in the acceptance of the people's behavior towards the application of scientific practices is brought about through the medium of education. Needless to say, the conflict between tradition and modernity in this regard is the direct outcome of knowledge and ignorance – the knowledge that comes with education.

It is an acknowledged fact that the acquisition of knowledge through education was a difficult task in the context of societies which were firmly rooted in their customary beliefs since the spread of education in these societies was beset with opposition. The problem faced by people who wanted to spread the benefit of education in societies that were primarily agrarian and/or traditional has been the subject-matter of many films in various languages. Ramesh Babu, the dedicated teacher who had witnessed the 1962 Indo-China War assigns Charini the duty of collecting children to educate them, so that they in their turn can educate the people.

Charini brings Talo and Takar, the two sons of Tado to school. The scene where the teacher carries the children on his shoulder while crossing the bridge is symbolic of bridging the gap between ignorance and knowledge. The children on the shoulders are representations of the new youth of independent India who were being guided by the likes of Ramesh Babu. Similarly, the act of going to school is the act of building up the New and Modern India as envisaged by the leaders of the nation.

It is also important to note that Yalam, a small girl living with her old grandfather, Nikam Aab too decides to go to school. Her decision reflects how the women of the New NEFA were keen on learning and reaping the blessings of education. However, unlike Talo and Takar, she does not get to attend college as she has to look after her ailing old grandfather. Yalam's character brings to the fore the issue of child marriage that is practiced in some tribal societies. Her grandfather had agreed to her child marriage with Talo when she was just one year old against a bride-price of one *mithun* but as she grows up into a young woman, she falls in love with Talo's younger brother Takar. She asks her grandfather to free her from the bond of child-marriage, and the villagers on mutual consent decide that she can be freed from her bond with Talo if Talo and Takar's father gives one *mithun* to Yalam's grandfather. After that, Yalam takes on the task of liberating other women bonded in child marriage.

In the movie, the two brothers, Takar and Talo are antithetical to each other. Takar takes pride in his religious traditions and practices but Talo despises his tradition as barbaric and uncivilized. In the scene where Takar tells his brother of the story of the origin according to their cultural beliefs, Talo refutes it as untrue and discards it as rubbish. Takar wants to be an educator whereas Talo wants to indulge in a luxurious life style that is beyond his reach. Taking advantage of his greed, Talo is tempted by some unscrupulous persons to leak sensitive information and pictures of the defense establishment of his area. Talo's disapproving and dismissive attitude towards his traditional practices leads him to convert into another religion. He even tries to lure other villagers to follow his steps by offering them money. When they learn of his plans, they beat him up. Later Talo physically assaults Yalam and Yakar, who are rescued by Charini.

It needs to be understood here that the spread of modern institutionalized education was perceived as a threat in many societies where it was viewed as a contender to the traditional system of knowledge. The movie does not in any way try to undermine the value of traditional knowledge and practice. In *Mera Dharam, Meri Maa* it is made clear through the conversation between the school teacher and the doctor that their intention in spreading the benefit of vaccination in the hills was never to undermine the position of the traditional priest nor to look down upon traditional knowledge and wisdom. Rather, their wish has been to bring about an amalgamation of both worlds so that the people can reap a 'double benefit' and live a better life free from fear of the dreaded disease. It is worth mentioning here that as the movie shows, the children who were vaccinated recover from the disease while those who were not succumb to it. This is made as a passing remark in a dialogue between two characters, but underlining it is a serious message that perhaps it is now time to embrace the benefits of scientific knowledge towards a better and healthier life. It shows the film-maker's sincere effort towards envisioning a future where one form of knowledge would complement the other, working hand in hand in unison towards a better world. It is also a reflection of the respect that Dr. Bhupen Hazarika had for the traditional culture of Arunachal Pradesh; a fact which is expressed in many of his songs. This can be understood further when towards the end, Tado forcefully tries to win his father to his side but his father explains to him with the symbolical significance of the tree which in spite of the pressure exerted by external forces like the wind only moves its leaves but the roots that are embedded deeply beneath remain unshaken. This explains the deep belief that people like Tado have in their traditions and practices and how it cannot be erased from their self and being. In the ensuing tussle, Talo kills his father with a pistol. Witnessing this, Takar fights with his elder brother while their mother cries and shouts for them to stop. Unfortunately, she also slips from the top of the cliff and dies. The death of the mother is significant as it is symbolic of the death of Mother India, the idea of united nationhood, and how the country, the mother figure suffers when the sons are fighting against each other in the name of religious and cultural differences. The two brothers are reflections of the cultural differences that stand for two different worldviews – the western worldview and the traditional one.

The division of the film's setting into two polarities, i.e., the rural and the urban is in itself an indication of the theme of conflict between tradition and modernity. The rural setting with its attachment to customs, rituals, beliefs and superstitions is indicative of tradition while the urban setting with its motor cars, hotels, restaurants, shops and electronic gadgets is symbolic of modernity in terms of living. Thus, the characters that belong to these two different settings carry the mores of these two different modes of human existence. But it is the characters that shuffle between the village and the city pose the issues of the conflict between tradition and modernity more because they are exposed to both these modes and become the individual sites where the conflict between these contradictory forces is played out. Yet it must be said that the influence upon the individual is finally percolated into the society to which they belong. So, when these young men and women go back to villages, they carry with them the waves of change, sometimes for better and sometimes for the worse.

In the context of the film, acquiring education, which is the most potent tool for the spread of modernity, has been projected as not an easy task. When the teacher in the film wants

to educate children so that they can become the torch-bearers of the tribe in future, he has to do with great caution, as there are very few who understand the value of education in the lives of the people. The parent of the two lead male characters, the protagonist and the antagonist, allow their children to be taken to school only when all the other people of the village have gone to their fields for cultivation. In fact, the major focus of the film is on education and how it can be applied both ways, either for the upliftment of the self and the community or for selfish individual advantage finally leading to disaster.

As already mentioned, the division of the film's setting into the diametrically opposed rural and urban settings symbolizes two different modes of existence – the rural setting with agriculture as its base is symbolic of a self-sufficient economy with the minimum of requirements while the urban setting with its motor-cars, restaurants and shops filled with beautiful and imported clothes and gadgets symbolize an economy which is consumerist and where the fulfillment of one desire leads to another, thereby re-establishing the law of Economics that human wants are unlimited but the resources to fulfill these wants are limited at our disposal. It is this limited nature of human resources to fulfill the unlimited wants that leads the elder brother, who turns into the antagonist, into undesirable paths for making money. It is this lure of modern clothes and gadgets that leads this young man to work as an informer for a foreign nation and is finally blackmailed and trapped. In this sense, he becomes a victim of the enchantment that modern consumerist society holds for the individuals who suddenly come into contact with a culture (since consumerist culture is also a culture) alien to one's native culture. His desire for fashionable, 'foreign' clothes and accessories has been very aptly reflected in the scene when he goes to a shop and hangs around admiring the expensive clothes displayed for sale. It is at this point in the film that he is approached by the agent who had been stalking him and then he is taken and lured into the trap of working against his own nation.

But it would be inappropriate to mark him off as a pure 'victim' as it would exonerate him from his choice of treading the wrong path. In fact, if Aristotle's concept of *hamartia* were to be applied to him (though it is obvious that he is not a tragic hero), his 'tragic flaw' lay in his ambition to enjoy a materialistic life. In one of the scenes in the movie, when he is with his brother by the river, and the younger brother tells that he wants to come back to the village and work for its betterment, he does not like the idea and shouts back that he wants to go away from the village and stay in the town where he can enjoy the comforts of life. The second instance is in a room, presumably a hostel room which he shares with his brother, where his brother tells that he has used the amount he had received as stipend to buy books, but his brother has squandered it on fancy things.

So far the response toward modern clothes and gadgets is seen, it is not that only the major characters in the film are affected by the glamour of modern lifestyle. This is evident even in a minor character like Tardy who acts the role of a rustic fool in the film. He goes to a barber's shop in North Lakhimpur and cuts off his *pudum* which is the traditional way of tying of male hair in the Nyishi tribe. He also gets hold of a pair of old trousers and a torn shirt and walks proudly in them fashioning himself in front of others in a humorous manner. It is equally true that the other characters in the film who come to the urban setting or even when they are in the process of acquiring education in school and college take to wearing 'English' clothes. However,

it has not been the intention of the film-maker to prove the superiority of one type of dressing over the other. Rather, the adoption of shirts and trousers at schools and college is viewed more as a shift towards convenience according to the demand of the contexts. Problem arises when this convenient shift becomes a passion and a compulsion; so much so that it is adopted as a status symbol to mark the rift between the so-called 'modern' and the 'traditional'. Also, the act of Tardy of cutting his *Pudum* and wearing shirt and trousers is an instance of how many people follow fashion whimsically without understanding its essence, sometimes provoking laughter.

Another point which brings the theme of tradition vs. modernity in this film is the clash between the traditional religion and the 'new' religion. In the film this is reflected very clearly during the preparation toward the celebration of *Nyokum*, the traditional festival of the Nyishis. As preparation for the festival begins in full gaiety, the persons who have converted to other religions criticize the preparations and express their displeasure. They do not want to have any connection with it and look down upon it. For them, the traditional and customary meaning attached to the rituals and the sacrifices do not hold any meaning. Drunk with the feeling of embracing a new culture and religion, they criticize all this as meaningless. However, it is not made explicit in the film regarding the other religion into which the people are converting. This conflict between the traditional and 'modern' religion definitely brings about a clash among the people and at several points in the novel, references to the meanings of rituals and to the deities of the Nyishi pantheon (in general, the Donyi-Polo pantheon) is made. One of the reasons why the film-makers put the focus on conversion and its opposition to traditional religion is probably to highlight the fact how many people who have converted are too quick in denouncing their old way of life without having properly understood the essence of both religions.

In the clash between tradition and modernity, patriotism and betrayal emerges as an important theme. The antagonist, as discussed above, gets ready to observe the movement of Indian troops near the border and send information to foreign agents for money, at the end, getting blackmailed and falling into their trap. As can be pre-understood, he also meets his doom after causing much tragedy to the family. The final message that the film seems to send when one tries to relate the plot and the title is culture = mother = nation; thereby sending the message of patriotism and the need to hold to it amidst all changes and conflicts. For the nation to survive, the younger generation needs to keep their indigenous beliefs alive along with scientific developments and modern education. The ending lines of the film "Jab tak Suraj Chand rahega, tab tak hamara Dharm bhi rahega" strikes the keynote of the existence of indigenous religious beliefs. In the movie, it is mentioned that the tribesmen worship the sun as 'Ane Donyi' (Mother Sun) and the moon as 'Ato Polo' (Father Moon). Therefore, the ending lines suggest that the traditional values will remain intact till the end of existence. The message in the movie is that one should neither completely discard the religion that one is born into nor the traditional practices but should utilize education to reflect, understand and adapt as per the requirements and accept the benefits of the fruits of modern science.

The theme of tradition vs. modernity encapsulated in the fervor of social commitment and patriotism thus occupies a central position in the film, *Mera Dharam, Meri Maa*. It stands out as one of the most focused pre-occupation of the film-maker. As a major theme it weaves around itself several issues and questions that were in the air during the 1970s and which continued

much later into the 1980s too. The beauty of this film lies in its emphasis on the need for a synthesis of the old and the new, taking into account the positive aspects of both so that the society as a whole benefits from such adoption. The magisterial task has been left open to the contemporary audience who, in good knowledge of the events around them, was in a suitable position to grasp the message.

**Works cited:**

*Mera Dharam, Meri Maa*. 1976 (film). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xyzMasPz80>

*The Times of India*, Nov. 6, 2011.