



The Politics of the Celluloid Throne: A Critical Study of *Kissa Kursi Ka* (1978)

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ABSTRACT

Kissa Kursi Ka (1978) by Amrit Nahata is one of the most politically charged and vilified films in Indian movie history. The film, which was conceived on the eve of the 1975 Indian Emergency, employed scathing political satire to mock the growing crony capitalism, political sycophancy, and authoritarianism surrounding Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and her son, Sanjay Gandhi. The film's thematic architecture, its symbolic portrayal of Indian citizens, the extraordinary extra-legal destruction of its original master prints, and its lasting legacy as a warning about state censorship and freedom of expression in a democracy are all critically examined in this essay.

Introduction and Historical Context

The tradition of political satire in Indian cinema has historically functioned as a democratic safety valve, offering a populist critique of institutional corruption. Scholars of South Asian media note that satire relies heavily on caricature and allegory to bypass overt censorship while maintaining popular resonance (Shedde, 2015). Scholarship evaluating the post-Emergency release of the reshot 1978 version notes the sobering reality that even under a newly elected non-Congress government, the film remained subject to heavy bureaucratic cuts (Ramnath, 2015).

In April 1975, months before the declaration of the Emergency, Congress Member of Parliament-turned-dissident Amrit Nahata submitted *Kissa Kursi Ka* to the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC). The film was a thinly veiled allegory targeting the administrative excesses, personality cults, and controversial industrial ventures (specifically the nascent Maruti enterprise) of the ruling political elite.

Sensing a direct and unvarnished attack on the regime, the Indian state reacted not merely through standard bureaucratic censorship, but through total annihilation. All prints and the master negative were confiscated and systematically incinerated at a Maruti factory in Gurgaon. Following the fall of the Indira Gandhi government in 1977, the Shah Commission investigated the incident, leading to a landmark legal battle that found Sanjay Gandhi and Information and Broadcasting Minister V.C. Shukla guilty of criminal conspiracy and mischief by fire. Nahata subsequently reconstructed and reshot the film, releasing a second version in 1978.

The director Amrit Nahata who was a three time Member of Parliament from Barmer as a member of Indian National Congress. As a filmmaker he does not possess a strong filmography. Apart from *Kissa Kursi Ka* Nahata has produced and directed two other lesser known films *Sant Gyaneshwar* a religious biopic in 1965 and a crime thriller *Raton Ka Raja* in 1967.

Thematic Architecture and Allegory

"If you're not angering someone, you're not doing satire right." — Jordan, filmmaker.



Fig.1. showing visual situational irony as the board reads *aaram haram hai* (rest is forbidden) emphasizing relentless work and national duty

The scene inside the office of Directorate of Complaints where complaints of citizens are registered functions as a biting piece of visual satire, exposing the complete systemic breakdown of administrative accountability. As Janta (Shabana Azmi) arrives seeking recourse, she is confronted by a guard fast asleep directly beneath a prominent placard reading "*Aaram Haram Hai*" a classic political slogan championing relentless national duty.

The film *Kissa Kursi Ka* operates primarily within the framework of political farce and carnivalesque satire. Instead of adopting a realistic narrative tone, Nahata utilizes broad archetypes to expose the mechanical nature of power. The kursi (chair), which represents political authority as an absolute fetish object that turns common people into dictators rather than as a seat of public service, is the film's main motif. Manohar Singh's character, Gangaram, is an unintentionally simple-minded commoner who, thanks to the manipulation of cruel party officials, is propelled to the highest level of political leadership. His transition from an ordinary citizen to an arrogant autocrat reflects the institutional decline of democratic values. The portrayal of a deaf-mute woman named Janta (The Public) by Shabana Azmi is a brilliant illustration of how the very procedures meant to safeguard Indian voters marginalize, exploit, silence, and reduce them to passive spectators. There is Caricature of Cronyism in the film that takes direct aim at extra-constitutional power centers of the 1970s, mocking high-profile coteries, opportunistic godmen (played by Utpal Dutt), and industrial ambitions driven by political favoritism.



Fig. 2. Close up shot of the devouring State visualizing gluttony

There is a scene where Janta is seen starving, desperately searching empty utensils for a morsel of food representing the absolute destitution and deprivation of the common public under the regime. The sharp cut to a gaping, monstrous mouth swallowing grain and goods establishes a direct cause-and-effect relationship: the citizen's empty plate is directly caused by the corrupt politician's endless appetite. The items being sucked into the mouth symbolize public resources, welfare distributions, and national wealth diverted illegally into private hands. The accompanying evil laughter strips away any remaining pretense of governance, framing the ruling class not as public servants, but as predatory parasites who mock the very people they starve. A visual metaphor in the form of close up shot of mouth has been used to represent rampant corruption.

The scene shifts from standard narrative realism into a visceral, surrealist nightmare. By utilizing a macro-close-up of an open mouth swallowing essential goods (such as grain sacks and household commodities), the film translates abstract state corruption into a horrifyingly literal act of consumption. It is a visual manifestation of political embezzlement—showing that the resources meant for the survival of the masses are literally being devoured by the political elite.

By introducing a gallery of absurd ministerial archetypes—such as an engineer who literally "digests" infrastructure, a deaf director of complaints, and a bureaucrat who reduces art to state propaganda—the narrative exposes a regime where public welfare is swallowed by systemic embezzlement and administrative incompetence. The brilliance of the satire lies in how Meera's glowing introductions inverted themselves: what sounds like praise is actually a sharp indictment, laying bare how a supposedly progressive administration seamlessly mutates into the very corrupt autocracy it vowed to replace.

The scene where the *kursi* is getting introduced functions as a brilliant political allegory by transforming the titular *kursi* (chair) into an active, talking character that embodies the corrupting nature of absolute power. Through its eight cynical commandments; ranging from betraying the public and ignoring criticism to worshipping the seat itself—the chair instructs the newly elevated Gangaram to abandon all democratic responsibility, self-indulgence, and personal accountability. The scene offers a scathing satirical critique when Gangaram's youthful enthusiasm transforms into literal and symbolic subordination: politicians may initially win office in the name of the people, but in the end they become subservient to the institution of power itself, where any degree of corruption is justified in order to protect the throne.



Fig. 3. Survival of the political throne by Gangaram's ministers showing sycophancy and the desperate attempt to secure *Kursi*

This image captures the physical realization of the film's central political metaphor: the desperate, collective scramble to cling to power at all costs. As Gangaram's hold on authority slips, his ministers and loyalists physically swarm around him, clutching onto his body and the chair itself in a chaotic

physical farce. This scene brilliantly underscores the theme of political sycophancy. The chair is no longer just a seat of governance; it has become a fragile idol of survival. The frantic positioning of the followers—clinging to his shoulders, arms, and base—visualizes how an authoritarian regime relies entirely on mutual dependency, fear, and collective desperation among its cronies. When the *kursi* is threatened, the entire administrative machinery is reduced to a pathetic, physical scramble to keep the leader—and themselves—from falling out of grace.

The tragic narrative arc provides a powerful culmination of the film's political allegory, starkly contrasting the absurd farce of the ministerial cabinets with brutal, violent reality. When the Private Secretary assaults Janta played by Shabana Azmi and justifies it by claiming he merely replicated the actions of Gangaram and the ruling elite, the film collapses the boundary between private criminality and state-sanctioned abuse. Exploitation is presented as the regime's fundamental operational logic rather than as an outlier as throughout the film Janta stands in for the silent, downtrodden Indian citizens who are constantly taken advantage of, and disregarded by the ruling class. Her final act of hanging herself is a striking critique of a system that deprives the public of a voice, a remedy, and a way out.

The Politics of Erasure: Censorship as State Violence

The destruction of *Kissa Kursi Ka* marks a dark watershed moment where the boundary between legal state censorship and extra-judicial vandalism collapsed. The regime's anxiety over the film stemmed from its ability to weaponize popular culture against a centralized personality cult. Rather than an active political agent, the electorate is frequently depicted as a marginalized, silent spectator caught between systemic exploitation and institutional apathy (Rothrock, 2024).

When the state burns a film negative, it attempts to perform a double erasure first it destroys material evidence of dissent and second it seeks to erase the collective political consciousness of the audience. The subsequent legal proceedings under the Vohra court and the Shah Commission exposed how deeply institutional machinery could be subverted to protect dynastic and partisan prestige. However, the irony of the film's post-Emergency release in 1978 was that even under a newly elected, non-Congress Janata Party government, the reshot version faced heavy bureaucratic cuts, proving that the impulse to suppress critical art is a systemic hazard inherent to state power, regardless of the party in office.

Conclusion

Kissa Kursi Ka remains far more significant as a historical and political document than as a polished piece of cinematic art. It holds a special place in Indian cinema history as a movie that endured physical martyrdom for revealing the brittle underbelly of Indian democracy. Scholars and moviegoers alike are reminded by studying *Kissa Kursi Ka* that the struggle for freedom of expression is ongoing and that the appeal of the political "kursi" continues to pose a threat to public welfare and accountability. In *Kissa Kursi Ka*, Nahata deployed broad farcical archetypes to dismantle the personality cults emerging around the ruling establishment of the mid-1970s. Rather than constructing a conventional realist narrative, the film utilized grotesque parody typified by the unearned elevation of the buffoonish character Gangaram—to expose the structural fragility of political office.

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