



Progressive Role of CBFC

"Cinema is a mirror that can change the world."

– Diego Luna

Art is a natural instinct of human beings, but the scope of its expression is determined by the state and society, since the state is responsible for preserving a society's cultural values. Cinema – the most recent form of the visual performing arts – is more influential today than other art forms. As it also includes the element of technological development, this technological advancement continues to make it increasingly popular day by day. Even in countries like the UK and Australia, there are institutions like the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) and the Australian Classification Board (ACB) which regulate cinema according to the prevailing social values in their respective countries.

Film censorship in colonial India was formalised with the Indian Cinematograph Act of 1918, which came into force in 1920, leading to the establishment of censor boards in major cities like Bombay, Calcutta, and Madras. However, the main purpose of all this was to strengthen political control that was favourable to British colonial interests, rather than to protect the

creative expression of an Indian filmmaker. Even the word 'censorship' in Indian cinema is a legacy of the colonial government, which sought to control the surge of Indian nationalist sentiments. For example, Indian films like *Bhakta Vidur* (1921), *Raitu Bidda* (1939), and *Thyagabhoomi* (1939) were banned by the British government.

Article 19(1) of the Constitution of independent India is a primary foundation for human expressions, guaranteeing the Right to Freedom of Speech and Expression. However, this right cannot be absolute and independent of social and cultural values, the unity and integrity of the country, public morality, foreign relations, and public order. It is subject to 'reasonable restrictions' under Article 19(2). It was under this framework that the Cinematograph Act of 1952 was passed by the Indian Parliament, which gives statutory recognition to film certification.

The development of the film certification process in independent India was initially aimed at ensuring that films adhere to the prevailing standards of decency and



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morality. Over time, the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) refined its approach to balance constitutional values, social sensitivity, creative freedom and the reasonable restrictions mandated under Article 19(2). The shift from the rigid policy of 'censorship' to the increasing liberalisation of 'film certification' is a symbol of the government's judicious thinking and a broad change in the scope of this institution (CBFC).

Modernisation and Transparency Reforms

On social media, the CBFC is often portrayed as a rigid and conservative institution. However, the Board has shown vitality and adaptability, aligning itself with the evolving expectations of the film industry and cinematic technology.

Recently, the traditional UA rating has been restructured into three distinct categories — UA 7+, UA 13+, and UA 16+ — to foster a more nuanced balance between cinematic content and viewer age. Previously, the UA rating did not differentiate between the content needs of a 7-year-old and a 17-year-old, often leading to cultural discomfort or 'shock' for families watching films together in theatres.

To address these concerns, the Central Board of Film Certification introduced the UA marker system, granting parents the freedom to select content based on the age of adolescent viewers. This reform mirrors the practices of digital platforms, which routinely provide age-based content information.

Through this change, CBFC has attempted to chart a 'middle path'—balancing the filmmaker's creative freedom with the social expectations of parents. Filmmakers now carry a social responsibility to inform audiences in advance about the age suitability of their content.

In 2017, a major policy decision marked a paradigm shift within the CBFC. The principle of 'good governance' was formally integrated into the institution's functioning, and the Board was reimagined as a facilitation center aligned with the evolving needs of the film industry.

To support this transformation, CBFC launched an online e-certification system, offering filmmakers



a transparent and more reliable platform for film certification. This initiative was part of the government's broader vision of 'Ease of Doing Business,' ensuring that the certification process is completed within a defined timeframe of 48 working days.

From the application stage to the issuance of the certificate, every stage of the process has become more transparent—filmmakers can now track the status of their files and know exactly which stage and section the file is in. Except for the Examination Committee, human intervention in other stages has become almost negligible, enhancing both efficiency and fairness.

In August 2019, a redesigned interactive certificate was introduced, featuring a QR code that, when scanned, allows users to access detailed information about the film's certification—particularly its rating—online. This innovation has empowered parents to make more informed decisions regarding the suitability of films for their children.

In times of emergency, CBFC has demonstrated its responsiveness by going beyond its established systems. Even during the Covid-19 pandemic, the Board continued its operations. Through swift and secure digital screenings, it ensured broad participation from committee members and prioritised the interests of filmmakers.

Key Statutory and Procedural Reforms

In 2023, the Cinematograph Act underwent key policy reforms, with the new rules coming into effect on 15 March 2024. The film industry has long grappled



The image shows a sample of the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) certificate. It features the Government of India logo and the CBFC logo. The text is in both Hindi and English. The certificate number is 2A012207201900032 Feature. The film title is DEMO FILM CERTIFICATE (HINDI) (Colour) (3-D). The date is 14/06/2019. The category is UNIVERSAL. The duration is 096.40 min. sec. The certificate is valid for theatrical release only. The examining committee members are listed: Panel Member A, Panel Member B, Panel Member C, Panel Member D, and Examining Officer (E.O.). The name of the applicant is ***** FILMS PVT.LTD. MUMBAI. The name of the producer is ***** FILMS PVT.LTD. MUMBAI. The chairman of the CBFC is Praseon Joshi.

Sample of CBFC's redesigned certificate

with the issue of piracy, which severely undermines both creative originality and financial returns. Even major producers often feel defrauded by unauthorised distribution.

To address these challenges, the Act strengthened the legal framework related to anti-piracy. It now includes strict financial penalties and provisions for imprisonment in cases of unauthorised recording and exhibition—safeguarding both the rights of filmmakers and the regulatory authority of CBFC. Two new sections, 6AA and 6AB, were added to the original Act. CBFC is evolving to play both liberal and regulatory roles simultaneously—facilitating filmmakers through its e-certification system while protecting their interests through punitive anti-piracy measures.

CBFC has recently introduced a significant reform by extending the validity of film certificates indefinitely. Earlier, a CBFC certificate was valid for only 10 years and had to be renewed—much like a passport. Now, unless exceptional circumstances arise, the certificate remains valid without any time limit.

This change has reduced the administrative burden on CBFC and eliminated the need for unnecessary re-certification—whether a filmmaker wishes to re-release their content or not. It allows filmmakers to invest their time and financial resources in new projects rather than repeatedly navigating the certification process.

The central government is committed to inclusive development, and entertainment too must reflect this ideal of public welfare. To make cinematic experiences

more accessible to audiences with visual and hearing impairments, films made in multiple languages after 15 September 2024, are now required to incorporate technical features such as Audio Description (AD) and Closed Captions (CC).

The goal is to move beyond the binary of physical ability and disability, ensuring that entertainment reaches a wider audience. In the near future, sign language will also be included as part of accessibility standards, and every film—whether in one language or many—will be required to comply with these provisions.

Artificial intelligence can help make these standards both cost-effective and scalable. With just a mobile app, any cinema

hall can be made accessible to 'specially abled' viewers. While this may initially place some financial burden on producers, in the long run, it will expand their audience base. As technology becomes more affordable, entertainment will reach everyone. This initiative can also be seen as an opportunity for filmmakers to fulfill their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)—by making cinema inclusive, empathetic, and socially conscious.

Timelines are a very significant factor in the film industry, which can affect both the reach of a film to a larger audience and its performance at the box office. It often happens that producers have to release their films on a specific date or occasion, but any delay in application means they have to wait for the regular screening process. Keeping all these circumstances in mind, CBFC has provided filmmakers the opportunity to avail of a facility called 'Priority Screening.'

Filmmakers are now being offered a 'Tatkal' (urgent) service for film screening, prioritising their release dates. This service is similar to the expedited processes provided by the Railways and Passport office. Filmmakers can utilise this facility by depositing a prescribed fee for the urgent service. This initiative is designed to treat film production entities like an industry, placing their needs and requirements on a priority basis. Currently, 20% to 30% of film producers are taking advantage of this facility, and the certification process has been made significantly faster.

Enhancing Scope & Inclusivity

Following the abolition of the Film Certification Appellate Tribunal (FCAT), the Central Board of Film

Certification (CBFC) appears to be the last autonomous body responsible for film content, with subsequent appeals only possible in the Honourable Courts. However, the CBFC has made its role more democratic and transparent. It is evolving into a crucial mediator between freedom of expression and the diverse national socio-cultural values. To better fulfill this responsibility, the selection of members for the Advisory Panel has been broadened significantly. Members are now selected from various segments of society to ensure proper representation of the country's diversity, including journalists, theatre artists, social workers, homemakers, lawyers, doctors, and engineers.

Furthermore, subject-matter experts—such as historians, legal experts, political scientists, economists, psychologists, and social workers—are invited from outside to join both the Examining Committee and the Revising Committee, depending on the film's content. For instance, as contemporary issues like drug addiction, IT, and financial crimes are increasingly addressed in films, involving experts from these fields in the film certification committees makes the CBFC's deliberation process more equitable, accurate, and responsible. This expands the Board's scope of thinking with specialised expertise, making it more liberal and enhancing its ability to make better, more transparent decisions on even the subtlest facts.

The participation of female members has been further ensured in film screenings that involve violence and suggestive content. This is based on the recognition that women are naturally more sensitive and possess greater expertise in the proper socialisation of the new generation. By incorporating these factors into the film examination process, the entire procedure has been adapted to be more relevant to the changing socio-cultural environment.



The presence of popular figures from the film and creative industry on the CBFC board has maintained the film industry's trust in the institution. The current Chairman, Prasoon Joshi, is a renowned lyricist, scriptwriter, and advertising *guru*. Other members are also related to theatre, writing, direction, and acting. As a result, the CBFC has transcended being merely a government body. It has evolved into an expert institution that understands the social impact of creative content and assigns appropriate ratings.

In the future, the need to physically bring a DCP (Digital Cinema Package) for film screening will be eliminated. Instead, the film will be transmitted online via e-content delivery. A plan to secure and preserve this content in a safe digital space after the screening is also slated for implementation within the coming months. Additionally, a digital signature scheme is in its final stages of development. This initiative aims to further accelerate issuing of final film certification.

Unofficially, the film certification process of the CBFC has garnered further importance due to the prevalent OTT platforms. While OTT content is generally outside the CBFC's purview, these platforms have begun expecting CBFC certificates from film producers. This suggests that even independent online entertainment mediums like OTT platforms believe in the CBFC's liberal working style and equitable judgment.

The government is trying to make this institution more 'film industry friendly' through technological advancements and a change in its approach, moving its role from a regulatory body to one of dialogue. However, it is now the duty of the film industry to place the idea of 'Nation First' above mere entertainment and prioritise social unity and cultural values. CBFC completely respects creative freedom, but filmmakers also have a responsibility to remember that art has historically fulfilled its duty towards society's cultural values.

The impact of a film is far broader and deeper than nuclear energy. Just as nuclear energy, when used positively, can improve the lives of millions, but when used negatively, it can destroy civilisations. Similarly, films can positively give a society new dreams and inspire people to think about and attain those dreams, but they can also lead to the cultural decline of society in a negative way. The filmmakers must realise that no art can be above the national interests. The CBFC is perpetually committed and dynamic in its effort to achieve harmony between creative thought and national interests. □