

Mainstreaming of India's Art Cinema in the 21st Century

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Abstract

In any cinema, there exists two streams of filmmaking – mainstream or commercial or fantasy cinema and parallel or art or realistic or indie cinema or third cinema. Hindi cinema, one of the largest entertainment industry of the world, is no exception to it. Films in the last two decades have demolished the wall that separated the two genres creating a new cinema where content, rather than the stars, music, and action, has become the king. This research paper is an attempt to retrace the journey of the indie cinema in becoming the mainstream. It will primarily be based on analysis of the cinematic content generated in the Hindi cinema since the beginning of the 21st century.

Introduction

Commercial or mainstream cinema, in any language, creates an imaginary world where the viewers can escape for close to three hours. Its primary objective is to entertain audience and help them forget their daily trials and tribulations.

The characters of the mainstream cinema tend to be larger than life. There is glitz, glamour, song and dance, action, melodrama, romance, suspense, sex and titillation. The mainstream movies are generally longer than two hours and relatively cost much more. Their primary motive is to garner profit at the box office.

This cinema in India can be divided into the following sub-genres: love stories or romance, musicals, action, melodrama, suspense, horror, family drama, historical, biopics, war movies, anti-war movies, and ultra violent movies. An important feature of the Indian mainstream cinema which makes it different from the other world cinemas is song and dance. The action in Indian movies is frequently interrupted by songs. At times, the songs are an intrinsic part of the plot and take the story further.

A majority of the Indian filmmakers churn out commercial movies. The most popular directors of such cinema are Rohit Shetty, Aditya Chopra, Anil Sharma, Kabir Khan, Tigmanshu Dhulia, Imtiaz Ali, and Subhash Ghai. Salman Khan, Akshay Kumar, Ajay Devgan, Shahrukh Khan, Aamir Khan, Hrithik Roshan, and John Abraham are some of the most popular stars of India's mainstream cinema though Aamir Khan and Akshay Kumar also

do movies every now and then where social issues hitherto taboo are raised. The emphasis in this kind of cinema is producing films that can get into the 100 crore club.

Commercial cinema is meant to earn profit in single screen theatres and multiplexes in India and abroad. It does not so much care about the comments of the film critics.

In comparison, art or parallel cinema focuses on themes of exploitation, realism, feudalism, caste atrocities, hunger, injustice, draught, society, and politics. Such films are made for discerning audience, international film festivals and critical applause more than raking in the mollah at the cinema hustings. Art cinema arrived in India in the 1950s after Satyajit Ray, one of the greatest filmmakers in India and the world, made *Pather Panchali*, a Bengali film, under the influence of *Bicycle Thieves*, the Italian movie which introduced neo realism on the large screen.

Though there were Hindi films which depicted social realism earlier too (Guru Dutt's *Pyasa*, Bimal Roy's *Mother India* and *Do Bigha Zameen* to name a few) there existed no formal demarcation between the commercial and art cinema then. Besides Ray, two other Bengali filmmakers Ritwik Ghatak and Mrinal Sen contributed majorly to the growth of the parallel movement in India. Shyam Bengal, Govind Nihlani, N Chandra, Goutam Ghose, Mira Nair, Mahesh Bhatt, Saeed Akhtar Mirza added to the serious content by making art films in Hindi in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s.

The art films were greatly supported first by Film Finance Corporation (FFC), the earlier avatar of National Film Development Corporation (NFDC), and later by the Development Corporation. The institution has till now funded over 300 films in various languages including Richard Attenborough's *Gandhi* and Shyam Benegal's *The Making of the Mahatma*.

The parallel cinema in India suffered a jolt in the early 1990s due to a plethora of reasons. Firstly, the financing of the mainstream films by underworld became a fashion. Secondly, the rising popularity of television hugely cut down the profits in Bollywood. And thirdly, piracy and economic turmoil caused by liberalisation became a headache for the filmmakers.

Review of Literature

Dr. Itishri Sarangi says the screening of Vittorio De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* in the first Film Festival of India in 1952 by the Film Division made many filmmakers realise the futility of monotonous and senseless song sequences. She claims subsequent setting up of Film Finance Corporation (FFC) by the central government promoted directors who made films outside the commercial circuit. This, according to her, led to the revival of the 'New Indian Cinema' that got better response from the overseas audience. Dr. Sarangi says this cinema was different from the commercial cinema.

The Parallel cinema 'follows quite a different trajectory. Rather than disseminating a unified picture of utopian Indian culture, parallel cinema sought to generate some kind of insight into Indian life by capturing the experience and contradiction of the society in transition by focussing on small segments of Indian reality but explore their complex layers of meanings' (Sarangi, 2013).¹

Dr. Sarangi calls parallel cinema in India ‘a sort of intellectual movement that was non-commercial in content. “It was a substantial handling of the commercially viable things that focuses more on acting posturing real life situations that deserves attention for its serious themes with the ability to accept events and situations as they really are” (Sarangi, 2013)ⁱⁱ.

Dr. Sarangi lauds the writers/directors of Indian parallel cinema for giving proper space to women. “The directors like Mira Nair, Shyam Benegal, Aparna Sen have always focussed on mature women characters in their movies. Their movies pave a way for feminism as whatever presented in their movies also capture the mind of the audience, thus such movies works for the development of women and their changing role in the Indian society. Indian women have come a long way both in reel and real life. They are no more submissive, suppressed, subjugated, subservient or objects of desire. They are rather portrayed in different shades to her identity as an individual” (Sarangi, 2013)ⁱⁱⁱ.

Dr Sarangi’s research looks at the parallel cinema from feminist point of view. It may help one in finding out the individual identities of women characters but throws no light on what has led to the mainstreaming of the art cinema in India.

Mihika Sengupta says there was a clear divide between second cinema and first commercial cinema till 1980s. But in the late 80s onwards, there emerged films which combined commercial aspects of filmmaking with social messaging. She names movies like Mira Nair’s *Salaam Bombay* (1988), Nagesh Kukunoor’s *Iqbal* (2005); Aamir Khan’s *Rang De Basanti* (2006), *PK* (2014), *Dangal* (2016); and Meghna Gulzar’s *Raazi* (2018) which, according to her, were not only successful at the box office but also had a social message (Sengupta, 2019)^{iv}.

Sengupta’s research, however, talks about only half of the story. It talks about how the process of mainstreaming of third cinema in India started but misses many other films made in the last one and a half decade which have completed the process.

Analysis

The art cinema maintained a distinction till late 1990s when Ram Gopal Varma’s crime noir *Satya* (1998) tried to break the binary. This was the first time that a filmmaker portrayed the underworld from up and close with all its grittiness, pretensions, and frailties. For every character of his, except his protagonist Satya, Varma had a reference point. He met actual gangsters and their connections to understand the trappings of the Mumbai’s underbelly.

Kallu Mama’s character, according to him, drew from a beer bar owner in Borivali who had connections with the underworld and whom he had met when he was scouting for shooting location. “When I walked into his room, I was startled to see a huge amount of cash lying on the mat in plain sight. As I tried to persuade him to let me use his location, just the sight of all that money lying around made me feel very uneasy. After I came out, I wondered why the sight of that money had made me feel uneasy. After some thought I figured out that it’s normal reaction to hide the valuables when a stranger comes visiting, but by not hiding the money the beer bar owner was sending a subconscious or conscious signal to me that he didn’t need to be scared of anyone because of who he was. Then later on when I met him while I was shooting in that area, he was very friendly; he looked like a different person altogether. Then I realised that the first time I met him, he was trying to play up to an image which I thought I had of him.....This is what I used for Kallu Mama’s character in *Satya*.

When the builder comes to meet him, Kallu Mama pretends he is a heavyweight gangster when he is actually the clown in the gang, which people come to know later” (Varma, 2015)^v.

Bheekhu Mhatre’s character on the other hand drew from a gangster about whom Varma had heard from from Ajit Devani, the former secretary of actress Mandakini who was supposedly close to Dawood Ibrahim once. “I met this guy called Ajit Devani who had been Mandakini’s secretary and because of her one-time liaison with Dawood, he had reportedly known and interacted with some of the gangsters belonging to the Dawood Ibrahim–Chota Rajan gang when they were still together. He recounted to me an experience he had when he met a gangster whose brother had just been killed by the cops. His brother had also been a gangster. When Ajit Devani went to meet him, apparently the gangster was abusing his brother’s dead body for not heeding his advice, resulting in his death. That startled me as I have never heard of a person abusing a dead body. Then I thought to myself that a gangster lives on power and the brother by not listening to his advice and getting himself killed, had taken away his power to save him and that’s what brought on his anger. It was his grief which manifested as anger. I took that as the soul of Manoj Bajpai’s Bheeku Mhatre character and the incident inspired the scene where Bheeku Mhatre abuses Chander after his death” (Varma, 2015)^{vi}.

Varma’s *Satya* not only made a star out of Manoj Vajpayee but also became a blockbuster. Subsequently, there was a lull for about eight years. Dibakar Banerjee’s first film *Khosla Ka Ghosla* (2006) became the next milestone in the journey of art cinema towards relevance at the box office. The film, shot at a 40 days schedule with small budget, narrated an exceptional story of very ordinary people, had a dash of realism, and had no stars. It told the story of Kamal Khosla (played by Anupam Kher), an average man in Delhi, who is defrauded of his hard-earned plot of land by an unscrupulous real estate dealer Kishan Khurana (Boman Irani). Every character in the movie is relatable. The unassuming film made with a small budget and small cast and crew made the cash registers ring. Banerjee followed it up with *Oye Lucky! Lucky Oye* (2008) and *Love Sex Aur Dhukha* (2010), two other surprise hits which were made with shoe-string budgets and unknown actors. Banerjee claims to have been enthused by Ram Gopal Varma, Ketan Mehta and Shyam Benegal. His *Shanghai* (2012), though not as successful as his earlier films, was also a film where the story was the star. It exposed the politics-criminal nexus and emphasised on individual integrity to stem the rot. In between, Benegal, the old warhorse of the parallel movement, delivered a hit through *Welcome to Sajjanpur*, an unpretentious story told through small actors. He announced to the world half a decade later that the much-talked about divide between commercial and alternate cinema had blurred due to the maturity of the audience in accepting different types of films. “Earlier, there was an unfortunate divide between parallel and commercial cinema. But films are designed to entertain the audience. I feel the divide has blurred, now that the audience for these movies has matured. This is a good sign. The audience has become more accustomed to different films” (Pant, 2013)^{vii}.

Benegal has realised that the ultimate goal of art cinema should also be to entertain the audience. “Some films serve entertainment on a plate, while others have multi-layered content and may be a little difficult to appreciate. But, in the end, films should be entertaining, have a take-home quality and enrich you” (Pant, 2013)^{viii}.

Anurag Kashyap’s *Gangs of Wasseypur* (part 1 and 2) in 2012 made sure that the parallel cinema gets entrenched in the mainstream. Set in the coal mines of Dhanbad in Jharkhand, *Gangs of Wasseypur* was promoted by Kashyap as an ‘item film’. The two part film, that depicted the story of a three generations of criminals, was shot as a single film measuring a

total of 319 minutes. It not only minted almost double the amount spent on filming but also featured at the Cannes Film Festival during the Director's segment at the festival in 2012. As well, it figured among Guardian's 100 best films of the 21st century.

Low budget films which became hits in the last five years (2015-2019)

Serial Number	Name of the film	Year of release	Budget (in crores)	Worldwide gross (crores)
1.	Tanu Weds Manu Returns	2015	17.5 crore	148
2.	Pink	2016	29	108
3.	Jolly LLB 2	2017	83	182
4.	Shubh Mangal Saavdhan	2017	25	64
5.	Stree	2018	24	171
6.	Badhaai Ho	2018	29	219
7.	Raazi	2018	38	193
8.	Bala	2019	32	131
9.	Dream Girl	2019	36	195
10.	Article 15	2019	30	91

Source: Boxoffice India

The success of *Khosla Ka Ghosla* (2006), *Bheja Fry* (2007), *A Wednesday* (2008), *Oye Lucky! Lucky Oye* (2008), *Love Sex Aur Dhaukha* (2010), *Tere Bin Laden* (2010), *No One Killed Jessica* (2011), *Tanu Weds Manu* (2011), *Gangs of Wasseypur 1 and 2* (2012), *Fukrey* (2013), *Jolly LLB* (2013), have introduced a new crop of directors and actors who have their ears to the ground and can churn out stories the common man can relate to. In last five years, there has been an abundance of such films which were not only set in realistic locations but also made money. These included *Talwar*, *Toilet Ek Premkatha*, *Padman*, *Article 15*, *Andhadun*, *Super 30*, *Veere Di Wedding*, *Bareilly Ki Barfi*, *Luka Chhipi*, *Raazi*, *Sonchiriya*, *Newton*, *Stree*, *Badhai*, *Jolly LLB 2*, *Bala* and many more. Filmmakers like Anurag Kashyap, Dibakar Banerjee, Anubhav Sinha, Zoya Akhtar, Anand L Rai, Meghna Gulzar, Amar Kaushik, Neeraj Pandey etc. are the flagbearers of this trend which seems to be here to stay.

Banerjee acknowledges this. "Today there is a new generation of filmmakers doing exciting work, and may be in some small way our generations of filmmakers, who started about 10-15 years earlier, have something to do with it. I would like to be a party to this situation rather than just react to it" (New Indian Express, 2020)^{ix}.

Conclusion

The multiplex system has helped the thinking filmmakers and actors who would like to experiment and reach out to the discerning audience in the Indian society. Suddenly, there is more space available to films with newer themes and fresh stories.

Saurabh Shukla asserts, “You have to understand the line between parallel cinema and commercial cinema has blurred. It is a misconception that the films that have newer themes are not working. Films like ‘Barfi’, ‘Jolly LLB’ and ‘Jolly LLB 2’ all these movies are made on fresh stories and they are making good money” (PTI, 2017)^x.

It is an established fact now that films like *Khosla Ka Ghosla* or *A Wednesday* have a better revenue model than big starcast mainstream movies. Moreover, “the content driven films have a longer shelf life and have a repeat audience” (Hiremath, 2019)^{xi}.

Hindi films in the last two decades have definitely obliterated the wall that separated the mainstream and parallel genres in Bollywood.

ⁱDr Itishri Sarangi, *Parallel Cinema*, 2013, Contemporary Discourse cites from Valicha, K, 1998, *The Moving Image: A study of Indian Cinema*, London, Sangam Book Limited.

ⁱⁱDr Itishri Sarangi, *Parallel Cinema*, 2013, Contemporary Discourse

ⁱⁱⁱibid

^{iv}Mihika Sengupta, *Revisiting Third Cinema: The 80’s* cites from Ghose, A. (2018). *105 Years of Indian Cinema: Third Cinema in Crisis*, Frontier. Retrieved February 10, 2019

^vRam Gopal Varma, 2015, *Guns and Thighs*, Rupa Publications

^{vi}ibid

^{vii}Aditi Pant, August 08, 2013, *Hindustan Times*; Lines between parallel and commercial cinema are blurring- Shyam Benegal

^{viii}ibid

^{ix}New Indian Express, 19th April 2020, *The Match hero is a product of patriarchy: Bollywood Filmmaker Dibakar Banerjee*

^xThe Indian Express, April 29, 2017; Saurabh Shukla: *The line between parallel cinema and commercial cinema has blurred.*

^{xi}SavitaRaaj Hiremath, 31 March, 2019, *Changing Phase of Indian Cinema From Commercial To Content Driven Movies*, Business Standard



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