

Indian Popular Cinema: A Narrative of Cultural Change

K. Moti Gokulsing and Wimal Dissanayake

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The text titled *Indian Popular Cinema: A Narrative of Cultural Change* was originally published in 1998 written by K. Moti Gokulsing, a social scientist and Wimal Dissanayake, a film historian. In this text, the authors attempt to review the nine decades of Indian popular cinema and examine its immense influence on people in India and its diaspora. It also considers the 'Industry status' of Indian Cinema, its unique elements and economic equations.

Indian Popular Cinema: A Narrative of Cultural Change provides for the first time a historical and cultural survey of popular, artistic and regional Indian cinema categories and introduces readers to its distinctive forms. The text is divided into two parts with nine chapters and focuses on Indian cinema industry which is the biggest film-producing country in the world. Like any other art form, cinema is also a cultural artifact. The authors state, "Cinema not only reflects culture, it also shapes culture". As far as Indian cinema is concerned, it has promoted modernization, westernization, urbanization, new ways of life, a sense of pan-Indianism, secularization, the emancipation of women and the rights of minorities, etc. Tracing the impact of Indian cinema, it has created a permanent impact in the world of fashion, on Indian psyche as it was able to generate public opinion on various issues and also reflected the social, cultural and political contexts.

According to Moti Gokulsing and Wimal Dissanayake, there are six forces that have had a profound impact on the growth of Indian Cinema. They are,

1. The two epics – *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*
2. Classical Indian Theatre
3. The Folk-Theatre
4. The Parsi Theatre of the 19th Century
5. Hollywood
6. Musical Television (p 17)

The second chapter of the text is titled as “The Distinctiveness of Indian Popular Cinema” and it deals with topics like the difference between Popular and Artistic films, the concept of ‘Indianness’ of Indian cinema, the different genres associated with Indian cinema, various themes and subjects associated with Indian cinema, the notion of Artistic films, the contributions of Satyajit Ray and other Artistic filmmakers.

Popular vs Artistic

In the next part, the authors list the differences between ‘popular’ and ‘artistic’ cinema in Indian film industry. Around 90% of films released in India belong to the category of Popular cinema while the remaining 10% is Artistic films. The popular films genre is appreciated by the masses while the art films are more realistic and inspired by Neo-Realistic methods. The popular cinema is highly melodramatic, musical and carries moral messages. On the other hand, art-house films follow a different pattern in theme, style and technique. Popular cinema is considered as a form of mass entertainment while artistic films are popular chiefly among international circuits.

Indian popular cinema has a unique blend of elements and it is known for its ‘vividness’ and it was hugely instrumental in shaping the “popular imagination” (23). According to the authors, “...Indian popular films constitute a distinctively Indian form of mass entertainment” with a combination of fantasy, action, song, dance and thus making it a “spectacle”. But the Indian art-house films take a parallel track as it tries to explore the complex and multifaceted experiences, the depth of psychological motivation and above all, presents a social vision.

Major Genres associated with Indian Cinema

Wimal Dissanayake and Gokulsing lists the different genres associated with Indian cinema. They are,

1. Mythological films (fantastic narrations of ancient stories)
2. Devotional films (shows diverse forms of union with divinity)
3. Romantic films (erotic passions against social conventions)
4. Stunt films (focus on action and physicality)
5. Historical films (fanciful stage settings and costumes)
6. Social films (explores social problems and issues)

7. Family melodramas (explores tensions and upheavals within the matrix of the family)

Cultural Significance of Indian Popular Cinema

Indian popular cinema carries a true Indian cultural imprint which makes it exclusive when compared to films produced in other countries. The films have played a major role in shaping the popular Indian consciousness and have injected notions of heroism, duty, courage, modernity, consumption and glamour into the minds of the spectators. The popular themes and subjects of Indian cinema are the recurrent romantic love, tale of male friendships, theme of motherhood, renunciation, fate, respect for tradition, social injustice, etc. All these factors provide Indian cinema a “characteristically Indian outlook” (24).

Different Genres – An Analysis

The Genre of Mythological Films

In such films, the director depicted characters and events from the past taken from epics and scriptures. The films portrayed actions and interactions of Gods, demons and superhuman powers. The filmmakers used epics to tell and retell stories to illustrate the ancient times and also to suit the contemporary contexts. Mythological films formed a base for themes like the feminity of Sita and villainy of Ravana (image of a woman suffering like Sita in later movies and the villains and his actions akin to Ravana).

The Genre of Devotional Films

To explain the genre of Devotional films, the authors cite the example of the film titled *Sant Tukaram* (1936) directed by V. Damle and S. Fatehlal. The film narrated the story of the poet-saint named Tukaram and his transformation through divine interventions. *Sant Tukaram* is often considered as a moralistic narrative with all the elements included to attract the common populace.

Sant Tukaram is a Marathi film, produced by Prabhat Film Company based on the life of Tukaram (1608–50), a prominent saint and spiritual poet of the Bhakti movement in India. Vishnupant Pagnis did the role of the protagonist and it was the first Indian film to receive international recognition. The film was popular in many international circuits and it was selected as one of the three best film of the world at the Venice Film Festival. It set a pattern for the devotional films to follow and is regarded as an archetype.

The Genre of Social Drama

Films which belong to the social drama were prominent right from the beginning of Indian Cinema. The filmmakers often presented the social issues in such films and they were treated with a characteristically Indian flavor. Such creations are often defined as films with a social message set in the framework of melodrama.

Wimal Dissanayake and Gokulsing point out two films to illustrate the genre of social drama. *Achhut Kannya* (Untouchable Maiden) released in 1936 was directed by Franz Osten and it narrated the story of love between a Brahmin boy and an untouchable girl. The film dealt with serious subjects like the theme of casteism and untouchability based on the ideals of Gandhi and Nehru. Though the subject was thoughtful, it was set in the frame of a popular film which attracted the masses. The film *Bombay* (1995) written and directed by Mani Ratnam also belongs to this category. The film explores the relations between Hindus and Muslims in India and it deals with issues of extremist thinking, xenophobia, etc.

The Erotic/Romantic Genre

The films belonging to this category are extremely popular from the beginning of Indian cinema and the critics are of the opinion that this genre actually shaped Indian culture to a great extent. In India, the norms of the Censor Board are strict and hence the filmmakers cannot depict overt sexuality like their foreign counterparts where the rules are liberal. To compensate this, Indian films convey sexuality through suggestions, signs and symbols in the forms of songs and dance sequences (rain dance is an example). Along with sexual undertones, the Indian filmmakers also employ a huge dose of sentiments to attract the public. The themes of majority films belonging to this group are based on the archetypal 'Laila-Majnu' and 'Radha-Krishna' traditions. The authors cite two examples - *Barsaat* (1949) and *Andaz* (1949) for this genre.

Barsaat (Rain) was directed by Raj Kapoor and it narrated a triangular love story. It was a run-away hit and it contained all the elements of a true romantic film. *Andaz* (Style) was directed by Mehboob Khan and it too had the story of a love triangle. The film featured Dilip Kumar and Raj Kapoor together along with Nargis as the heroine. Both these films emerged as blockbusters that year.

Characterization in Indian Cinema

Indian popular cinema uses a number of identifiable characters like the hero, heroine, villain, etc. The characters are repeated with similar traits as the filmmakers find it as a

formula to achieve success. An example of such a creation is the image of the mother. Indian cinema presents 'mother characters' as caring, they remain steadfast in her devotion to the family and always uphold moral values. In the text, the authors suggest the image of the mother in films like *Deewar* (1975) and *Mother India* (1957).

Deewar directed by Yash Chopra is often considered a ground-breaking cinematic masterpiece. The 'mother character' in *Deewar* is presented as a suffering figure dithering between her two sons – one being a Police Officer and the other being a smuggler. In *Mother India* too, the mother-figure is depicted as a steadfast character. At the end of the film, Radha, his mother, shoots Birju, her son due to his atrocious deeds and her character is often described as a perfect example for an enduring mother.

Other features of Indian Popular Cinema

According to the authors, there are a few other features of Indian popular cinema like the triumph good over evil (at the end of the film), importance of restoring social order, presenting a combination of entertainment and moral edification and above all, the presentation of evil as central to cinema (*Kismet*, *Awaara*, *Sholay*, etc.).

Artistic Films

On the other hand, Indian art-house films are often realistic and ethnographic. The filmmakers of such films always try to capture Indian reality and they keep away the glamour and glitz of popular cinema. The films which belong to this category are screened in various international film festivals. The main exponents of Artistic films are Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak, Mrinal Sen, Tapan Sinha, Adoor Gopalakrishnan, G. Aravindan, Shyam Benegal, Girish Karnad, Girish Kasaravalli, Shaji N.Karun, Buddhadeb Dasgupta, etc.

Satyajit Ray

Satyajit Ray was an Indian film director, writer, and illustrator born in West Bengal. Ray is regarded as one of the greatest filmmakers of world cinema and the leading figure of Indian parallel cinema. He directed 36 films, including feature films, documentaries and short films. *Pather Panchali* (1955) was his first film followed by films like *Aparajito* (1956) and *Apur Sansar* (The World of Apu) (1959). These films together are known as *The Apu Trilogy*. Ray received numerous national and international awards including the Bharat Ratna and the Academy Honorary Award. Ray's films are true depictions of Indian rustic life and often regarded as textbooks for others to follow.

Adoor Gopalakrishnan

Adoor Gopalakrishnan too is another popular figure in international circuits who has taken Indian cinema to an international level. His film *Elippathayam* (Rat Trap, 1981) narrated the story of a man who is unable to accept the social changes. He often follows the Neo-realistic tradition like Ray and is considered as a doyen of Art-house films. His other notable films are *Anantharam*, *Mukhamukham*, *Vidheyan*, etc.

Themes and Techniques in Realistic Cinema

The realistic/artistic films usually follow a traditional narrative with fewer gimmicks (eg. eye-level camera angles) and explore themes such as alienation, clash of tradition vs modernity, Westernization and its impact, the role of the artist in a consumer society, the subjection of women, etc.

Conclusion

The second chapter titled, “The Distinctiveness of Indian Popular Cinema” of the text *Indian Popular Cinema: A Narrative of Cultural Change* has provided a broad outline of the features of Indian Cinema and the reasons for its distinctiveness. The authors conclude by saying that Indian cinema is unique in terms of theme, content and style and thus it is different from other world cinemas. Dissanayake and Gokulsing write, “It is a world that bears the Indian cultural inscription” (33).