Understanding Meaningful Cinema

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Introduction: Cinephilia
Cineastes say that films help the audience to reflect on the divergent cultures and justify the presence of multi-cultural, multi-ethnic audience in view of this divergence. The language of cinema continues to evolve in a living tradition and the filmmakers trace the ever-changing language of this medium from the silent era to the talkies, from the days when screen went from black and white and got colorized. Emotional appeal, subtlety in its communication and most importantly throwing a new light on the world, as we know it counted a lot to the audience. Filmmakers now work across the spectrum of media including painting, novels, theatre and opera. In the global cinema, in general, the production has become more accessible today, the qualitative aspects have sadly given way to quantity and so, films often miss emotional and spiritual richness. The world is a closer place today. Perhaps it is cinema that helps to blur the boundaries.

The concept of film as a commercial art form started in fifties. The fifties and sixties are generally known as the golden period of Indian cinema not only because masterpieces were being made, but because of the popularity of the songs of that era. One of the distinctive features of Indian cinema is its narrative structure. Even if the films of India are influenced by Hollywood, it remains different in its narration style with infinite digressions, plots within plots and deviations. Over the years, interplay between modernity and tradition in its different appearances has attracted the Indian filmmakers. Indian new wave cinema emphasized on impulses of creativity and Indian cultures that can attain universalism with its Indianess.

However, the late sixties brought in a new change that could be attributed to two major factors. In the first place, the Film Institute of India was set up in Poona (now Pune) in 1961 that gave the students a first-hand glimpse of the best in world cinema, and taught them the power of the medium for conveying strong messages even as they entertained. Another factor was the generation of filmmakers, which was young. It was told by their elders that Independent India would become a Heaven on Earth. Now when they have come of age, they discovered that their parents’ dream had remained shattered. They have seen corruption and breaking up of the joint family norms, due to increasing costs of living, replacing the British tyranny. This aided the students from FII (later named the Film and Television Institute of India) to make films which directly or indirectly exposed the hypocrisy and malpractices in society.

This backdrop gave birth in the late sixties to what was then as Art or Parallel cinema and filmmakers like Shyam Benegal, Adoor Gopalakrishnan, Ketan Mehta, Buddhadeb Dasgupta, G. Aravindan, Gautam Ghosh, Aparna Sen, Govind Nihalni, Girish Kasarvalli, Mani Ratnam and others began making films with strong social messages. The popular cinema also had its share in this, with filmmakers like Basu Bhattacharya, Basu Chatterjee, Hirshikesh Mukherjee, Gulzar, Sai Paranjpye and several others using the lighter format to convey strong messages. This period also witnessed a major resurgence in regional cinema, partly propelled by the fact that the Government of India instituted the Indian Panorama section in the International Film Festival of India and also because Doordarshan, for some time, showed these films at prime-time with subtitles. The average Indian for the first time realized all over the country that films were being made in around twenty languages and dialects.

It is generally believed that the film industry is full of glamour, glitz and wealth. Nevertheless, nothing could be farther from the truth. On a conservative estimate, the film industry employs over one million people directly or indirectly, a large majority of them being involved with distribution and studios. A rough economic structure of the Indian film industry shows an investment in all sectors of near about Rs. 50,000 crores, which includes the investment in studios, film producing units – entertainment and documentary, distributors unit, cinemas – permanent and touring, laboratories, recording studios, distribution and expenditures in hardware, exports and imports.

The country has approximately 13,000 cinema houses of which around 9,000 are permanent. The weekly cinema audience numbers over 15 million, though this number is fast declining because of the higher rates of tickets of the multiplexes. However, there have been some positive changes in the past few years. The Government of India has realized that cinema is the goose that lays the golden eggs. Cinema not only got recognized as an industry, but also became entitled to institutional finance and insurance with amendments.
in the relevant laws. Though the Central Government’s attempt to bring cinema from the State List of Constitution to the Concurrent List failed, it did manage to get the entertainment tax reduced by setting up a group of Information Ministers from different states who demonstrated that reduction of tax in fact led to increase in revenue. Through the Group had recommended 60 percent as the upper limit for entertainment tax, the attempt is to take concrete steps to check video piracy, and to promote multiplexes with lesser seating capacity instead of the large cinema houses which seldom managed to hold 60 percentage of its capacity, except in the first three or four days of release.

India today hosts an annual International Film Festival of India, held in Goa as an annual competitive fete. An International Children’s Film Festival is held in Hyderabad every second year, alternating with the Mumbai International Film Festival for documentary, animation and short films. The Government gives National Film Awards every year on the basis of decision taken by independent juries, The Indian Panorama started in 1978 provides a showcase from which films are chosen for participation overseas.

Networking Money
The investment in the banking or all other service sectors has now seemed to seize after the rise of petroleum and gold. People now show more interest in putting money on the luxuries of life. What used to be a prestigious art in the early days of cinema has now a matter of great importance to the entrepreneurs, involving investment of millions of dollars on the projects. These projects, unlike any other booming industry investment sectors, yield returns in shares or debentures making the money making machine run smoother. Multinational companies, which had once been interested in medicines, real estate, etc. has also started putting their money in the hands of the entertainers. The entertainers have been finding means to display their art of work; but once channelized for a particular purpose, they act as puppets. The big boss tends to use them for their own branding issues. Thus, it makes cinema as one of medium for establishing the brand image of their organization in front of the audience. Cash starts flowing for the production and distribution of the image the corporate wants to portray in front of the audience at large. The final product yields revenue from the advertisers, who again are, in larger terms, attached to the source, which had been responsible for the making of the product. The circulations lead to an assured growth in their liquid assets.

Money lost for the production of the film added more to the name of the person responsible behind it. As the renowned corporate houses are vouching their money for the sake of their own publicity, they started investing in the small-scale film projects, which requires less money to be made. In that case, they were enabled to put in money in more than one film at a time, which catered a wide range of audience. This also decreased the risk factor on getting the money back from the market. Unlike any other production mechanism, if any one unit fails to bring back the desired profit from the market, there is no looking back as the other might lead to a jackpot.

Shri Venkatesh Films of Bengal is now a tycoon producing the maximum number of films a year. Starting from the scratch, they have now their own distribution chain along with a tie-up with multiplex owners of West Bengal. With the best of the filmmakers in their cards to make the films for the audience of all categories, from the rural audience with commercial ‘masala’ for mere entertainment to ‘meaningful’ filmmakers who cater to the people with intellect and critics. With a recent tie up with another leading Bengali channel for satellite release of their films and repeated screenings, they have turned themselves to be the money making machine.

The same is the case for the production of films in Mumbai, the so-called hub of Indian cinema. Bollywood, the decisive element which has the largest share of production of Indian cinema and catering them to the largest number of audience in the world, has shown a strong tendency in producing the films that does not highlight the muscle power but the strength of the brain behind the making. Examples can be cited of the productions done by Amir Khan Productions that produces only selective films. Aggressive stories, with strong critical reception is been made based on a shoestring budget, but yielding a market profit in double or more. Films like 3 Idiots, Dhobi Ghat or Talaash are few examples of this kind. Dhobi Ghat, an ‘unusual’ film was made with a budget of rupees eight crore that created a business of Rs. 15 crore. 3 Idiots had been a remarkable example of this kind. Made on a budget of only 34 crore, the film earned 205 crore at Indian box office and another 175 crore worldwide, thus totalling 380 crore that is more than ten times the input. The figures prove that the tendency of the audience and hence, the market has leaned more towards the extremes, be it meaningful cinema or the mainstream strength revealing films like Bodyguard, Dabangg or Ek tha Tiger. The later named projects spend an enormous amount of money on the star value, exotic locations and technical brilliance.

Technology vis-a-vis Creativity

Research Paper

IJRAR- International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews
The business aspect of the recent filmmaking influences the creativity. The most widespread element had been the coinage of the term 'item dance' in the contemporary films. The trend of having the item dance in films had been playing a significant role since 1960’s. With its advent in the Telegu cinema, it has been widely popular in Bollywood with Helen, Zeenat Aman and many others. It mostly allured the youngsters who formed a big part of the audience. The marketability of the cinema as a product took off with the pin-up images on the hand drawn posters. 'It is thus a vehicle for commercial success which ensures repeat viewing’\(^1\). Recent development in the incorporation of item number has shown in the impact of ‘star’ as a item. In the golden era, the item numbers were used in the situations to highlight the immoral points of the narrative. However, nowadays, with the impact of global television, the item numbers are used to signify the film. The eye-catchers or teasers concentrate in and around the item dance that may or may not be a part of the screenplay. They are used just to invoke the target audience to view the film in the theatres.

The saleability of a film is what matters most now for the filmmakers. The filmmakers are pressurized to invoke a satisfactory feeling amongst its audience. The financiers of the film are willing to see the film as a success that leads to more revenue earned while selling the satellite telecast rights of the film to any television networks or DVD distribution rights. For that reason too, the filmmakers are mostly compelled to hire the top-notch actors for the film, as their face value matters. The compromise happens in hiring the best people for the sections who are entitled to take the film from script to screen, the technicians who work behind. The best of the works of the technicians thus remain in the darkness of the lab, whereas the x-factor in the star makes the other film a grand success in the box office.

In the next few years, the audience of cinema saw the intrusion of digital functions, leading to havoc shift in the technicalities behind the complete working periphery. The workflow changed leaving an impact on the content, with the option to the creators to change the visual and aural impact from the originality of the manual system. The tangibility of the media was no more effective with the introduction of the high definition cameras and editing setups. The people started experiencing crisp images, tight cuttings and crisp sound on the digital screen. The film started becoming an experience rather than a journey.

In India digital filmmaking started late, but it was soon very popular because of its economic expanse. The filmmakers have the power of shooting and re-shooting the scenes as the cost of celluloid nullified. Real experimentation started in the audiography of a cinema as it included digital surround sound technology in the theatres, making the theatre more ‘real’ in aural aspect. Sound came from everywhere, in accordance to the need and effect designated to the cinema. Indian cinema got a special weapon in its hand as the song and dance got more and more lively to the audience.

Not only had the technology led to the change in the aesthetic cinema. The formal aspect of filmmaking involving the aristocratic aura of the people attached to it has been going through a situation of massive bankruptcy. The concept of small budget films with guerrilla style of shooting and editing resulted in the birth of new age filmmakers. The Kolkata based Q, director of Tasher Desh (Fiction), Love in India (Documentary) and many more films earned money by directing television commercials. He gathered friends around him and opened a new production house of his own, naming it “An Overdo se Joint”. His recent works had been highly appreciated in various international film festivals all over the world, giving the Bengali film industry a lift.

The resultant effect has led to interest of film enthusiasts from all corners of the world. International financiers and co-producers are showing more and more interest in funding projects with local essence. Vimukthi Jayasundara, young director from Srilanka, had established his quality of work with his films like The Forsaken Land and Between Two Worlds. He is also the only recipient of Caméra d’Or at Cannes Film Festival from Srilanka. His recent work, Chatrak (Mushroom), a realist story with urban isolation due to social conflicts, has been dealt with surreal narrative flow. The borderline disorder between the fiction and non-fiction is another strong character in the story. Similarity can be found in the works of few other contemporary filmmakers like Aditi Roy and Srijit Mukherjee. The way of story-telling is more often a narrative told or seen through the eyes of a character. This kind of plot structuring makes the audience react to the content freely, regardless of the Hollywood three-act structure of the screenplay. As in case of Aditi Ray’s film Abasheshey – the End of it All, the complex story of relationship between a mother and son is revealed in a non-linear way to build up the character of the mother through the letters she writes to the son. In Srijit Mukherjee’s psychological thriller Baishe Srabon, the protagonist becomes the antagonist and the revelation happens through another passive character in the screenplay. This kind of international

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An approach in story-telling, where the system of breaking the rules of the game between the hero and the villain nullifies, has slowly crept into the local market and had been humbly accepted by the financers for experimentation.

Prospective Film Industry

Hence, for any business including films, there is need for the right revenue model, which can give creativity a chance to breathe freely. Creativity opens new vistas and makes people think and work towards better goals. In India, National Film Development Corporation had ensured the visibility of another kind of cinema that would not be able to find distribution outlets. It had also helped filmmakers who are not up to the commercial curve. Bollywood, which may be referred as commercial Indian Cinema, is a contemporary expression of the lowest common denominator in the nation, but does not have the capacity to be the main vision. According to the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting information, Rs. 400 crore had been set aside for the National Film Heritage Mission as the government wants greater introspection into matters like archiving as the film industry celebrates its centenary this year. View of the world that Mumbai representing Indian cinema is gradually shifting to the regional cinemas that are having strong representation in global market. After years of marginalization, when Indian cinema (but, not Bollywood) is getting the fame in the world arena, it is also getting into the challenge because the nation does not have the benefit of a formal education system in the mass level. There should be an understanding of the fact that one can only be moved by the hardship of his own life and the combination of images and sound depict the effect on the screen. The audience need to be respectful even if it is not satisfactory to one’s personal tastes. Both commercial cinema and censorship must be negotiated with judicious reasons. In case of Bollywood, the objective should be to improve the industry with intelligent films much like the manner of filmmakers like Satyajit Ray, whose films are watched by significant audience.

In India, ‘Bollywood’ may be commended for being faithful to the Indian aesthetics, mentality and narrative traditions. Art must promote beauty, but wisdom is above beauty. Wisdom is what makes films more balanced, but not always appreciated by public. Therefore, there is a sign of stagnation everywhere. Several Indian filmmakers who have ventured the road of a different kind of cinema have lamented the lack of distribution or exhibition facilities for such ventures. These filmmakers in fact want the government to step in to reduce taxes and create an environment for art theatres to come up in the country. However, being a state subject, the central government has been unable to take independent decision in this regard. Whereas, most countries have film policies to guide the industry and professionals, but there is no such policy in India as cinema is a state subject. Nevertheless, it is true that a film with a good story will ultimately find viewers who believe in strong story telling.

In a world where few read, films are incredibly important. Books written by various authors address the problem of the slow death of society with the decreasing rate of the reading ratio. The consensus leads to the fact that there are still some new ways of reading in a techno-driven world even as young people prefer playing video games, listening to their i-Pods, talking on cell phones and chatting on social networking websites and adults lollled before the idiot box. Though several filmmakers think that there is no connection between the two as the language of cinema is different from the language of literature. Films must have something to say like some in-depth stories. For these reasons, the films are considered implausibly valuable in today’s scenario.

References