



An Exploratory Study of the Resurgence of Parallel Cinema in India through OTT Platforms

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ABSTRACT :

This research focuses on the concept and aspects of parallel cinema and how OTT has made the revival of these movies possible due to their accessibility, mobility and diversity. Parallel cinema is known for its symbolic representation of a society which can be considered as a serious content focusing more on the socio-political elements and realism aspects.

Parallel cinema, a term simply synonymous with art cinema, or the cinema which flows against the conventional boundaries of commercial and mainstream aspects, is a movement started in India around the 1930s. Parallel cinema gave India acclaimed filmmakers like Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak, Mrinal Sen, Shyam Benegal, Guru Dutt and many more. This cinema borrowed heavily from the Indian literature of the times, hence became an important study of the contemporary Indian society, and is now used by scholars and historians alike to map the changing demographics and socio-economic as well as political temperament of the Indian populace. Right from its inception, Indian cinema has had people who wanted to and did use the medium for more than entertainment. They used it to highlight prevalent issues and sometimes to throw open new issues for the public.

However, post 1980s, the prime focus was given to the 'entertainment value' of films and the realistic or parallel cinema took a backseat. The rising costs and the failure of distribution of these films were also some of the major reasons of the decline of this cinema. The present study tries to understand how this cinema was reborn and how it has made its mark on the OTT platforms; with a qualitative approach providing case studies of some of the most popular cinemas available and how well they lay a foundation for the revival of art or parallel cinema.

Key Words: Parallel Cinema, Art Movies, Entertainment, Indian Cinema, OTT

History of Cinema in India :

Cinema is considered to be an important art form; it is a source of popular entertainment and a powerful educating medium. In fact, each stage in film making is a part of art, be it story writing, cinematography, lighting, costumes, editing, music, dance, dialogue in short everything that forms a part of pre-production, production and post-production. It is one of the most admired media of communication. Cinema has always been a subject of cultural communication as well as the various aspects of society including the political, civic and economic state as well as their ongoing issues and challenges.

Post its inception as a soundless film by Lumiere Brothers in 1899, a soundless film called Raja Harishchandra was produced in 1913 in India by Dadasaheb Phalke. During the initial days all the movies were 'mythological' theme based as people were religious and the directors created magic on screen using these themes. The 1920's saw the rise of several film directors, trying their hand at making silent Indian movies. It was in 1931, when the first sound film Alam Ara directed by Ardeshir Irani released, its success inspired directors in South India and various other parts of India including Bengal to also start producing films. The name Bollywood was a combination of Hollywood and Bombay (Mumbai) which was at the heart of Indian film production. Songs and music had a huge influence in making a film famous and last ever as classics in people's mind.

Satyajit Ray founded the Calcutta Film Society in 1949. India got its stalwarts in directors like Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, Ritwik Ghatak, Guru Dutt, Raj Kapoor, Dev Anand, Chetan Anand, Mehmoob Khan, V. Shantaram, Bimal Roy, Kamal Amrohi, K Asif and many more. Many actors and actresses saw the stature of success. Apart from entertaining people, films were the ideal media to educate masses about all sorts of issues. Events in Indian history were reflected in films, from partition to Independence, social problems to evils, love stories all saw success at box office. To cater to the global audience, films showing the lives of Indians living abroad and how they coped in Western societies were brought into the Bollywood scene. In 1990, new actors immortalised stories and characters. There were a lot of 'masala movies', which were a blend of action, drama, thriller, romance, drama, songs and brainless comedy. Today Bollywood is on power in terms of technology, acting, animation, stunts etc to its western counterparts.

Indian cinema is evolving since decades and reaching new heights over the years. Despite thematic peculiarities and drawbacks, social conditioning and cultural inhibitions, it has proved its merit in technical perfection, artistic evaluation and directorial innovations. While filmmakers like Anurag Kashyap have brought into light the genre of noir and crime, directors like Rajamouli have experimented with Avant Garde movies. In the recent decades, the filmmakers have given more attention to the social dimension of the medium, particularly its use in mobilizing the masses through effective messages on serious issues such as social justice, environmental safety and a more rational and scientific approach to human problems.

Objectives of the Research :

1. To study the origin and decline of Parallel Cinema in Indian Cinema History
 2. To explore the resurgence of similar movies in the form of parallel or art cinema through OTT platforms
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The Origin of Parallel cinema in India :

“Cinema’s characteristic forte is its ability to capture and communicate the intimacies of the human mind.” ~ Satyajit Ray

Parallel Cinema, a film movement with its origin in the state of Bengal in the 1950s was an alternative to the mainstream or the commercial cinema. It was inspired by the Italian Neorealism, after Indian New Wave, French New Wave and Japanese New Wave followed. The movement was initially led by Bengali cinema and produced internationally acclaimed filmmakers such as Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, Ritwik Ghatak and others. It later spread across and gained prominence in other film industries of India. Parallel cinema is known for its serious content, depiction of realism and naturalism; it was in accordance of the socio-political setting in the country. Art cinemas have borrowed content from the Indian literature. They concentrated on a better content rather than unwanted song and dance. These films are termed as “Offbeat” or “The Art House Cinema” or “Parallel Cinema” or even the “Indian New Wave”.

Realism in Indian cinema dates back to the 1920s and 1930s. The very first example under this genre can be of the 1925 silent classic film – *Savkari Pash* (Indian Shylock) by filmmaker V. Shantaram. Shantaram who portrayed the protagonist character himself, has written a story of the constant tussle between the capitalists and the working class. This movie is one of the very first depictions of realism and Shantaram has been accoladed with many such movies in his filmmaking career.

Satyajit Ray was the pioneer of the genre “Indian Parallel Cinema”. *Pather Panchali*, which won the “Best Human Document Film” at the Cannes Film Festival, is one such gem under his contribution which highlights the social evil through an emotional story. Parallel cinema of 1940’s and 1950’s was influenced by Italian and French Cinemas. Satyajit Ray’s debut classic movie *Pather Panchali* was influenced by Italian Vittorio De Sica’s *Bicycle Thief* and French filmmaker Jean Renoir’s *The River*. We see a comeback of Parallel Cinema in 1980’s into the mainstream with the movie *Ardha Satya* was based on a short story *Surya* by D.A. Panvalkar.

According to Dr. Itishri in her research on ‘Parallel Cinema’, “The birth of Parallel Cinema is the Indian new wave, is a sort of intellectual movement that was non-commercial in content.” The author talks on how parallel cinema had a unique way of posturing real-life situations which deserve attention. The serious themes which are a mirror to the society are brought into highlight and such cinemas can be a study of relation between state and society.

Characteristic Features & Its Distinction from Commercial Cinema :

The Parallel Cinema covers the contemporary socio-political problems of the country. Realism is core essence of these films. These films are not a cup of tea for the masses, and are expected to change the thought processes of the audience which is mostly the elite crowd. Mostly, there are no idols or stars in art movie. The ideas or the story can change or shake the minds of the audience. Unlike commercial cinema, the budget of these films is very minimal, so the story rejects the ‘Bollywood formula’ over-the-top scenes and acting, make-up, costumes, etc.

Commercial cinema has humongous budget, superstars, a great technical team, outdoor shoots, huge sets, great dance and song sequences. The new stint of commercial cinema reaching 100 crores is catching up. It has a mix of romance, drama, suspense, action, comedy and a lot of songs and dance. In Indian mainstream cinema, songs have a special cultural significance be it for any action or any emotion of a particular scene. These are mass entertainers, which might or might not have any relevance to realism. This kind of a cinema is an actual entertainer and meant for the audience have a cathartic experience of escaping the reality and entering a fantasy world of heroes fighting against evil and winning at everything.

According to the author on ‘filmlifestyle blog’, here are some major differences that exist between parallel and commercial cinema:

- **Context** – The director who is the author of the story expresses his own agony with the society and its evils which the common man has to suffer. These types of movies try to connect with the audience on a deeper level and are more relevant to them because the characters are common people and not some over-the-board star cast.
- **Genre** – The genre being realism or realistic drama, the story usually revolves around socio-economic or political issues. The form of narrative adopted here is non-linear storytelling, revolving around the protagonist’s life and how it is affected by events taking place around him/her.
- **Presentation** – Parallel cinema is mostly experimental and it differs from commercial or masala movies in terms of the film maker’s vision, presentation, theme and style.

According to one article in *Hindu* titled “Parallel cinema” the author has pointed out that many mainstream filmmakers have called out on parallel cinema as a ‘complaint box cinema’ because of its fixation on social issues. Many of these issues enlist capitalism, corruption, patriarchy and religious intolerance. Many of them which are more radical in nature with a strong political ideology also deal with modernization and class welfare.

The same article also talks about how parallel films are characterised by their rejection of popular forms, especially the song and fight sequences and have an affinity for rural settings or working class. While they mostly opt for method actors, there is also a significant use of experimental cinematography and editing with close-ups and lengthy sequences, there is very little music and the colour palette is also fixed with a toned-down feature. Through the years, these films have almost always been funded by state-owned institutions.

In this research paper titled “Indian Popular Cinema: A Narrative of Cultural Change”, 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 statuses of

Indian Cinema, its unique elements and economic equations. The realistic/artistic films usually follow a traditional narrative with fewer gimmicks (e.g., 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.

In another research paper titled “Storytelling of reality in realistic cinema ‘Court’ (2014) with the perspective of Bazin’s realism film theory”, the researcher has tried to incorporate Bazin’s definition of the theory for the regional movie Court which also received the National Award under the Best Film category.

Realism film theory can be defined with some easy points that; things should be shown as things are actually in reality. (Prabhakar, 2019) The author has written the perspective of Bazin’s theory and how he believed that the photograph is recreation of the reality and experiences in the cinema. Likewise, in a realistic cinema the subject and treatment should be real. The actors should also be non-professional with minimal camera movement and real locations. All these are some major characteristics of realistic film as per the realism film theory.

The Decline in Parallel Cinema :

Pradeep Krishen, an Indian filmmaker wrote in one his essays on Parallel Cinema, titled ‘Knocking at the doors of public culture: India’s Parallel Cinema’ (1991) – “New and New Wave Cinema were the terms first used in late 1960s and early 1970s, but ‘New’ness has a habit of wilting with the passage of time, and though the term is still heard today, its resonance is weakening.” In this essay he further talked about the inadequacies and accomplishments of the film movement through the 1970s and 1980s.

By the early 1990s, commercialization and rising costs had a negative impact on the art films. There was no guarantee on the investment returns and these films also became less popular among the filmmakers. Another major reason for the decline of parallel cinema was that the National Film Development Corporation of India had no backing for the distribution of these films. The mainstream exhibition system did not pick up these films because these films did not have the so-called ‘entertainment value’ that they were looking for. Thus, it left to a few Film Societies to screen these films; that too on a single screening basis. The advent of television and its popularity saw the film society movement decline. Gradually, the government reduced the patronage of such films, for they had only unseen films to be shown on their balance sheets.

There was a constant tussle between parallel and mainstream cinema. Parallel cinema rejected the worldview and pattern of mainstream cinema thus never finding acceptance in the production, distribution and exhibition system. Due to this, most of the audience or the young elitists missed out on offbeat films made by the present generation filmmakers like Sushant Mishra, Murali Nair, Amitabh Chakraborty, Ramchandra PN and many more. Thus, these filmmakers never garnered a large audience.

Many great filmmakers attempted to bring the Parallel Cinema back in the trend most notably Ram Gopal Varma (Satya, Company), Mani Ratnam (Bombay, Roja, Yuva) and most recently Anurag Kashyap (Black Friday, No Smoking, Gangs of Wasseypur) and Vikramaditya Motwane (Udaan, Trapped). But still, the Parallel Cinema never reached the glory days of “The Golden Age of Indian Cinema” (1940- 1960).

One has to pause for a while and look back to know whether Indian cinema has ever been treated at its modernist or foundationist level. In fact, there exists an Indian cinema, which is largely dependent on “modernist” (Bauman, 1991; Smith, 2001) perspectives of India, free from the impositions of the post-critical and post-colonial perspectives. (Murthy, C. S., 2015) This research heavily talks about how Bollywood films, though commercial in nature fail to adopt “modernist” tendencies like innovative production techniques and incorporation of cross-cultural flows to establish the uniqueness of Indian cinema.

The question also remains whether the tastes of audiences are changing due to the increasing presence of independent/alternative films in film festivals. The Indian New Wave of the late 1960s to 1980s was more visionary because of public funding and a certain ideology of nation building. The future of parallel cinema may remain uncertain because of lack of funding or an ecosystem but many filmmakers continuously strive to maintain their artistic practice and evolve in the globalised and interconnected world of cinema.

Commercial films, big or small, have a way of reaching to the audience. But a film with a social message may not always work with the masses. Sometimes it seems that social issue-based films are made for awards or an elite audience. Many such films are then graced by the elite film festivals. Some of these films are too serious and filled with facts and harsh reality that the audience feels emotionally burdened with the films content as it can sometimes be depressing. Young and enthusiastic film makers have also begun to experiment with themes and scripts without losing sight of its commercial aspects.

Movies like Swadesh, Rang De Basanti, Taare Zameen Par, Munna Bhai MBBS or Peepli Live, have effectively conveyed a social message without becoming dull or boring. A film with reality can be disturbing and it may not have an influence but reality in smaller dosage can be retained longer. Thus, we can revive the golden years of parallel cinema with a pinch of commercialization.

Research Methodology :

Qualitative research holds the understanding of a phenomenon or situation or an event by exploring the totality of the situation. So, a closer look at the overall study of parallel films and their revival on the OTT platforms is relevant in this paper. As the qualitative research is more of research based on substantial and extensive literature, it is also supported by the popular research method of data collection which is case studies. Case studies of films (originally released on OTT platforms) such as Bulbul, Qala, The Great Indian Kitchen, Axone and Chintu ka birthday and their structure, features, characteristics will be discussed to further prove the resurgence of the independent arthouse films.

Discussion and Analysis :

The rise of over-the-top (widely known as OTT) platforms, is the equivalent of a theatre experience at the leisure of the audience. With these media

services that can be easily accessed through mobile phones, laptops, smart TV, and other audio-visual devices and an internet connection the audience has gained unlimited access to entertainment sources worldwide. One of the biggest boosts that the OTT platforms achieved was during the pandemic period of COVID-19, with Indian and International content, it played an essential role in the information revolution and development. While many of these are monumental changes, they are only in essence; missing out on the fundamental changes that these platforms have brought out in the universe of storytelling and cinema.

OTT has not only been a boon to most of the filmmakers of India, offering a diverse range of storytelling options; but also, to the lesser-known actors and the audience with the choice of consumption of their favourite genre of cinema or show. The most important factor is that OTTs do not have to follow a “normal commercial theatrical format”, making it a unique platform for a diverse arena of audience. The star-studded Bollywood stars like Shah Rukh Khan and Akshay Kumar delivered their biggest successes in the physical theatres but now you can see a new range of lesser-known actors like Nawazuddin Siddiqui and Pankaj Tripathi garnering the same amount of success and love on the OTT platforms.

With a thorough gaze on the extensive literature available it is evident that the parallel cinema or art movies are not very popular among the mainstream distribution and exhibition platforms. High ticket prices in multiplexes act as another hurdle. This, in turn, determines the kind of audiences—mostly middle to upper middle class—that have access to these films. Despite media attention on international film festivals, and Indian films being regularly selected or winning awards, there is still not enough information available to emerging filmmakers on how to access these spaces.

Indian films do tend to miss out because of the tough competition among auteur-driven films from several countries and importantly, the question of pandering to film festival gaze and complex interactions between the various stakeholders of the circuit on a geopolitical stage. But this has changed with the emergence of various streaming platforms which have provided a new direction to reach audiences. Such platforms, however, gradually move towards major production houses and bring worthy serialised ‘content’.

Resurgence of Parallel Cinema through OTT platforms :

Due to some effort from directors and story tellers, parallel cinema has seen a resurgence in the last decade, especially in the last few years with the rise of OTT platforms. Parallel cinema is rising from the background and catching the eyes of current generation movie goers. Some contemporary alternative films also draw from this legacy. These movies though drawing from a legacy are vastly different with a drive to reach regional as well as international audience taking into account the globalized circumstances and a need for international or foreign funding sources as well.

This research has highlighted such cinema as case studies with their unique depiction and treatment which in turn can be qualified under the term of parallel/art/independent cinema.

Bulbul & Qala :

Anvita Dutt, director of both the movies, is also a writer and lyricist herself. The director, a realist herself, has portrayed some of the most harsh, horrifying truths of the society through her movies, released and distributed directly on the OTT platform - Netflix.

Set in 1800 Bengal Presidency, the film’s opening scene shows us a little girl and her feet dangling from a treetop (the feet of a woman are an important metaphor in the film). Dutt has provided symbols and motifs throughout the film in the form of feet, peacock feather and the bold red and green color palate. The most fascinating thing about this movie is what the filmmakers call the art of *mise-en-scène*. *Mise-en-scène*, in simplistic terms, is the stage design and arrangement of actors in scenes for a theatre or film production, both in visual arts through storyboarding, visual theme, and cinematography, and in narrative storytelling through direction. The camera movements are shifty which give a sense of continuous action and a first-person narrative technique. This film perfectly throws light on the patriarchal whim and the different confinements that a woman has to face in this society.

Qala, on the other hand, is a structural and paradoxical musical/psychological drama. The haunting past of Qala has been told in flashbacks i.e., a non-linear pattern much like the horror drama *Bulbul*. The dramatic cinematography produces an enchanting effect of seduction, danger, music as well as melodrama. There is a lot of symbolism hidden in the objects like milk, mercury, repeated dialogues hidden amongst the parallel tension in the protagonist’s head.

The movie has in a chaotic non-linear setting effectively portrayed mental health, business of ‘movie industry’ as well as the privilege men have in a patriarchal society.

The Great Indian Kitchen :

Films that question patriarchy are often criticized because they’re mostly made by men, and it is argued that rarely do they do justice to the subject. The Great Indian Kitchen can however be an exception. Directed by a male filmmaker Jeo Baby it delves deep into patriarchy and realistically portrays it onto the screen without any over-the-top scenes. Without picking sides, the film quietly, in the most traumatic fashion, gives the audience a glimpse into the life of a married woman in India and her role in the kitchen. The film’s most beautiful but haunting shots take place in the kitchen. As the camera zooms in on the food being prepared, all one could think of is how delicious it could taste. But as the camera pans on the women who are making those dishes, working in the most horrible conditions, it’s a stark reminder of the reality and how patriarchy has enslaved women.

This Malayalam hit though released theatrically garnered much of its audience on the OTT platform – Amazon Prime video according to the Hindu article - ‘The Great Indian Kitchen’ Tamil movie review: A necessary remake to show patriarchy its place’. Even though the Malayalam original was consumed by a large audience on OTT platforms, a Tamil version might reach its intent to a newer set of audiences — and that’s more than enough to make current-day practitioners of patriarchy sit up and take note. (Ramanujam, 2013)

Axone :

Axone, one of its kind is not just a famous dish from Nagaland, but also one of its kind, realistic, slice-of-life dramedy. Axone, pronounced 'Akhuni', is a particularly pungent ingredient used in Naga cuisine. Axone is a small film with big ideas, deftly directed and delicately performed. This film perfectly and realistically portrays the 'North eastern' which is used as a collective term in the movie as deliberate choice against the racial slurs and streets of Delhi. This movie with its real locations and a fairly non-professional cast brings out the cultural diversity of the country as well as the racism which is not nearly visible or heard but is subtly present in the society. The film doesn't feel the need to over-dramatize its social commentary, simply witnessing the tremendous difficulty that these characters are forced to endure, just to be able to celebrate a happy occasion, is enough to get the point across. This movie was originally distributed by the OTT platform – Netflix and is present under the Independent/Arthouse Genre list on the platform.

Chintu ka Birthday :

The movie directed by duo Devanshu Kumar and Satyanshu Singh is a shocking chronicle of an Indian family stuck in war-struck Baghdad sometime in the early 2000s. A simplistic story of a birthday party going haywire, it adapts to an intimate and claustrophobic setting of home which is a mirror to the war-zone itself. Still the use of space and people in each setting is impeccable through a series of narratives and incidents going on in the house. The cinematography is another aspect which elevates the impact by capturing the limited surface area to work around. There are character reflexes in the form of tilt scenes effectively bring out the chaos in the film yet refreshing enough to fill the gap in the scene.

The film, originally meant for theatrical release was released on the OTT platform – Zee5 during the pandemic, getting a much higher audience due to the quarantine.

Conclusion :

With a thorough review of the above films as case studies and carefully studying their structure, presentation and style, it is evident that in the most recent times the filmmakers have experimented with the art of filmmaking. Due to the time limitations, the researcher has studied only a few movies, but others which can be studied as independent or art movies are very well present on the OTT platforms. To name a few, *Cargo*, *Ramprasad ki Tehrvi*, *Ludo*, anthology films like *Paava Kadhaigal*, *Lust stories and Ghost stories*, *Gulaabo Sitabo*, *Fourth River*, *C U Soon*, *Lootcase* and many more; these films have tried to reject the set norms of Indian commercial or mainstream cinema and experimented with the setting, cinematography, editing, content which brings out a socio-political but a modernist approach and standing out as what we can call as independent cinema.

Further, this research can also delve into audience reception and what they expect from the ever-growing and changing technology, be it in the form of theatrical release or OTT release. The research has brought forth the perspective of various filmmakers and their idea of depiction of reality and real-life social issues and evils present around us. While the A-lister movies such as *Brahmastra*, *KGF*, *RRR*, *Kantara* gaining a large audience with their magnum opus setting and over-the-top setting, presentation as well as exhibition, lesser-known actors as well as storytellers and film makers are getting a platform in the form of OTT and online audience.

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