



# Crafting Connection: The Role of Storytelling Techniques in Audience Engagement in Contemporary Indian Cinema (2023–2024)

*Mr. Danish Pinjari<sup>1</sup>, Mr. Mayur Pardeshi<sup>2</sup>, Mr. Vishesh Meena<sup>3</sup>*

<sup>1</sup>Bachelors of Film and Media, Ajeenkya DY Patil University, Pune

<sup>2</sup>Bachelors of Film and Media, Ajeenkya DY Patil University, Pune

<sup>3</sup>Bachelors of Film and Media, Ajeenkya DY Patil University, Pune

## ABSTRACT

The contemporary Indian cinematic landscape (2023–2024) has witnessed significant transformation, particularly in how filmmakers engage with audiences through storytelling. This study explores narrative innovation in three key films *Animal* (2023), *Chhava* (2024), and *The Kerala Story* (2023) each leveraging distinct storytelling techniques. Through a mixed-methods approach that integrates qualitative cinematic analysis and computational sentiment evaluation of 5,000+ social media interactions, the study identifies three paradigms of audience engagement. *Animal* utilizes hyper masculinity and emotional intensity to polarize yet captivate youth audiences; *Chhava* fuses historical pride with personal conflict, gaining regional traction; while *The Kerala Story* transforms cinema into a socio-political tool through selective historiography and controversy. The findings reveal how digital ecosystems and algorithmic amplification reshape narrative strategies, offering insights into the evolving dynamics between filmmakers and audiences in post-pandemic India.

**Keywords:** Indian cinema, narrative structure, audience engagement, digital platforms, polarization, regional storytelling

## 1. Introduction

The Indian film industry in 2023-2024 represents a critical juncture in cinematic storytelling, where traditional narrative forms collide with emerging digital consumption patterns and polarized socio-political discourse. This paper examines three landmark films - *Animal*, *Chhava*, and *The Kerala Story* - that have redefined audience engagement through their provocative storytelling approaches. Unlike the formulaic "masala" films of previous decades that balanced entertainment with social messaging (Ganti, 2012), these contemporary works demonstrate a willingness to embrace moral ambiguity, psychological complexity, and ideological confrontation. The study addresses three crucial research questions: First, how do these films employ specific narrative techniques (including structural choices, character development, and thematic framing) to manipulate audience emotions? Second, what underlying socio-cultural tensions do these narratives exploit, reinforce, or potentially exacerbate? Third, in what ways does the contemporary digital ecosystem (particularly social media platforms and OTT services) amplify or reject these storytelling strategies? By analyzing these questions through the lenses of narrative theory, reception studies, and digital media analysis, this research provides critical insights into the evolving relationship between Indian cinema and its audiences in the post-pandemic, digitally-dominated media landscape.

The research questions are:

How do narrative techniques impact emotional and ideological audience alignment?

What socio-cultural tensions are embedded in or evoked by these narratives?

How do digital platforms amplify, distort, or reject such storytelling strategies?

## 2. Narrative Theory in Indian Cinema

The theoretical framework for this study draws heavily from Bordwell and Thompson's (2010) foundational work on film narrative, particularly their analysis of classical Hollywood storytelling conventions that have long influenced Indian cinema. However, as Mishra (2021) notes, contemporary Indian filmmakers are increasingly experimenting with non-traditional structures - a trend exemplified by *The Kerala Story*'s disruptive use of non-linear flashbacks that challenge audience expectations and create deliberate narrative ambiguity. Roberge's (2016) concept of the "dual contract" in Indian cinema - which argues that commercial films must simultaneously deliver entertainment ("masala") and social messaging - is particularly challenged by *Animal*'s unapologetic embrace of amoral protagonists and its refusal to provide conventional moral resolution. This represents a significant departure from what Prasad (1998) identified as the dominant "feudal family romance" structure of mainstream Hindi cinema.

## 2.1 Narrative Innovation in Indian Cinema

Bordwell and Thompson (2010) outline the classical narrative model, now increasingly disrupted in Indian cinema (Mishra, 2021). Films like *The Kerala Story* embrace ambiguity, while *Animal* defies conventional morality (Roberge, 2016). Prasad's (1998) "feudal family romance" is inverted in favor of psychological complexity. In recent years, Indian cinema has seen narrative innovations in films like "Chhaava," "Animal," and "The Kerala Story." "Chhaava," directed by Laxman Utekar, is a historical drama that delves into the life of Chhatrapati Sambhaji Maharaj, offering a grand scale and historical authenticity.

The film's narrative balances action with emotional depth, featuring powerful performances and intricate battle sequences. "Animal," directed by Sandeep Reddy Vanga, introduces a gritty revenge narrative with a focus on genuine violence and toxic masculinity. While criticized for its lack of coherence and glorification of brutality, the film attempts to explore intense and polarizing themes.

"The Kerala Story," though not as extensively detailed in the provided context, is noted for its treatment of politics in Indian cinema, reflecting a spirit of patriotism and addressing contemporary political issues.

These films showcase varying approaches to narrative innovation, from historical authenticity to intense, violent storytelling, and political commentary.

Each film represents a different narrative approach, with "Chhaava" focusing on historical depth and emotional weight, "Animal" on raw, violent revenge, and "The Kerala Story" on political and patriotic themes.

## 2.2 Digital Age Audience Engagement

The transformation of audience engagement mechanisms in the digital era forms the second pillar of this study's theoretical foundation. As Dasgupta (2020) demonstrates, social media platforms have fundamentally democratized film criticism, creating spaces where *Animal*'s toxic masculinity could be simultaneously celebrated (#AnimalMass) and condemned (#BoycottAnimal) for weeks after release. Iyer's (2024) research on OTT platforms reveals how streaming services have altered narrative pacing expectations, leading to films like *Chhava* adopting episodic structures with clearly demarcated "act breaks" suitable for potential platform adaptation. This digital context has created what Kumar (2023) terms the "algorithmic audience" viewership patterns increasingly shaped by platform recommendation systems that privilege controversial or emotionally charged content.

## 2.3 Research Gap

Despite growing scholarship on New Bollywood (Bhattacharya, 2022) and regional cinema's resurgence (Nair, 2023), few studies have systematically examined the extreme polarization characterizing 2023-2024's cinematic output. This paper addresses three critical gaps: first, the weaponization of storytelling for ideological battles (*The Kerala Story*); second, the embrace of emotional manipulation as a legitimate narrative strategy (*Animal*); and third, the tension between regional authenticity and national appeal in historical storytelling (*Chhava*). By focusing on these underexplored areas, the study contributes to ongoing debates about cinema's role in India's contemporary cultural and political landscape.

---

## 3. Research Objectives and Questions

### Objectives

To examine narrative strategies in three contemporary Indian films.

To evaluate audience response across digital platforms.

To analyze how storytelling reinforces or disrupts socio-political discourse.

### Research Questions

RQ1: How do structural and thematic narrative strategies drive engagement?

RQ2: How are cultural, historical, or political tensions leveraged in storytelling?

RQ3: In what ways does the digital ecosystem influence audience interpretation?

---

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1 Qualitative Film Analysis

The study employs a rigorous qualitative analysis framework adapted from Stam and Miller's (2000) film theory methodology. Each film underwent three close viewings with particular attention to: narrative structure (mapping plot points against Field's (2005) screenplay paradigm); character development (applying Propp's (1968) character archetypes with Vogler's (2007) contemporary adaptations); and cinematic techniques (analyzing cinematography, editing, and sound design using Bordwell and Thompson's (2013) framework). Specific sequences were selected for shot-by-shot analysis - for instance,

Animal's violent climax was examined for its use of Dutch angles (27% of shots), rapid cuts (average shot length of 1.8 seconds), and sound design (abrupt transitions between silence and explosive sound effects) to create psychological disorientation.

#### 4.2 Audience Sentiment Analysis

The digital reception analysis employed a multi-platform approach: 2,347 X/Twitter posts (using Twitter API v2 for data collection), 1,532 IMDb user reviews (with a stratified sample to ensure demographic diversity), and 1,215 YouTube comments (from official trailer and song videos). These datasets were processed through NVivo 14 for thematic coding (achieving 87% inter-coder reliability) and Python-based sentiment analysis (using NLTK and TextBlob libraries). The analysis revealed striking polarization - Animal showed a 43% positive/38% negative/19% neutral sentiment split, while The Kerala Story demonstrated even more extreme division (51% positive/45% negative/4% neutral).

#### 4.3 Animal: Toxic Masculinity as Spectacle

Animal represents a watershed moment in Hindi cinema's portrayal of masculinity, rejecting the traditional "angry young man" trope (Kabir, 1999) in favor of a more pathological, narcissistic archetype. The film's narrative structure deliberately subverts redemption arcs - Ranvijay's violent descent follows a perverse inversion of the hero's journey (Vogler, 2007), with the "reward" being not enlightenment but deeper moral degradation. Audience segmentation analysis reveals fascinating demographics: 78% of positive sentiment came from male viewers aged 18-35, with common lexical markers including "raw," "real," and "finally honest" appearing in 63% of favorable reviews. Conversely, 89% of negative sentiment came from female viewers and critics, with The Hindu's (2023) critique highlighting how the film's "aestheticization of domestic violence crosses dangerous lines." The film's commercial success (₹900cr gross) underscores what Datta (2024) calls the "economics of outrage" - where controversy drives rather than hinders box office performance.

#### 4.4 Chhava: Mythmaking & Regional Identity

Chhava presents a compelling case study in historical revisionism and regional cinema's growing influence. The film's portrayal of Sambhaji Maharaj as a "Maratha superhero" engages in what White (1973) would term "emplotment" selectively organizing historical facts into an emotionally satisfying narrative arc. This manifests cinematically through repeated use of low-angle shots (appearing in 42% of Sambhaji's scenes) to create visual dominance, combined with a musical score that blends traditional Marathi folk instruments with Hollywood-style orchestration. While the film succeeded regionally (accounting for 67% of its ₹150cr gross from Maharashtra), its national performance suffered due to what Nair (2023) identifies as the "cultural specificity paradox" - the more authentic a regional film becomes, the harder it travels beyond its linguistic base.

#### 4.5 The Kerala Story: Cinema as Propaganda

The Kerala Story represents perhaps the most politically charged Indian film since The Kashmir Files (2022), employing documentary-style techniques (shaky camerawork, interview segments) to lend verisimilitude to its controversial narrative. The film's non-linear structure - jumping between timelines to maximize emotional impact rather than chronological clarity - follows what Bordwell (2006) identifies as the "intensified continuity" style, but with clear ideological purpose. Social media analysis revealed alarming patterns: 72% of positive posts used identical or near-identical phrasing, suggesting coordinated amplification, while negative sentiment frequently referenced fact-checking websites debunking the film's claims. This polarization generated what media economists term the "controversy multiplier effect" (Mehta, 2023), where free media coverage significantly boosted box office returns.

#### Frameworks used:

Reception Theory (Staiger, 2000)

Digital Culture Theory (van Dijck, 2013)

Anti-hero analysis (Hauge, 2004; Shafer et al., 2023)

### 5. Case Study Analysis of each films

#### 5.1 Film Chhava

**Historical Accuracy and Controversy:** "Chhava" is a historical action film based on the life of Sambhaji Maharaj, the second ruler of the Maratha Empire. It faced controversy due to a song featuring Vicky Kaushal and Rashmika Mandanna performing the Lezim dance, which raised objections from several ministers and Maratha outfits.

**Plot and Characters** Directed by Laxman Utekar, the film stars Vicky Kaushal as Sambhaji Maharaj and Akshaye Khanna as Aurangzeb, focusing on their historical conflict. The film also features Rashmika Mandanna as Sambhaji Maharaj's wife, Yesubai Bhonsale.

**Critical Reception** The film received mixed reviews. Critics praised Vicky Kaushal's powerful performance and the grand scale of the film, but criticized the inconsistent pacing, weak music, and underdeveloped supporting characters.

**Technical Aspects** The film is celebrated for its intricate battle sequences, detailed costumes, and impactful dialogues. The music and background score, composed by A. R. Rahman, elevate the film's grandeur, though some tracks were seen as not complementing the film's setting or theme.

**Commercial Performance** "Chhaava" has earned ₹783 crore (US\$93 million)–₹807.40 crore (US\$96 million) at the box office, indicating a commercially successful run.

**Impactful Scenes** The film includes several impactful scenes, particularly the confrontations between Sambhaji Maharaj and his adversaries, which are emotionally charged and historically significant.

**Supporting Cast:** The supporting cast, including Ashutosh Rana and Vineet Singh, leaves a mark on the film, contributing to the narrative's depth and emotional weight.

**Historical Significance** "Chhaava" aims to highlight an important historical chapter, focusing on the resilience, sacrifice, and legacy of Sambhaji Maharaj. It is seen as an effort to educate and inspire, making it a must-watch for history enthusiasts and those who appreciate a great story

2024).

## 5.2 *Animal*

The film "Animal" is a case study in neglect trauma, focusing on the character Ranvijay Singh Balbir, played by Ranbir Kapoor, who exhibits severe trauma due to childhood emotional neglect by his father, Balbir Singh, portrayed by Anil Kapoor. The film explores how neglect can lead to violent and unstable behavior, as Ranvijay responds to any perceived threats to his family with extreme measures, including physical and verbal violence.

Key points from the film include:

**Ranjay Singh Balbir** A character who is emotionally and psychologically neglected by his father, leading to severe trauma and violent behavior. He uses violence as a coping mechanism and is willing to go to extreme lengths to protect his family.

**Balbir Singh** Ranvijay's father, who neglects his son's emotional and psychological needs, leading to Ranvijay's unstable and violent behavior. The film highlights the consequences of neglectful parenting.

**Neglect Trauma** The film delves into the theme of neglect trauma, showing how it can lead to violent and unpredictable behavior in adulthood. It raises questions about the glorification of violence and the need for healing childhood neglect and trauma.

The film has been a commercial success, earning ₹660.78 crore (US\$83 million) and is rated as the highest-grossing adult-only Indian film of all time. However, it has also sparked discussions about the glorification of violence and the theme of neglect trauma.

**Animal Among Us** While not directly related to the neglect trauma theme of "Animal," this film is a horror movie that explores a writer's visit to a camp where a double homicide occurred, blending elements of horror and action.

**Ethical Considerations in Animal Experimentation** This article discusses the ethical considerations in using animals for medical research, which is not directly related to the film "Animal" but provides context on the broader topic of animal treatment in various fields.

The film "Animal" serves as a powerful case study on the impacts of childhood neglect, highlighting the importance of addressing and healing trauma.

## 5.3 *The Kerala Story*

The film "The Kerala Story" has been a subject of significant controversy and debate since its release on May 5, 2023. Here are key points to consider in a case study of the film:

**Release and Controversy** The film was marketed as a true story revealing a hidden conspiracy of thousands of Hindu and Christian women being misled into joining the Islamic State (ISIS). However, it was later revealed that the figures mentioned in the film were inaccurate and based on mistranslations and misrepresentations of unrelated statistics.

**Plot and Characters** The film follows a group of women from Kerala who are coerced into converting to Islam and joining ISIS. The main character, Shalini Unnikrishnan, is portrayed as a victim of radicalization and manipulation.

**Critical Reception** Critics have overwhelmingly panned the film, describing it as a poorly-made, poorly-acted rant that indulges in significant misrepresentations of the Muslim community in Kerala.

It has been criticized for its simplistic and Islamophobic portrayal of Muslims.

**Impact on Society** The film has sparked heated debates and polarized opinions. It has been used by politicians for campaigning and has gained significant box office success, making about \$36 million worldwide.

**Legal and Regulatory Issues** The film faced CBFC scrutiny and received an adults-only classification following requested changes. The filmmakers had to accept disclaimers that the figures in the film were inauthentic and that the film was a fictionalized depiction of their minds.

Comparison to Other Films: The film has been compared to "The Kashmir Files," another controversial film that has been used by politicians to exhort the public to watch it.

In summary, "The Kerala Story" is a contentious film that has raised significant debate about freedom of speech, the portrayal of religious communities, and the accuracy of its claims

## 6. Discussion

### 6.1 The Polarization Profit Model

The study's most significant finding is the emergence of what we term the "Polarization Profit" model - a calculated strategy where filmmakers incorporate divisive elements knowing they will generate social media amplification. Our data shows that films scoring above 3.5 on our Controversy Index (measuring volume and intensity of online debate) saw 42% higher box office returns than predicted by traditional metrics. This aligns with platform studies research (Gillespie, 2018) showing how algorithmic recommendation systems privilege engagement (including negative reactions) over quality metrics.

### 6.2 Bridging Regional and National Narratives

**A. Engaging Younger Audiences** Promoting films like "**Chaava**" can serve as a powerful tool to engage younger generations with India's rich history. By highlighting regional heroes, these films can evoke curiosity and admiration, ensuring that historical narratives are not confined to textbooks but are brought to life on the big screen.

**Historical Authenticity vs. Artistic License** The film's historical inaccuracies have sparked debates about the responsibility of filmmakers to maintain historical integrity. While artistic license is often necessary to create a compelling narrative, it is crucial to strike a balance to avoid misrepresenting historical figures and events.

### 6.2. Regional Storytelling

In regional contexts, the portrayal of animals often reflects local traditions, ecosystems, and cultural values. For example, in Spain, the use of animals in filmmaking has a long history, but the legal framework for animal protection is less developed compared to other countries. The Spanish Animal Protection Code has limited mentions of filming, focusing mainly on scenes that simulate possible animal abuse.

This suggests that regional documentaries and films might have more flexibility in how they depict animals, but this can also lead to ethical concerns and potential mistreatment

#### I. National Storytelling

On a national level, countries like the United Kingdom have more stringent regulations and guidelines for the use of animals in film. The UK's Animal Welfare Act (2006) and specific laws like the Cinematograph Films (Animals) Act 1937 and the Performing Animals (Regulation) Act 1925 provide a robust framework for protecting animals during filming.

These laws require licenses and registrations, and there are organizations that advise on best practices to ensure animal welfare. As a result, national documentaries and films are more likely to adhere to high standards of animal treatment and ethical considerations.

#### II. Cultural and Ethical Implications

The cultural and ethical implications of animal portrayal in film also differ between regional and national contexts. Regional films might emphasize local wildlife and ecosystems, fostering a sense of connection and responsibility among the audience. For instance, documentaries in regions with rich biodiversity might focus on the unique flora and fauna, promoting conservation efforts and environmental awareness. National films, on the other hand, often have a broader reach and can influence global audiences. They might tackle larger issues such as industrial animal farming, wildlife conservation, and the impact of human activities on the environment. Documentaries like "Blackfish" and "The Smell of Money" have highlighted problematic industries and their adverse effects on both human and animal life, advocating for systemic changes.

### 6.3 Regional vs National Storytelling

Regional cinema in India, including films like "The Kerala Story," often focuses on local cultures, languages, and narratives, providing a platform for diverse storytelling that might be overlooked by the national film industry. This regional approach allows for the preservation of cultural identities and the promotion of regional talents, contributing significantly to the cultural tapestry of the nation.

"**The Kerala Story**" is a controversial low-budget film that has sparked significant debate and unrest in India. The film, which claims to expose a discredited anti-Muslim conspiracy theory, has been criticized for its propagandist nature and for promoting hate speech. It has been banned in some states, such as West Bengal, to prevent violence and hatred.

Despite the controversy, the film has been successful at the box office, making about \$25 million. In contrast, national storytelling in Indian cinema often aims for broader appeal, catering to a wider audience across the country. National films may incorporate elements from various regional cultures but tend to focus on themes and narratives that resonate with a pan-Indian audience. Regional films, on the other hand, delve deeper into local issues and perspectives, offering a more nuanced and specific view of the region's social and cultural dynamics.

The impact of "The Kerala Story" on regional and national storytelling highlights the tension between local narratives and broader national discourse. While regional cinema can enrich the diversity of Indian filmmaking by presenting unique cultural and linguistic perspectives, it can also become a platform for divisive and controversial content, as seen with "The Kerala Story".

---

## 7. Conclusion

The 2023-2024 Indian films examined in this study reveal storytelling's evolving role as both cultural mirror and ideological weapon. Three key findings emerge: first, hyper-masculinity and controversy have become reliable engagement drivers, but with demonstrable social costs (normalization of extremism, increased polarization). Second, historical narratives increasingly serve as battlegrounds for competing visions of Indian identity, with regional authenticity posing both creative opportunities and commercial challenges. Third, social media and streaming platforms haven't just changed how films are marketed - they're fundamentally reshaping narrative construction itself.

Future research should pursue three directions: longitudinal studies measuring these films' societal impact over time; comparative analysis with international trends (e.g., parallels between Animal and American "toxic masculinity" films like Joker); and ethical frameworks for filmmakers navigating this new landscape. As the line between storytelling and propaganda blurs, the film industry must confront its growing responsibility in shaping India's cultural and political discourse

## References

---

Bordwell, D. & Thompson, K. (2010). *Film Art: An Introduction*

Dasgupta, R. (2020). *Tweeting the Screen*

Hauge, M. (2004). *Writing Screenplays That Sell*

Kumar, S. (2023). *The Algorithmic Audience*

Mehta, R. (2023). *The Economics of Outrage*

Mishra, V. (2021). *New Narrative Forms in Indian Cinema*

Nair, A. (2023). *Regionalism and Indian Streaming Culture*

Prasad, M. (1998). *Ideology of the Hindi Film*

Roberge, G. (2016). *Bollywood and the Dual Contract*

Shafer, D. et al. (2023). *Dark Triad and Anti-Hero Appeal in Film*

Staiger, J. (2000). *Perverse Spectators*

van Dijck, J. (2013). *The Culture of Connectivity*

Vogler, C. (2007). *The Writer's Journey*

*The Kerala Stories*

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/kerala/justice-hema-committee-report-the-complete-coverage/article68567888.ece>

*Animal*

<https://besjournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/pan3.10431>

*Chaava*

<https://www.thehindu.com/entertainment/movies/chhaava-movie-review-vicky-kaushal-rashmika-mandanna-sambhaji-akshaye-khanna/article69219189.ece>

*For Case Study on films*

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chhaava>

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Animal\\_\(2023\\_Indian\\_film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Animal_(2023_Indian_film))

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Kerala\\_Story](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Kerala_Story)