

THE FILM AND THE NORM: RE-ASSESSING POPULAR INDIAN FILMS

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Abstract

How a feature film is to be looked at was established in the first few decades of the 20th century, mostly in the West. But what happens when a film stems from a different culture?

*Many films made in India carry an ancient theory of entertainment, encapsulated in the *Natyashastra*, with only a change in platform, not intent. This article submits that such films must be assessed by the aesthetic norm that informs it.*

Keywords: *Film Studies, Indian Cinema, Bollywood, Natyashastra*

INTRODUCTION

The objective of this article is indicate a critical and theoretical validation of commercially successful films made in India and to suggest a possible way in which to better understand a genre of films that have hitherto been dismissed as formulaic, predictable and ultimately irrelevant in its artistic contribution to the world of cinema. The article hence seeks to suggest the need to understand popular cinema in India by norms of traditional Indian theatre that is the root of Indian cinema. The purpose is to (a) re-think the way commercial cinema is written about, and (b) to concur with the perspective that popular cinema in India is a legacy of theatre and hence should be studied using the aesthetic theory of the *Natyashastra* that has explained and guided all performance in India since time immemorial.

Referring to the film-maker Jean Epstein and his idea of the *photogénie*, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith says, “The ideas of *photogénie*, montage and the articulation of time and space... came to form the dominant theory, if not of what cinema was... then of what it could aspire to be.” (Nowell-Smith 53). After the two world Wars, Hollywood tried to return to the popularity of the old musicals, but there was also a desire for realism, especially in war-torn Europe. This desire led first to Italian Neo-Realism and then to French New Wave films. A seal of approval for both movements came from the film critic Andre Bazin, who applauded the minimal tampering with time and space through camera manipulation and editing devices, thus retaining the film’s real-life feel. Above all, Bazin “insisted on cinema’s unique ability to let reality reveal itself without any attempt to force it into any preconceived notion of what it was.” (Nowell-Smith 64).

Assuming that Art imitates life, the better film was one that best represented life. Philosophical theories about Life, Truth, Perception and Reality got reflected in the visual narratives that was cinema. The challenge was to work out ways in which to do so and hence, film making went from being moving photographs, to the idea of *mise-en-scène*, to a series of montage. Sophisticated technology helped to include special effects that helped stylise the representation of life on screen, in keeping with the conversations that sharpened the perspective on life itself. The art and craft of film making was expected to come together to create a feature that best implemented these theories. This has been the foundational idea on which films continue to be viewed, discussed and awarded even today.

FILMS IN INDIA

Aruna Vasudev in her book *The New Indian Cinema* suggests that cinema in its early stages in India was “treated at worst as a reprehensible, though unavoidable, social catastrophe, at best a barbarous pastime for the uncultured”. She believes that the credit for a change in attitude towards cinema and the development of Indian films goes to the Film Enquiry Committee (FEC) set up by Nehru in 1949. This led to the first International Film Festival of India in January 1952. The first National Awards for meritorious films was given

out in 1954. Children's Film Society India was founded in 1955 with the hope that "indigenous and exclusive cinema for children would stimulate their creativity, compassion and critical thinking" (Website, CFSI). Under Nehru's leadership, several steps were taken to oversee (and regulate) Indian films. These steps included the formation of the Film Finance Corporation (FFC) in 1960 (which became the National Film Development Corporation in 1975), establishment of the Film and Television Institute of India at Pune, also in 1960, and the formation of the National Film Archives of India in 1964.

Though set up by the Government of India in 1960, The Film and Television Institute of India started its coursework only in 1961. With eminent film makers like Ray, Ghatak and Sen as faculty, the aesthetic theory at the FTII was influenced by Italian and French schools of film making. For instance, Satyajit Ray has acknowledged the influence of De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* on his film making style. With the release of Ray's *Pather Panchali* in 1955 and the international euphoria that immediately followed the release, a new trend in Indian cinema had begun. Directors like Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak, Mrinal Sen, Mani Kaul, G. Aravindam and Adoor Gopalakrishnan made internationally acclaimed films in Bangla, Hindi and Malayalam. Subsequent film makers continue to be inspired by these film makers even today and create films that stand the test of global standards.

The first Indian film to gain recognition at the Cannes film festival was Chetan Anand's *Neecha Nagar*. The film failed at the Box Office, but won the Palme D'Or at Cannes in 1946, the only Indian film to have won that prestigious award. *Pather Panchali* won the Best Human Document award at the 1956 Cannes Film Festival and is highly admired even today, being listed as one of 100 top films in the world. Girish Kasaravalli's 1977 film, *Ghatashraddha*, has the distinction of becoming the only Indian film to be chosen by the National Archive of Paris. More recently, the debut film of director Chaitanya Tamhane, *Court*, won 19 awards at the prestigious Venice International Film Festival. Clearly, India has produced many films that live up to expectations set by the discussions collected in the French magazine *Cahiers du Cinema*, films much admired and awarded internationally.

While India has produced many critically admired films, India has also produced many more that seem to meet very different viewer expectations. What if the only commonality is in the craft of film making, not in its art? What happens when a film stems from a different root idea of performance and entertainment?

ASSESSING POPULAR FILMS IN INDIA

Lalit Joshi, in his essay titled *Cinema and Hindi Periodicals in Colonial India (1920-47)*, included in the book *Narratives of Indian Cinema* edited by Manju Jain, discusses the writing style of early film critics in India. He takes the example of writers like Gajanand Sharma and J.R. Shastri and summarises their method thus: "[they] began with plot description so that the readers could understand the sequence of events. This was followed by a description of the characters and their roles in the film. Finally... focused on the technique of direction, acting, etc." The assumption here seems to be that the viewing public is basically uneducated and uninformed, but for the good offices of the critic. The idea, according to Joshi, was to convert audiences into connoisseurs, thus demanding and generating better cinema.

In spite of their popularity, (or perhaps because of it), serious commentary on Indian films focused exclusively on films they saw as having the potential of winning awards. By the 70s, an unbridgeable chasm appeared between the critically acclaimed, but financially unprofitable, 'Art' films and the popular 'Commercial' films that were box office successes but ignored by award giving institutions. It is not a coincidence that this chasm appears within a decade of the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII) being set up in 1960, with the coursework beginning there in 1961. Commercial cinema was either passed over or mentioned apologetically and then dismissed.

Early commentators on films in India have looked down on the 'song and dance routine' of commercial films and termed the formulaic plots 'masala'. The motive of making profit is somehow reprehensible and the fact that a film was monetarily successful is somehow what makes it not have artistic merit. Satyajit Ray seems to encapsulate this belief in writing: "You cannot really reprehend mediocrity, you can only regret it. But you can and must condemn the gifted film maker who has it in him to combine artistic integrity with a consciousness of dual responsibility to the viewing public and to the man who backs him but who yet keeps postponing the great film because he must 'first make a little money' and therefore must compromise just this little, just this once."

The implication that artistic merit is somehow contrary to commercial success is surely not justified. What of the tens and thousands of people who throng the theatres to watch the latest film starring their favourite actor? Can it be valid to dismiss the choice of so many audiences across cultures?

By the 80s, there was more in-depth understanding of commercial cinema and slowly, these films are being looked at more seriously. As Vamsee Juluri, a professor of Culture Studies in the University of San Francisco, confesses in his book *Bollywood Nation: India through its Cinema*, “We may not be able to understand the whole of India in a classroom or in a book, but we can certainly learn much by listening to how India has been speaking, at least through its most popular mass medium.” Other commentators like Madhav Prasad have been taken popular films collectively as a document to record the social, political and economic conditions of India, and many popular films have found its way into culture studies classrooms in India and abroad. As Ravi Vasudevan puts it, “... popular film is treated as an entry point for understanding the legitimization of social and political power through narrative forms commanding the widest of social constituencies.” Collectively, these popular films are seen to have some value; individually many still face ridicule.

THE NEED FOR CHANGE IN ASSESSMENT NORMS

The parameter of judging a film must have congruence with the aesthetics that informs it. The setting up of training centres for film and television and the opening up of markets has made Indian audiences familiar with and trained in global theories of film making and viewing. But ‘Commercial’ cinema was made by film makers who were intuitive story tellers, mostly self-taught, telling stories for audiences that focused on the “how” and not the “what” of a storyline. If these films were judged only by expectation of plot coherence, continuity and uniqueness of theme, many a Blockbuster film would be left by the wayside.

Consider the following description of a typical, commercial Hindi cinema:

In these films abstract notions have simple human representations. Good is characteristically a young man, necessarily handsome and exceptionally virile; Good’s offshoot, Vulnerable Innocence, is naturally a young woman, necessarily beautiful, preferably lacking in intelligence, and helpless; Evil is usually male, also virile and necessarily ugly and sometimes female and, if at all glamorous, then necessarily witch-like; Evil’s offshoot, Confusion, can be male or female and preferably ugly and also untrustworthy.

– John W. Hood

The Essential Mystery: Major Filmmakers of Indian Art Cinema

The irony and sarcasm is apparent here. Notable also is the choice of words that offers a description akin to that of an European morality play: Good, Vulnerable Innocence, Evil and Confusion. This is a different language of understanding, taken from the world of European Morality Plays, quite foreign to the world of Indian cinema.

There is no way to predict popularity of a film in India merely by noting its budget, formulaic plot and the inclusion of sex, song and glamour. It is significant that films with similar storylines, cast, production budget and distribution logic could fare very differently in the Cinema Halls. For example, *Sholay* has an estimated earning of Rupees 45 crores approximately, while *Shaan*, with very similar conditions, earned a mere 12.7 crores to date. [Note: the source of these numbers is <https://bestoftheyear.in>, updated in 2018]. Clearly, Indian film audiences are more invested in the “how” the story is told, and not overly concerned with the “what happens next” question.

Speaking of mainstream films in India, film scholar and historian Ashish Rajadhyaksha in his book *Indian Cinema: A Very Short Introduction*, talks of many film critics who regard popular cinema as “trash” and says in disagreement with such line of thought, “In contrast to the widespread belief that these films were not worth preserving has been the fact that for millions of Indians, wherever they live, a major imagination of India derives from its movies.” (Rajadhyaksha 4). Could the Rasa-Bhava theory as explained in the *Natyashastra* provide an alternative lens to assess and understand Indian films towards a better appreciation of the cinematic practices of mainstream Hindi films? To get a better understanding of popular cinema in India, it is important to trace its roots, re-connect the films to Indian aesthetic norms and to discuss them in a relevant manner.

FOLK ROOTS OF INDIAN CINEMA

Folk theatre in India has a long and rich history. While losing some of its audiences to television and cinema, they have yet a vibrancy that refuses to die down. Today, it is well established that Indian cinema evolved out of theatre. The technology of film making is not what excited the Indian film maker. Perhaps that is why Dadasaheb Phalke and Himanshu Roy simply hired equipment and technicians from the West and focused their attention on the story being filmed. In fact, the telling of the story became more important than the story itself, with audience not objecting to formulaic, predictable plots.

Indians, in fact, are used to seeing the same stories repeatedly. Consider the Ramlila - a nine-day celebration of the story of Rama in Uttar Pradesh, or the stories from the Mahabharata in Kathakali performances in Kerala. In

an interview Manmohan Desai had once said that he sees all Hindi films as Ramayana and Mahabharata, the fight of Good versus Evil, where Good will always win. This predictability of the plot is not troublesome in the least.

Reginald Massey, who has written extensively on the culture, religion, music and dance of India, has this to say in his article titled *From Bharata to the Cinema: A Study in Unity and Continuity*, “The early films in India borrowed extensively from the traditional forms of entertainment. Indian theatre from ancient times was an amalgam of dance, drama, music, and poetry, and in film, with the introduction of sound, one was able to incorporate all these elements with ease. Thus, without being aware of it, the film-makers became the heirs of the great Sanskrit dramatists.” (Massey 67).

The fact is that most Indians have grown up being exposed to mythological stories with a narration technique that includes songs, dances and theatre. The traditional arts (classical, folk and tribal) thrive in India and continue even today to be understood by aesthetic norms set by the *Natyashastra*. But Indian films seem to have had their connection with traditional arts severed, and are not usually studied by norms of the Rasa-Bhava theory of the *Natyashastra*. Massey’s words serves as a reminder that Indian cinema is rooted in traditional drama. The original and the greatest text on drama and performance arts in India is, of course, the *Natyashastra*.

AN ALTERNATE VIEW

An early theorist of cinema, Rudolph Arnheim in *Film as Art* said, “A motion picture in itself is an event; it looks different every moment, whereas there is no such temporal progress in a painting or sculpture.” This is in sync with ideas put forth by the French-Italian writer Ricciotto Canudo in 1911 in an essay entitled *The Birth of a Sixth Art*. He presented cinema as “a superb conciliation of the Rhythms of Space (the Plastic Arts) and the Rhythms of Time (Music and Poetry)” (Quoted by Geoffrey Nowell-Smith in *The History of Cinema*).

The idea seems to be that somehow the world of painting and sculpture (Rhythms of Space) is intrinsically different from the world of music and poetry (Rhythms of Time), and that cinema is attempting to bridge two distinct worlds. But the fact is that in Indian traditions of performance and entertainment, these worlds were inextricably tied together. The seminal text on dance, drama, music and entertainment, the *Natyashastra*, looks at all these elements as being interconnected. Hence, it will not be wrong to say that the “superb conciliation” mentioned by Canudo is, in fact, not new to Indian aesthetics.

The *Natyashastra* is a text based on observation of performing art forms that existed at the time the text was composed. Interestingly, this text does not prescribe a set of rules which need to be followed for all times and places. In fact, it is suggested in the *Natyashastra* that art forms must dynamically adapt to the tastes of people of different places and at different times. It is therefore not unjustified to use the tenets described in that text to understand popular cinema. The difference is in the platform, not the essence of entertainment. One can even go as far as to say that some films need to be understood only by the tenets proclaimed in the *Natyashastra*.

Unfortunately, not enough focus has been placed on the influence of the tenets of the *Natyashastra* in discussions around Indian films. Philip Lutgendorf in his essay has emphasised the importance of the *Natyashastra* and regretted the fact that there is not enough emphasis on the importance of that ancient text for Indian cinema.

Discussions of the conventions of Indian popular cinema in terms of those of pre-modern performance genres often invoke the ancient Sanskrit drama and its authoritative treatise, the *Natyashastra*, yet they seldom offer detailed information about this text. This is unfortunate, since the *Natyashastra* is a key moment in the Indian tradition of thinking about performance; its relevance for film theory potentially goes beyond the stylistic similarities that link the theatre it describes with the latest Hindi or Tamil melodrama.

- Philip Lutgendorf
Is There an Indian Way of Film Making?

IN CONCLUSION

Since independence, there has been an interest in researching, promoting and maintaining Indian heritage. Government bodies like the three Akademies and the ICCR have supported Indian Art and have contributed greatly to energising traditional performances. Stalwarts like Rabindranath Tagore, Rukmini Devi Arundel, Kamal Devi Chattopadhyay and Maulana Abul Kalam Azad supported classical art and made them acceptable to the middle class in India. Classical music and dance schools proliferated across India and abroad, moving from

rural spaces to urban, often westernized spaces. Designers (textiles, architecture, urban utilities) have increasing using traditional craft to make their products unique.

The film industry in India also needs to include Indian aesthetic norms to the many ways a film can be assessed. Globalisation, in a way, has interfered with the traditional Indian understanding of performance and entertainment. Film-makers like Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak and Mani Kaul, did receive many awards and great critical acclaim, yet they did not run in the cinema halls for more than a week or two and that too, to empty seats. At the same time, there were films that did make profit and run to full houses not only for Indians and the Indian diaspora, but also for people in China, South-East Asia, Africa and the Middle East. While a small community of commentators dismissed these films, they are loved by many viewers.

In dismissing most mainstream films (disparagingly termed “Bollywood”), commentators also ignore the paying public whose choice leads to the commercial success of these films. To believe that a chosen few will decide for everyone what is a good film is an extremely elitist stance to take. Equally, to believe that theories that originated in the West are the only way to understand a film is to allow the colonisation of the mind and taste. It is important to understand popular films by going past dismissing them as being unworthy of comment.

There’s a need to look at popular cinema differently and understand both the practitioner and the viewers better. The submission here is to encourage a connect popular films to their roots and see them as a legacy of the *Natyashastra*, an ancient text on performance and entertainment in India.

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