



A SCREEN AND A MIRROR

SEVEN DECADES OF INDIAN CINEMA

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CONTENTS

A SCREEN AND A MIRROR: SEVEN DECADES OF INDIAN CINEMA	5
INDIAN CINEMA THROUGH THE DECADES: A RETROSPECTIVE	7

A SCREEN AND A MIRROR: SEVEN DECADES OF INDIAN CINEMA

The advent of cinema was a revolutionary development for our collective experience of storytelling and art. Here was a powerful medium that transcended the structural boundaries attendant on its predecessors - unlike literature or high art, with its need for a grounding in theoretical education, moving images projected to a screen in a darkened room were breathtakingly simple, and had the potential to bear profound sentiment, expression and messages, arguably with greater impact than framed watercolours or wordy tomes. While visual storytelling did exist in the form of theatre and live performance long before film, the birth of cinema meant that these were no longer confined to locations marked by social status. A truly mass medium, cinema was different from Broadway or the opera, restricted as they were to the leisured classes. It was inherently public in terms of its consumption, and consequently in its impact on the popular psyche.

As cinema grew its potential was recognised and put to use, often to horrifying effect. D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) glorified racism and hatred, and led a resurgence in the popularity of the Ku Klux Klan, which it depicts as a heroic force fighting to maintain White supremacy in the United States. A few decades later, filmmakers like Leni Riefenstahl were patronized by the leadership of Nazi Germany, with Adolf Hitler and Joseph Goebbels supporting the production of such films as *The Triumph of the Will* (1935) and *Olympia* (1938) to showcase their vision of an Aryan Germany, to mobilise popular support for their horrific ideology. These efforts came to underline the rousing power of film, albeit used for evil, over the minds of viewers.

AT THE TIME OF INDIA'S INDEPENDENCE IN 1947, CINEMA ALREADY HAD A STORIED HISTORY, HAVING GROWN INCREASINGLY SOPHISTICATED AS AN ART FORM, A COMMERCIAL PRODUCT, AND AS A VEHICLE FOR POWERFUL IDEAS. YET PERHAPS NOWHERE ELSE IN THE WORLD DID FILMS COME TO OCCUPY THE POSITION THEY DID IN FREE INDIA

India had already seen its first 'talkie' around this time - *Alam Ara* (1931) - and by 1935, film studios had come up in major cities such as Calcutta, Madras and Bombay. Thus at the time of India's independence in 1947, cinema already had a storied history, having grown increasingly sophisticated as an art form, a commercial product, and as a vehicle for powerful ideas. Yet perhaps nowhere else in the world did films come to occupy the position they did in free India - as integral building blocks of national identity in a new nation striving to define, both for itself and for the world, its character, concerns, aspirations and anxieties.

In this new political structure of continental diversity, struggling to secure basic necessities such as food, shelter and education, the study of Indian cinema provides a uniquely rich insight into the creation of real and perceived community identities. While there exists a vibrant history of Indian cinema before Independence, this essay will focus on the period after 1947, and how films came to shape and were shaped by the social, economic and political realities of the largest democracy in the post-colonial world.

INDIAN CINEMA THROUGH THE DECADES: A RETROSPECTIVE

While India has produced a staggering variety of films in the last seven decades that encompass a range of themes, perspectives, aesthetics and styles of storytelling, one can advance certain broader trends reflected in the films of particular periods. This is not to paint the cinema of a period with broad, generalizing brush strokes; it is an attempt to identify aspects common to the popular cinema of a time, which were informed by the dominant contemporary ideas and attitudes and in turn played a part in shaping popular conceptions and culture.

THE FIRST DECADE AFTER INDEPENDENCE IS CHARACTERIZED BY FILMS THAT TELL STORIES LOCATED IN THE HEADY TUMULT OF A NATION BEING BORN. WHILE INDEPENDENCE BROUGHT WITH IT OPTIMISTIC IDEALISM FOR THE FUTURE OF A NEW SOCIETY, IT ALSO FORCED A RECKONING WITH THE ISSUES FACING THIS SOCIETY.

It is unsurprising that the first decade after Independence is characterized by films that tell stories located in the heady tumult of a nation being born. While Independence brought with it optimistic idealism for the future of a new society, it also forced a reckoning with the issues facing this society. The films of this era are often deeply sociological, depicting the divide between urban and rural India, the rich and poor, the old and the new, in the backdrop of Nehruvian socialism and the still fresh wounds of Partition.

Ritwik Ghatak's Bengali New Wave masterpiece *Nagorik*, which was completed in 1952 but did not see a theatrical release till 1977, tells the story of East Bengali refugees in Calcutta, contrasting the older generation's nostalgia for a lost home with their children's

cautious optimism for a new future even as they face uncertainty and deprivation. Bimal Roy's *Do Bigha Zameen*, (1953) inspired by a Rabindranath Tagore poem and by Italian neorealist cinema, dealt with the exploitation by landlords of smallhold peasants, and the inhumanity of the zamindari system against the backdrop of an industrializing economy. Shambhu (masterfully portrayed by Balraj Sahni) is a poor farmer robbed of his meagre land by a zamindar seeking to build a new mill - forcing Shambhu and his family to eke out a livelihood in Calcutta, in harsh and unforgiving conditions, their two bighas of ancestral land transformed into a lost hope. The experience of rural Indians in the metropolis was also the subject of Amit and Sombhu Mitra's *Jagte Raho* (1956) which solidified the trope of the naive villager confronted with callous city dwellers, who would not so much as spare him a drink of water.

These films offered evocative, sombre looks at the gulf between the promise of Independence and the cruel realities of everyday life, that had left the impoverished and marginalised to struggle for survival. Tying up this decade of exploratory, didactic cinema in 1957 were two films destined for classic status - B.R. Chopra's *Naya Daur*, which captures the conflict between tradition and modernization quite literally through a race between a bus and the horse-drawn cart it sought to replace, and Mehboob Khan's *Mother India*, which turned Nargis (Fatima Rashid) into a personification of the nation, and instituted the trope of the self-sacrificing mother who upholds her values even at great personal cost. In its first decade, thus, Indian cinema reflected a nation in flux, dealing with its traumas, as it stood on the cusp of an old society and promises of a new one that did not always match the vision projected by its leaders.

This period was followed by a more forward looking tone in cinema, although socially relevant and critical films continued to be made. Bimal Roy's *Sujata* (1959) is a rare mainstream portrayal of the evils of caste, with the struggle of the eponymous protagonist (played by Nutan) contextualising B.R. Ambedkar's work against casteism and untouchability. At the other end of the spectrum was *Junglee*, (1961) Subodh Mukherjee's light hearted romantic comedy that immortalised Shammi Kapoor's brash and yahooping character, of a young man from a privileged background who defies the stiff upper lip conservatism of his mother to romance Saira Banu's character across the class divide. Many films would follow *Junglee's* particular brand of class conflict - situating it in the context of romantic relationships, characterized by wealthy authoritarian parents, and resolved in a happy ending.

The period also saw great works of contemporary literature being adapted to the screen, which brought them to a wider audience. *Sahib, Bibi aur Ghulam* (1962) is Guru Dutt's adaptation of Bimal Mitra's Bengali novel of the same name, and *Shailrendra's Teesri Kasam* (1966) is based on a short story by the Hindi novelist Phanishwarnath Renu. Celluloid gave these stories new life, with both films earning National Awards and finding their way into nearly every list of India's all time great films.

There was also an infusion of greater colour and a shifting focus in the cinema of the sixties, with modernity increasingly vesting in the individual. Master filmmaker Satyajit Ray gave us *Mahanagar*, (1963) whose story of a middle class homemaker who enters the workforce reflects the growing consciousness of women's emancipation and the patriarchal biases faced by working women at home and in the workplace. The Malayalam film *Chemmeen* (1965) directed by Ramu Kariat, and Vijay Anand's *Guide* released the same year, also reflect a growing questioning of social norms, showing women characters who are unhappy merely being accessories to men in a marriage, and are complex individuals with their own weaknesses and motivations. In the same vein,

Basu Chatterjee's *Sara Aakash* (1969) took a critical look at the institution of arranged marriage, and the prevalence of patriarchal attitudes in mainstream society.

UNLIKE THE SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF THE PRIOR DECADE'S FILMS, WHICH CENTRED ON LARGER SOCIETAL SETUPS SUCH AS QUESTIONS OF CLASS AND THE URBAN-RURAL DIVIDE, THE SIXTIES WERE MARKED BY A QUESTIONING OF THE STATUS QUO MUCH CLOSER TO HOME, IN THE "PRIVATE" REALM OF FAMILY AND MARRIAGE.

Unlike the sociological analysis of the prior decade's films, which centred on larger societal setups such as questions of class and the urban-rural divide, the sixties were marked by a questioning of the status quo much closer to home, in the "private" realm of family and marriage. Outside the home, the cinema of this period continued to examine our trials and tribulations as a nation. Two years after India's disastrous war with China, Chetan Anand released *Haqeeqat*, (1964) dedicating it to Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and the soldiers of the Indian Army. This war drama, the first of its kind in India, focuses on the Battle of Rezang La and the last stand made by the brave soldiers of 13 Kumaon, evoking feelings of patriotic self-sacrifice, and what the scholar Gita Vishwanath has called a "nationalistic mother" producing sons for the battlefield.

The seventies in India bore the indelible imprint of a very different kind of "nationalist mother" - Indira Gandhi, who became prime minister in 1966 and split with senior Congress members three years later, had emerged as the matriarch of the country, larger than life, consolidating her place in politics and also in the popular imagination. Under her patronage the Films Division of India produced films like *Our Indira* (1973) and *The Indian Woman: A Historical Reassessment*, (1975) portraying the PM as the compassionate yet firm maternal neta (leader) overseeing social upliftment and progress at home while representing India at venues like the

United Nations.

This was also the era of the “angry young man” - the disaffected, disillusioned young male Indian pioneered by Amitabh Bachhan and the bombastic writing duo of Salim-Javed. The films they scripted like Prakash Mehra’s *Zanjeer* (1973) and Yash Chopra’s *Deewar* (1975) staged a violent catharsis against growing urban poverty, crime, and a corrupt system that exploits the weak. The suffering of these films’ protagonists often reflected the broken promises of the state, filling the violent revenge enacted by them in the climax with potent emotional payoff for viewers.

While these Amitabh Bachhan starrers may have pulled in the crowds, this was also the period where Shyam Benegal made his directorial debut with *Ankur*, (1974) a stunning specimen of the “parallel cinema” pioneered by the likes of Ray, Ghatak and Dutt. The success of this film, which examines the feudal structures that still oppressed people in rural India, ushered in a new era for parallel cinema, and Benegal would go on to cement his status as a pioneer with *Nishant* (1975), *Manthan* (1976) and *Bhumika* (1977), films that set the stage for such future works as Saeed Akhtar Mirza’s *Albert Pinto ko Gussa Kyun Aata Hai* (1980) and Salim Langde *Pe Mat Ro* (1989), Adoor Gopalakrishnan’s *Elippathayam* (1982), Sagar Sarhadi’s *Bazaar* (1982) and Ketan Mehta’s *Mirch Masala* (1987).

Off the screen, growing political disaffection, student agitations and labour union strikes by many real-life angry young people led to an increasingly authoritarian Indira Gandhi imposing Emergency in 1975, a dark period of authoritarianism, crackdowns on dissent and the suspension of democracy. Gulzar’s *Aandhi*, (1975) a political drama whose protagonist bore striking resemblance to Mrs Gandhi, was banned when the Emergency was declared, and was not allowed a proper release until Gandhi’s fall from power in 1977, despite the director’s insistence that the story had nothing to do with her. There were also films like Amrit Nahta’s *Kissa Kursi Ka*, (1976) which explicitly took aim at the excesses of the Emergency - famously

prompting Sanjay Gandhi to have the original reels burnt. Undeterred by the destruction of his work, Nahta remade the entire film and released it two years later, offering a darkly humorous look at how politicians try to seduce the public, personified in a meek, mute Janata played by Shabana Azmi, and filling the film with references to the Gandhis and their acolytes.

The films of the seventies thus reflected the political turmoil of the time, indirectly through stories of revenge against corruption and injustice and more pointedly through political films made against stringent censorship. Across the country, filmmakers used their craft to critique dominant structures - Agraharathil Kazhuthai, (1977) a Tamil film by avant-garde filmmaker John Abraham satirizes Brahminical bigotry and superstition, while the Kannada film *Ghatashraddha* (1977) by Girish Kasaravalli tells the story of society’s mistreatment of a widow through the eyes of a young boy, underlining how in patriarchal society, a woman’s body belongs to everyone but herself.

THE EIGHTIES WERE A CHAOTIC TIME FOR INDIAN CINEMA, WITH MANY LOOKING BACK ON IT AS A LOW POINT FOR ITS GARISH AESTHETIC AND FOCUS ON MASALA—SEX, ROMANCE AND VIOLENCE.

The following decade was a chaotic time for Indian cinema, and many look back on the eighties as a low point for their garish aesthetic and their focus on masala - sex, romance and violence. Mithun Chakraborty’s portrayal of a working class boy who rises to become a Disco Dancer (1982) was met with hoots and whistles in the theatres, and Raj Kapoor’s *Ram Teri Ganga Maili* (1985) broke Bollywood taboos on sex and nudity, with its depiction of Mandakini’s character under a waterfall in a white sari drawing crowds and ruffling many a feather. *Mr India* (1987) was another out and out entertainer, with Anil Kapoor’s everyman endowed with the power of invisibility going up against one of Bollywood’s most colourful and memorable villains, Mogambo, masterfully portrayed by Amrish Puri. Gangster films also

saw some influential entries, such as Govind Nihalani's *Ardh Satya*, (1983) where Om Puri portrays a jaded cop blurring the line between upholding the law and breaking it, and Vidhu Vinod Chopra's *Parinda*, (1989) which offers an emotionally turbulent look at the psyches of men in the criminal underworld. Tamil cinema too was rocked by Mani Ratnam's *Nayakam*, (1987) a Godfather-inspired gangster film rich in storytelling and technical finesse.

But the decade also gave us films like *Arth*, (1982) in which Shabana Azmi's female protagonist decides she doesn't need a man after her husband cheats on her. The independent woman who is not content to be a victim and declines to take her husband back was a milestone for portrayals of the feminine in Indian cinema. Another gem of this period was Kundan Shah's *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaron*, (1983) a hilarious satire on systemic corruption across politics, business and the media, made on a shoestring budget and starring some of the greatest talent of the age: Naseerudin Shah, Ravi Baswani, Om Puri and Satish Shah.

Often considered the greatest Hindi comedy film of all time, *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaron* was produced by the National Film Development Corporation, set up by Indira Gandhi in the preceding decade with the aim of promoting quality independent Indian cinema. The NDFC would also co-produce Richard Attenborough's *Gandhi* (1982) which swept the Oscars with 11 nominations and 8 wins the following year. Thus the cinema of this decade reflected and reacted to an India that was gradually opening up to technology and influences from around the world.

THIS PROCESS OF THE WORLD COMING TO INDIA WAS ACCELERATED BY THE ECONOMIC REFORMS OF 1991. POLICIES OF LIBERALIZATION, PRIVATIZATION AND GLOBALIZATION OPENED UP THE INDIAN ECONOMY, LEADING TO UNPRECEDENTED CONSUMERISM AND A NEW ASPIRATIONALISM IN THE MIDDLE CLASS.

This process of the world coming to India was accelerated by the economic reforms of 1991. Policies of liberalization, privatization and globalization opened up the Indian economy, leading to unprecedented consumerism and a new aspirationalism in the middle class. Commercial films carried on in the decadent trend begun in the eighties, with stereotyped characters, trope-filled plots and extravagant song and dance numbers. Instead of focusing on writing and storytelling through film, Bollywood largely came to rely on the "star system", the idea that leading actors would draw the masses to the theatres. The slapstick comedies of Govinda were accompanied at the box office by traditional family dramas, like Suraj Barjatya's *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* (1994) and *Hum Saath Saath Hain* (1999). Romance musicals like Yash Chopra's *Dil to Pagal Hai* (1997), Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam* (1999) and Aditya Chopra's *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995) became exceptionally popular, with the last becoming one of the highest grossing Indian films, and heralding Shah Rukh Khan as the undisputed king of romance of the time. These films also reflect an increasingly international sensibility, with their characters being non-resident Indians (NRIs) who straddle the line between traditional family values and the desire to follow their heart and live independent lives. They captured the fascination of a new generation of Indians who increasingly saw their place on the world stage.

At the same time the political tumult and communal tensions of the nineties, whose influence can still be felt today, was captured in this period. Notable examples include Mani Ratnam's *Bombay* (1995), a Tamil film that sets the love story of a Muslim woman and a Hindu man against the backdrop of the bloody communal violence that had traumatised the home of Bollywood two years before, and Mahesh Bhatt's *Zakhm* (1998), an eerily prescient look at the rise of Hindu fundamentalism in India. Approaching the new millennium, India was grappling with questions of identity and ideology, emerging from its cocoon of protectionism not only economically

but in social terms - a sentiment perhaps best captured by Pepsi's wildly successful 1998 marketing campaign, "Ye Dil Maange More!" - This heart demands more.

THE 21ST CENTURY USHERED IN AN INFUSION OF FRESH IDEAS AND APPROACHES IN INDIAN CINEMA. THE GRANT OF "INDUSTRY" STATUS BY THE GOVERNMENT OPENED UP FILMS TO INSTITUTIONAL FUNDING AND CONSEQUENT CORPORATIZATION, LEADING TO GREATER PROFESSIONALISM AND EFFICIENCY IN FILMMAKING.

The 21st century ushered in an infusion of fresh ideas and approaches in Indian cinema. The grant of "industry" status by the government opened up films to institutional funding and consequent corporatization, leading to greater professionalism and efficiency in filmmaking. The deregulation of cinema halls and the growing import of cable and satellite rights, as well as distribution rights around the world expanded revenue opportunities, allowing innovative films to be financed. The year 2001 saw a succession of films that moved away from formula driven templates, such as Ashutosh Gowariker's *Lagaan*, which imagines a cricket match between a clutch of oppressed villagers and their British overlords, and bagged an Oscar nomination for Best Foreign Film. The same year, Farhan Akhtar's *Dil Chahta Hai* followed three privileged young male friends on a trip to Goa, and became the iconic road trip movie for a generation, with its upper class protagonists navigating the ups and downs of friendship and love while sporting goatees and driving sports coupés. This focus on stories of the upper class continued with Mira Nair's *Monsoon Wedding* (2001) which deals with themes of sexual assault, homosexuality, and the clash between traditional values and an ascendant modernity in the extravagant setting of a Delhi farmhouse wedding.

If the nineties were about the world coming to India, it was time now for a more self-assured India to go out into the world. Nationalism

made a comeback in new avatars, with Farhan Akhtar's *Lakshya* (2004) portraying a directionless urban youth who finds meaning in military service, Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra's *Rang De Basanti* (2006) which tells the story of Delhi University students going from a carefree bunch playing freedom fighters in a film to becoming firebrand revolutionaries themselves against a corrupt political system, and Shimit Amin's *Chak De! India* (2007) which brought patriotism to the sports field, with its rousing story of a Muslim coach leading the Indian women's hockey team to victory while facing Islamophobic backlash and confronting his own professional failures. The films of the 2000s also increasingly explored marginalised topics, like homosexuality and the AIDS epidemic through Onir's *My Brother...Nikhil* (2005) and fractured father-son relationships through Vikramaditya Motwane's *Udaan* (2010), depicting real situations and the uglier side of families. The period post 2010 has seen an explosion of films that might have once been considered parallel or arthouse cinema, but which have met with considerable commercial success. As the lines blurred between mainstream and parallel cinema, Anurag Kashyap's gritty *Gangs of Wasseypur* (2012) became a modern cult classic, with its epic saga of three generations of gangsters in the coal mining district of Dhanbad, replete with stylised violence and dialogue laden with profanity. More and more films would take audiences from the big cities to the smaller towns and villages of India, with the success of Aanand L. Rai's *Tanu Weds Manu* (2011), Ashwiny Iyer Tiwari's *Bareilly ki Barfi* (2017) and Sharat Katariya's *Dum Laga ke Haisha* (2015) proving that cinema goes cared more for evocative storytelling than glitz and glamour.

This decade also underscored the transition of cinema from a mode of escapism to one of introspection - with films like Shree Narayan Singh's *Toilet* (2017) and R. Balki's *Pad Man* (2018) tackling issues like the lack of sanitation and menstrual resources in rural India. And after incremental steps down the decades, women-led films began to be given their due in earnest, with Vikas Bahl's *Queen*, (2014)

Anubhav Sinha's *Thappad* (2020) and Navdeep Singh's *NH10* (2015) portraying female leads as complex individuals with their own desires, struggles and imperfections in a variety of situations, from the lighthearted to the harrowing. More and more characters would break the mould of women in mainstream cinema being used as objects to further the plot - instead taking on the system, uninhibitedly exploring their sexualities, and living out their idea of modernity - one that transcends the metro cities to incorporate smaller town sensibilities in a continuous, ongoing process of exploration and introspection.

AS INDIAN CINEMA HEADS INTO A NEW DECADE, THE 2020S ARE IN MANY WAYS THE BEST TIME TO BE A FILMMAKER IN THE COUNTRY. THE STREAMING REVOLUTION HAS TAKEN INDIA BY STORM OVER THE LAST FEW YEARS

As Indian cinema heads into a new decade, the 2020s are in many ways the best time to be a filmmaker in the country. Over the last few years the streaming revolution has taken India by storm, and the popularity of OTT platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime Video and Hotstar has changed how films are created, distributed and consumed. Streaming has reduced the cost of entry into filmmaking, emancipating creators with the ability to reach wider audiences than ever before. This combined with the lack of stringent online censorship has enabled the boom of the "originals", or films that deal with topics once

considered too niche or taboo for commercial success. It has also enabled experiments with non-linear storytelling, and encouraged filmmakers to look at the fissures and wounds of our society creatively.

The Covid19 pandemic with which this decade began has also had its impact on Indian cinema - with the internet making up for the lack of theatrical releases, streaming is more vital to the film industry than ever before. Viewers too have become more discerning and demanding as they begin to consume content from around the world, including Spanish and Korean television series and films. This has raised the bar for Indian content, which must necessarily compete with the high production values and technical prowess seen on the international stage. It is a time of unprecedented opportunities for Indian filmmaking, and a great time to be a movie buff in India.

In many ways the Indian film industry has matured along with the country itself - no longer a youngling struggling to define its identity, it has grown into a confident, vibrant creative industry that creates powerful, moving art and tells important stories to the country and the world. And it promises to keep going: Indians have always been known for their love of stories, from the folklore of ancient India to the latest Netflix originals, and cinema has been wholly integrated into this tradition. Films will continue to be our favourite form of storytelling, and in doing so they remain an important part of the story of India itself.



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