

Resurgence of Parallel Cinema in the OTT Era

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Abstract

The Indian film industry today is in a state of flux as changing audience expectations are demanding more than just passive entertainment. Thinking, reflecting and interacting with the narrative are the qualities that today's audience is looking for in a motion picture and this has led to the revival of interest in parallel cinema. This genre that tells the story of society in all its existence with (undistorted) realistic issues and intricate storytelling, is on the way back to the top, particularly with the rise of Digital Over The Top (OTT) services like Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, and Disney+ Hotstar. This paper investigates the resurgent interest in parallel cinema in the OTT distribution era. The paper examines the historical perspective, the effects of the new digital platforms, and analyzes the kinship of narratives with regard to considerations of creative production in this cinema.

Key Words: Social Realism, Socio-economic theme, Neo-realism, Social Commentary, Realistic Storytelling, Social Justice

Introduction

In much of Western criticism, Parallel Cinema, labeled as 'Art House' cinema found its zenith between the years 1950s to 1970s. Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, Shyam Benegal and numerous others made films which captured the essence of the Indian nation. These films pushed the envelope in terms of story arcs, character arcs, and politics—addressing sociopolitical issues within the narrative itself. But it is the very same audience that soon made Bollywood popular dressing up with the song and dance of the star and the star system making everyone else and Parallel Cinema fade away.

Historical Perspective

The parallel cinema movement too has had its ups and down. As the golden age of parallel cinema came to an end, those films became few and far between as they dealt with social issues like poverty, inequality, or corruption and thus, were not commercially viable. Satyajit Ray's 'Pathar Panchali' (1955) and Mrinal Sen's 'Bhuvan Shome' (1969), fit naturally into this strong current of significance. Its Socio political relevance and realism came first, commercially appealing content was secondary. This period can be considered the Golden Age of Parallel Cinema. In the 1980s and 1990s we witnessed the growth of mainstream Bollywood, which, quite naturally, lessened the scope for Parallel Cinema. The trend within the industry changed focus with high production values using glamorous stars with escapist pictures, neglecting the more sensible and reflective cinema that was more or less the order within parallel cinema. "Indian cinema is often dichotomized into its main enduring traditions—the popular (Bollywood) and the art film (Kabir 2001:5) . Art films made between 1940 and the early 1960 were trenchant expositions on social issues and themes. These included the exploitation of farmers by landlords (Do bigha Zamin: 1953) destitution, privation in the metropolis (Boot Polish 1954), untouchability (Sujata, 1959), the urban-rural schism (Shree 420, 1955) and materialism against destiny (Pyasaa, 1957)¹

Rise of the OTT and new era for art style films:

One of the remarkable very contemporary aspects with regards to cinema is the **internet-based present-day cinema**. Used media and these new technologies have opened a wide range of possibilities to the consumers and now any person can watch almost any film with no restrictions whatsoever, even such films that could be seen

¹ India's new Independent Cinema, Rise of the Hybrid, Ashvin Imaanuel Devasundram, Page 18, Rutledge

only at the specialized art house cinemas and film festivals. Such unconventional features that might not fit in the regular cinema auditoria also found room in OTT platforms. Also, OTT platforms have enabled the filmmakers to play with subjects and **the way of storytelling** without the apprehension of box office uncertainties. This has in turn resulted into several contents that are suitable to the modern day audience. The essence of how parallel cinema was – content based on social justice, character based stories, impact on modern media, critique of society addressing its economic and political aspects while balancing commercialism and naturalism – is preserved, up to the OTT platform. Stories about gender discrimination, caste discrimination, corruption in politics, and psychological issues have for the first time in many years come in excess with craving for more such films. “But now after the advent of multiplex and various OTT platforms different types of stories made up by the movie makers. So, in recent days, the difference between commercial movies and arthouse movies has become blurred.”²

Let's do the comparative analysis of old movies with OTT's present scenario:

Do Bigha Zamin (1953)

Bimal Roy's Do Bigha Zamin occupies a unique place in Indian cinema, as this film is a heart-wrenching depiction of poverty in rural India and addresses the issue of social injustice. The protagonist of the tale is Shambhu Mahto, a farmer, and the story dramatizes the conditions of the villagers who have to borrow money and work for the landowners. This film is **a realistic fictional account of the social reality** in Calcutta, where location and cast become non-professional actors, and powerful narratives are weaved. " Roy introduced a new era of post-World War II romanticrealist melodrama focusing on the oppressive nature of social conventions and the exploitative character of capitalism.".³

Different methods are applied in the film to increase the impact of the film. In his film, Roy's casting of non-actors; even in minor parts helps enhance the film's realism. The film has strong icons such as the rickshaw, which signifies Shambhu's struggle and the burden he bears. This film depicts the harsh truths about the two extremes viz, the rural and urban context.

Do Bigha Zamin stands at the **forefront of Parallel Cinema by engaging the audience in the story** while at the same time communicating messages about **societal issues**. Most of the film audience understands that this film directed by Bimal Roy, starring Sahni Balraj is a classic film from which the hearty smile and pain do not vanish because of the conflict presented which is still evoked in today's society. Ray's film PatherPanchali and Aprajito are examples of the parallel film movement 'He is among the most reticent individuals to have ever directed a film, and this in a country where the film industry is notorious for such extremities'. The re-creation of film making with a focus on the new age story telling without the dependence on the traditional theaters and inhabitants. The film Do Bigha Zamin is no exception, R. K. Narayan, the renowned author of The Malgudi Days, explores the pain of displacement and loss that exasperates the within a struggle for existence of every man.

It enables one to relate the common themes and features present in the **modern movement of the cinema content**. This is clear, for instance in the popularity of streaming platforms at this age and because of the massive improved technological advances. In communications, this has led to the construction of diverse images that do not necessarily correspond to reality. Panchayat type of shows & Soni type of films in Netflix fit well within this framework of Social Realism & focus on characters providing the narrative. Strong characters with backstories and inner conflicts akin to Shambhu's are often **forecasted within OTT's modern Parallel Cinema**.

Do Bigha Zamin is famous for its character portrayal especially that of Balraj Sahni who plays Shambhu. This method of storytelling focusing on the dignity, struggle and calmness of the main character has not faded away even in the age of OTT. In an age where film making is called for two different dimensions, particularly on OTT Distributorship, the audience is often treated to the invocation of robust, fully developed profiles of the main characters, **whose missions are presented against the backdrop of a vividly depicted social order, encrypted communication systems in use**. There is an influence of Italian Neo-realism which is characterized by the use of peasant actors for a specific purpose, shooting on the sets of real locations, and concern for the common man in the direction of Do Bigha Zamin by Bimal Roy. This stylistic approach has an upward reawakening in the OTT Platform, in that the reassurance of economic viability cuts away any restraints on creativity.

Panchayat (2020- Present)

² Indian Contemporary Films and Social Reflections, Edited by Neena chokrovorty, Sharmila kayal, Sayak Pal, Adamas Knowledge city, Barasat

³ Ganti, T. (2013). "Bollywood: A Guidebook to Popular Hindi Cinema." Routledge, page 18

‘Panchayat’ The web series is about balancing the beauty of rural life and how simple life can be in the rural regions of India. The series has **intelligent depiction of urban rural attitude and problems of a village and the people with implementation of such villages**. This is a film however that gives importance to community, humor, and socio-economic difference – all of which is why “Panchayat” is loved by the masses and – to some extent – exemplifies a change within the tradition of modern day Parallel Cinema.

So, the series Panchayat, released on Amazon Prime Video, can also be regarded as one of the manifestations of another labor wave of Parallel Cinema in the OTT era. In the richer part of Indian cinema that is Bollywood, there may be a focus on glamorous revenge sagas but in the series ‘Panchayat’ and misadventures captured therein, a different angle is accentuated.

Panchayat is built around the inner workings of a small village panchayat in the Indian hinterland. It embodies the essence of village life in its various degrees of simplicity as well as complexity. The story takes in the middle of the action an urban youth who allures and at the same time resents working in some parts of rural India as a Panchayat secretary. This emphasis on relating to one’s audience without resorting to exaggeration is one that is typical of Parallel Cinema and sets it apart from the more exaggerated stereotypes presented in Bollywood for instance, of the society. The narrative engages several social and political dimensions experienced in the country’s periphery that include the red tape, the issue of women, and the dreams and realities of rural citizens. It dramatizes the problems and processes involved in rural administration and deliver a biting commentary on welfare politics without losing focus on the fortitude and resourcefulness of the villagers.

In achieving ‘Panchayat’ is a keen understanding as to what and how beautiful it can be to live in the villages and how simple life exists in the rural part of India. It is a series that has **simple yet intelligent representation of problems created by urbanization and nay implementation of such villages** and the people inhabiting them. This is however a film that prioritizes – love for the people, outline of the habitat, and diversity of the economy, social classes – that is why “Panchayati” is adored by the people and – in some ways – exemplifies a break in the evolving traditions of imageries contemporarily known as quite a number of Parallel Cinema. Evidently, the Amazon Prime series Panchayat, can also be attributed to the proliferation of yet another wave of Parallel Cinema in the era of OTT platforms. The biggest section of Indian cinema which can be terms as Bollywood perhaps focuses more on revenge dramas adorned with glamour, but there is a different perspective highlighted in the web series ‘Panchayat’.

Panchayat revolves around the rift of a panchayat or a block, deep in the interiors of India. It encapsulates village life in its fullness in terms of both simplicity and complexity. The plot in the middle of the action introduces an attractive, yet vexing, ‘panchayat secretary’ role ideal to an urban male looking to work in parts of rural india. While appreciating art, these films also tend to keep the audience in the orbit of common sensibility which is typical of their Parallel Cinema and makes Bollywood’s notional representation of society, for example, very different and very confused. So the story incorporates social and political experiences in the peculiar edge of the country, which embraces the bureaucracy, the women question, and the aspirations and the actualities of the countryside people.

Mirch Masala (1987)

The film ‘Mirch Masala’ directed by Ketan Mehta can be easily interpreted as a film dealing with power, resistance and community. The historical period of the film is set in India while the adverse issues of patriarchy and women's rights are prime. Sonbai played by Smita Patil is brave and rebellious and motivates other women in the story. “Mirch Masala” is also very political, as it tackles caste and gender based oppression, demonstrating how such notions can be dismantled through activism and solidarity.

Mirch Masala is about a small Indian village and its inhabitants, among which is Sonbai, a woman who works in a local factory and juggles defying a wayward tax collector. The issues of significant female figure and paid work highlighting the feminist perspective of societies where women are forced to endure quotidian struggles have the attention primary audiences and content creator contemporarily. Such platforms have also focused on gender social parity and issues, and there are series and films on women and empowerment, reaching extreme proportions. The film is praised mainly for its characterization with special mention of the lead character, Sonbai, as played by Smita Patil. Warmth and realism of characters is the trademark of the Parallel Cinema; such cinema does not shy away from the herculean task of depicting the characters rather than simply beautifying them. This is the case as well in the OTT era where there are also complex characters in series such as Delhi Crime and Made in Heaven which function, in terms of plot, like that of the movie Mirch Masala.

Mirch Masala is an opinion piece on aspects like power relations, bribery as well as patriarchy which are the key tenets of the Parallel Cinema. The revival of this genre in the age of OTT is because in there, one is able to make such content which has socio-political content as the one, which is often suppressed in the mainstream cinema. OTT series like Leila and Paatal Lok further explore similar socio-political themes dedicated to the legacy of films such as Mirch Masala.

The movie is reputed for rich techniques of cinematography and color usage in portraying resistance and empowerment. This aspect of visual narrative construction has been adopted by present day filmmakers who also use such elements to add to their narrative. Such narrative richness is made possible because of the creative allowance given by the OTT platforms and this is seen in the appetizing sad series such as Sacred Games and Ghoul.

Dahaad:

The show 'Dahaad' touches upon various social issues including, but not limited to, gender biases, discrimination based on caste, and the way society turns a blind eye to the violence targeted towards women. The main character who is a female cop is viewed with suspicion and ill-at-ease by her fellow male officers which points to the larger problem of how women are treated within the society. The series attempts to demonstrate the caste and gender perspectives working simultaneously and why it becomes essential to fight the internalized oppression in the viewers.

Dahaad takes place in a small village town in Rajasthan, India and is based on several mystery women deaths that are initially presumed to be suicides. The central character of the series, sub inspector Anjali Bhaati played by Sonakshi Sinha, investigates such women cases in the process of exploring other social issues. The backdrop and storyline are deeply realist with a focus on the way of life, and problems experienced by the people from rural India, which indeed is the hallmark of Parallel Cinema whose predominance is the realistic portrayal of the life of people without any embellishments. This series encompasses the important social-political issues such as the issue of – gender, caste atrocities, and corruption in the system. By dealing with these topics, Dahaad follows that path of cinema called Parallel Cinema, which aims to bring attention and raise questions about the existing social evils. The storyline illustrates the duality of the situation in which women find themselves in Indian villages, a sharp contrast to the earlier films of Parallel Cinema such as Mirch Masala and Ankur.

One of the features that set Dahaad apart is how the characters develop throughout the story. The main character, Anjali Bhaati, is described as a complicated yet strong-willed woman who goes against the typical stereotype of a female and overcomes the personal as well the professional obstacles. The narrative also sheds light on the other characters and their development, hence revealing their motivations and which internal or external forces could be at a conflict with them. Such an emphasis on full-bodied, believable figures is one of the characteristics of Parallel Cinema, which is one of the reasons why mainstream cinema has characterization that is full of archetypal characters.

The OTT platform like Amazon Prime Video has given rise to content creation and consumption therein, enabling filmmakers to address bolder subjects and alternate storytelling techniques. Certain narrative and thematic aspects present in Mirch Masala have had an impact on the rise of OTT currently. Social realism and, more importantly, social critique are hallmarks that have been successfully carried over to the digital space. For example, the series Four More Shots Please! and Bombay Begums showcase the lives and challenges faced by women following the same ardently feminist narrative in Mirch Masala. Dahaad has earned positive reviews for its engaging plot, impressive acting, as well as relevance to contemporary social issues. The positive response from critics and audiences respectively emphasizes the increasing appreciation and evolution of content that suits the tenets of Parallel Cinema. Understanding the audience dynamics and the content marketing strategies, Payne et al. OTT offered content liberally without the hazards of traditional movie kinescopes where commercial viability was the most important aspect. This has weighted it into the New Wave movement of the modern times where the exploristic endeavors of new filmmakers are being brought into the content of the new age.

In conclusion, we can say that Do Bigha Zamin's legacy is crucial to the tenets of Parallel Cinema and it is quite apparent with the revival of this genre in the OTT Age. The social commitment and realism of the film along with the development of characters and politics of economy set a pattern which modern day story tellers are still pursuing. And such is the case with this revival, as OTTs have been a great help in addressing these mother problems that Do Bigha Zamin exquisitely set up and comes in full circle by developing them forward. Moreover, Mirch Masala is a great contributor to the revival of Parallel Cinema as a trend in the age of OTT platforms. Its

relational cultural themes, of feminism in particular, social justice, and narrative fiction, are still relevant and contemporary to modern day content creators. In that sense, growing popularity of such content has turned OTTs into new media that provided opportunities for such focused exploration, keeping the spirit of Parallel Cinema afloat and in development. This maintenance and re-interpretation of Mirch Masala's theme, which plays aids the navigational prowess of their users in the current day and age of digital entertainment encapsulates the thought-provoking narratives. As audiences continue to seek content that challenges and engages them, the future of Indian cinema looks promising, with a broader spectrum of stories and voices finding their place in the limelight.

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