

The Indian New Wave Must Change

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We have our own master filmmakers who do engage with cinema as medium in meaningful ways. Take the example of stalwarts like Mrinal Sen whose films ensured Indian cinema a legitimate place among the vibrant post-War world cinema. Filmmakers like Adoor Gopalakrishnan and Girish Kasaravalli have indeed tried to follow these masters' legacies in their own unique ways. However, the Indian New Wave – which the films of these masters had paved way for – unfortunately doesn't exist anymore as a movement. Once actively felt in a few Indian languages films like in Bengali, Malayalam, Hindi, Kannada and Marathi, this new wave has ceased to be a force. We have already started talking nostalgically about it.

Indian parallel cinema, which used to be known in different names like new cinema, art cinema, offbeat cinema, art house cinema, minority cinema, alternative cinema, new cinema and experimental cinema, has brought laurels from audiences and film scholars abroad as well as within India. But the advocates of commercial cinema in India have always tried dismissing it by labelling it "intellectuals' cinema" and succeeded in keeping it away from the mainstream audience. It is also true that the majority of the audience, attuned only to the formulas of commercial cinema and not having been exposed to good cinema, find such films unacceptable. It is quite natural that they are yet to develop a taste for good cinema. However, this fact only reiterates the need for a parallel cinema, for the sake of a healthy society and cultural milieu. And it is precisely for this reason that mature film lovers are upset by the demise of the New Wave and the emergence of what film journalists have started calling 'New Generation films' which are nothing but perverted attempts to claim the legacy of the former.

Just like how the market-oriented imperatives of globalization have suppressed counter ideologies, the parallel cinema as an imagination and the aesthetic movement of the new wave, which resisted the dominant cultural norms, have all faded into the oblivion. The space for good cinema is still lying vacant, as the so called new generation cinema adventures are only a continuation of the mainstream cinema. Was the demise of the new wave untimely or inevitable? We need to look at the historical and aesthetic relevance of the New Wave in order to get an answer.

"Today, we get to read about new directors as well as small budget films without stars. It looks like there are going to be exclusive theatres showing offbeat films. These are exciting news. Our cinema needs such a movement." These are Satyajit Rai's words, while talking about a few films that reflected refinement at the level of the aesthetics and content. In this text (*Our Films, Their Films* 1976), in which he praises Mrinal Sen's *Bhuvan Shome*, Rai also sounds a warning to his imitators by saying: "Films sticking to old formulas might succeed. But there is no rescue for all the crap that are being produced under the label of offbeat cinema." (Perhaps, the 'hard work' of a set of directors who didn't take Rai's words very seriously also would have contributed to the early demise of the Indian New Wave.) In the early 1980s, Adoor Gopalakrishnan, who spearheaded the parallel cinema movement in Malayalam, had raised apprehensions about the use of the term 'parallel cinema'

itself. In one of his early articles which appeared in the collection *Cinemayude Lokam* (The World of Cinema; 1983), he said: "The use of the term has many practical limitations. First of all, it sounds as if this cinema will have to operate as isolated from the mainstream cinema. There has not been any movement in cinema which has not been assimilated into the mainstream cinema." Adoor has not elaborated anywhere on this logic of assimilation into the mainstream. It sounds ahistorical and compromising to argue that the movements in art and cinema that emerge out of resistances towards the dominant system will all ultimately be assimilated into the mainstream. As long as Hollywood control the global culture industry through cinema, and as long as the Indian film industry blindly follow the Hollywood model, there will be space and significance for a parallel wave of good cinema. Going by Adoor's logic, we need to search for the traces of the dead parallel cinema in the market spaces of the mainstream. If that is indeed the truth, then should we welcome the assimilation? The hopes that either the market-oriented mainstream films will elevate itself to the high artistic standards of good cinema, or that the parallel cinema will gradually become commercially viable, are futile, as long as one doesn't work out the theoretical foundations of such assumptions. (...)

On the one hand, we have commercial films appropriating the cinematic language that the proponents of art cinema have introduced; on the other hand, we have our parallel cinema adopting the marketing strategies and popular elements of the mainstream. One could say, this is the way in which Adoor's predictions have materialized. In contrast to other art forms, the heavy dependency of cinema on capital brings it under the monopoly of the capitalists. In other words, the technological art called cinema is more in the control of the film industrialists rather than artists. This explains Hollywood's continuing hegemony. (...) It is not going to be easy to redeem cinema in a country like ours from the influences of Hollywood which realized the tremendous potential of cinema as a medium that can appeal even to the illiterates. In fact, the first modernist movement in cinema called Neo Realism emerged as a protest against the illusions of this Hollywood.

Though cinema has witnessed several reforming movements from as early as 1940s – like Italian Neo Realism, French New Wave, American underground cinema, Cinemanova from the Latin Americas – theorists like Adorno have constantly refused to consider cinema as an art form. There were ideological reasons for this refusal. Adorno believed that since cinema is part of the culture industry that produces and perpetuates the values of the money market, it cannot be called an art. Adorno was fiercely criticized as cinema-illiterate to make such arguments. In fact it is clear that Adorno had in his mind mainstream commercial cinema when he made his arguments against cinema in whole. Only those who are not familiar with the history cinema would argue that cinema has progressed immensely over the last 50 years. In that sense, one can see in Adorno's arguments the hopes for an alternative cinema practice.

Like in the European countries which are the cradles of cinema, there are two dominant modes of practising cinema in India too: cinema as art and cinema as business. Even when the mainstream cinema catering to the needs of globalization has almost completely obliterated the parallel cinema that is firmly rooted in our nation's culture, there are still a few films being produced in Malayalam as well as other language films in India drawing energies from the old parallel cinema. It is natural that many aesthetic forms and imaginations experimented by earlier movements in cinema are still being reinvented and redeployed from time to time. For example, though Neo Realism was considered even during the time of its proponents, one can see its aesthetic influences on films

being produced in various parts of the world even today. Neorealism has not been assimilated into any mainstream; it remains so even now. The films of many stalwart directors from India in fact can be tagged in this category.

Fundamentally, it was the resistance towards Nazism and Fascism, the numbing effects of popular cinema, an empathy towards the suffering people, a modernist attitude towards cinema, and an allegiance towards reality were the hallmarks of Italian Neorealism. But surprisingly these theoretical commitments were not seen in Indian parallel cinema. Perhaps one of the reasons for the untimely death of our parallel cinema could be its lack of a theoretical commitment. It was after *Bicycle Thieves* was screened in the international film festival of 1952 that Indian filmmakers were exposed to neorealism. Rai prepared the outlines of his first film after watching the same film from London. From that moment, until its demise, Indian parallel cinema followed neorealism's principles, except on very few occasions. (...)

Neorealism was not just a fresh perspective in terms of aesthetics. Its content was political; its standpoints were ideological. Many Indian directors who are called Neorealists would like to be known as politically neutral, 'pure artists', either because they don't realize Neorealism's political charge or they do not want to accept that it was political. It is noteworthy that other than reforming the medium, our directors as well as critics have failed to evolve our nation's own contemporary film aesthetics or to provide a theoretical foundation for such a movement. The isolated attempts like that of Kumar Sahnii and Mani Kaul who nevertheless depend heavily on European theoreticians, however do not seem to have a currency in the specific contexts of film industries in various languages in India. This has come to be one of the limitations of Indian parallel cinema movement.

(...)

Though Italian Neorealism remains the chief inspiration for Indian parallel cinema, its emergence was closely linked to specific local contexts like the nationalist movements, Independence struggle, communal riots, the famines, the Partition, etc. The first generation of experimental filmmakers in India emerged out of the talented artists of the Left-affiliated Indian People's Theatre Association. KA Abbas's realist films like *Dharti Ke Lal*, and *Shehar aur Sapna* uphold the progressive aesthetic ethos of the IPTA. In Malayalam cinema too, the social realist literature had a major influence. From the novel *Randidangazhi*, this aesthetic spread its influence to films like *Neelakkuyil*, and achieved maturity in films like *Rarichan Enna Powran* and *Newspaper Boy*. It became part of even the mainstream cinema through writers and filmmakers like Thoppil Bhasi and K S Sethumadhavan, as popular films like *Aswamedham* and *Anubhavgal Palichakal* testify. However, Ramu Kariat's *Chemmeen* and P N Menon's *Olavum Theeravum* take Malayalam cinema closer to a [universal] cinematic language. Later, Adoor's *Swayamvaram* won Malayalam cinema several laurels at the national level, thus inaugurating parallel cinema in Malayalam. Even before the coming of John Abraham's *Agraharathil Kazhuthai* [Donkey in Brahmin Courtyard], Balu Mahendra's *Veedu* [Home] and *Sandhyaragam* [Evening Raga], and K Hariharan's *Ezhamathu Manithan* [The Seventh Man], several offbeat films were already being made in Tamil, like K Balachander's *Thanneer* [Water Water, 1981], and *Varumaiyin Niram Sivappu* [The Colour of Poverty is Red, 1980]; and Jayakanthan's *Unnaiyol Oruvan* [Someone Like You]. An urge reform the society, revolt against superstitions and injustices, the courage to challenge the elite's exploitation, siding with the marginalized, resistance against the caste hierarchy: these features can be identified in many films

made in the regional language film industries in India. However, as film texts, they remained primitive sloppy productions. (Ironically, when cinema started maturing as a cinematic medium, these thematic concerns started disappearing from cinema – an issue that needs to be studied.)

The point of citing these known historical facts here is to indicate that parallel cinema is not a phenomenon that emerged out of a black hole; it has distinct historical and local-national roots. Even before Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchanli*, Bimal Roy had started making films that defied the logics of the popular cinema, like *Do Bigha Zameen*. Similar is the case with Guru Dutt and Tapan Sinha, whose films took Bombay cinema away from its primitive form. The cinematic approaches that Guru Dutt's cameraman V K Moorthy introduced are devices that were poetically deployed in parallel cinema by cameramen like K K Mahajan. However, it is with the coming of Ray, Khatak and Mrinal Sen that cinema began to be considered a serious art in India. This famous Trinity differ among themselves in their style than things they agree upon. Ray, who didn't have an explicit political history, as well as Khatak and Sen who always kept their allegiances towards Communism and IPTA: all of them treaded a lone path. A future Indian will find the real India in their films which tasted successes and failures all along. India's cultural diversity and multiple life forms were reflected in the films of directors like Adoor Gopalakrishnan, Aravindan, Shyam Benegal, M S Sathyu, Govind Nihalani, Utpendu Chakraborty, B V Karanth, Girish Karnad, Prema Karanth, Girish Kasaravally, Shaji N Karun, Balu Mahendra, etc etc. The relevance of parallel cinema lies there.

The active art cinema movement of the 1970s in Malayalam was an attempt to make cinema contemporary. The dilemmas of the rebellious lovers (Adoor's *Swayamvaram*), the tragedy of the rural lives that were marginalized in the modernizing world (MT Vasudevan Nair's *Nirmalyam*), the anxieties of womanhood that battles the laziness and selfishness of the male world (*Athithi* of KP Kumaran), the identity crisis of the contemporary youth (Aravindan's *Utharayanam*), the alienating worlds of feudal society (K R Mohanan's *Aswaddhamav*), the dilemmas of the urban intellectuals (*Iniyum Marichittillatha Nammal* by Raveendran), etc were films that showed us unique cinematic renderings of themes and concerns alien to Malayalam cinema until then. Among these, Adoor and T V Chandran are the leading figures of parallel cinema now. We do not know this legacy will be continued; however, attempts by mainstream filmmakers like Ranjith and Kamal in making meaningful interventions in popular cinema prove that the efforts of parallel cinema has not been in vain.

The death of parallel cinema in India reflects the changes in values at the national level. Parallel cinema was a movement against the system against all odds and with the help of film societies. It also had nominal official backings from film festivals, film finance corporations, film institute and the film archive – directly or indirectly. The Nehruvian imagination has been compromised by the later central governments in favour of liberalization and commercialization. The shifting of the venue of film festival to Goa which is a tourist destination is indicative of the changing approach of the government towards cinema. It has become the carnival of stars! Commercial cinema now controls awards and festivals.

The fake cinemas that tried exploiting the name of parallel cinema also contributed to this deterioration. The fact that Mira Nair's films which are aimed at the overseas Indian viewers and films like *Slumdog Millionaire* are being celebrated as good films is indicative of the lack of film literacy amongst us. The reasons why the so called New Generation films in Malayalam are

celebrated are not entirely different. Critics often fail to notice that these art films also serve the ideological purposes of the mainstream cinema. It is also a common sight in Kerala to see 'art film directors' who are only used to the praises of critics coming up with inferior films one after the other and projecting them as sublime works of art. They remind us of the circus buffoons. It is in this vacuum that a few career-ist filmmakers pretend they are the new apostles of parallel cinema.

It is also disturbing that even when the number of viewers at the international film festival keep increasing, the number of viewers for the occasional good film that get released in theatres has not increased at all. All over India, film festivals have become forums for snobs to show off.

One has to acknowledge with regret that the death of parallel cinema was inevitable. However, it will be revived. If not as a movement, then as isolated films. Good art has to survive. What else has human beings have got to dream about!
