Parallel Cinema

The Indian New Wave, commonly known in India as Art Cinema or Parallel Cinema as an alternative to the mainstream commercial cinema, is a specific movement in Indian cinema, known for its serious content, realism and naturalism, with a keen eye on the sociopolitical climate of the times. This movement is distinct from mainstream Bollywood cinema and began around the same time as the French New Wave and Japanese New Wave. The movement was initially led by Bengali cinema (which has produced internationally acclaimed filmmakers such as Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, Ritwik Ghatak and others) and then gained prominence in the other film industries of India.

Origins

Realism in Indian cinema dates back to the 1920s and 1930s. One of the earliest examples was V. Shantaram's 1925 silent film classic Sawkari Pash (Indian Shylock), about a poor peasant (portrayed by Shantaram) who "loses his land to a greedy moneylender and is forced to migrate to the city to become a mill worker. Acclaimed as a realistic breakthrough, its shot of a howling dog near a hut, has become a milestone in the march of Indian cinema." The 1937 Shantaram film Duniya Na Mane (The Unaccepted) also critiqued the treatment of women in Indian society.[1]

Early years

The Parallel Cinema movement began to take shape from the late 1940s to the 1960s, by pioneers such as Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak, Bimal Roy, Mrinal Sen, Khwaja Ahmad Abbas, Chetan Anand, Guru Dutt and V. Shantaram. This period is considered part of the ‘Golden Age’ of Indian cinema.[2][3][4] This cinema borrowed heavily from the Indian literature of the times, hence became an important study of the contemporary Indian society, and is now used by scholars and historians alike to map the changing demographics the and socio-economic as well political temperament of the Indian populace. Right from its inception, Indian cinema has had people who wanted to and did use the medium for more than entertainment. They used it to highlight prevalent issues and sometimes to throw open new issues for the public. An early example was Chetan Anand's Neecha Nagar (1946), a social realist film that won the Grand Prize at the first Cannes Film Festival.[5] Since then, Indian independent films were frequently in competition for the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, with some of them winning major prizes at the festival.

During the 1950s and the 1960s, intellectual filmmakers and story writers became frustrated with musical films. To counter this, they created a genre of films which depicted reality from an artful perspective. Most films made during this period were funded by state governments to promote an authentic art genre from the Indian film fraternity. The most famous Indian "neo-realist" was the Bengali film director Satyajit Ray, followed by Shyam Benegal, Mrinal Sen, Adoor Gopalakrishnan and Girish Kasaravalli. Ray's most famous films were Pather Panchali (1955), Aparajito (1956) and The World of Apu (1959), which formed The Apu Trilogy. Produced on a shoestring budget of Rs. 150,000 ($3000),[6][7]
the three films won major prizes at the Cannes, Berlin and Venice Film Festivals, and are today frequently listed among the greatest films of all time.[8][9][10][11]

Certain art films have also garnered commercial success, in an industry known for its surrealism or 'fantastical' movies, and successfully combined features of both art and commercial cinema. An early example of this was Bimal Roy's Do Bigha Zamin (1953), which was both a commercial and critical success. The film won the International Prize at the 1954 Cannes Film Festival and paved the way for the Indian New Wave.[12][13][14] Hrishikesh Mukherjee, one of Hindi cinema's most successful filmmakers, was named the pioneer of 'middle cinema', and was renowned for making films that reflected the changing middle-class ethos. According to Encyclopædia Britannica, Mukherjee "carved a middle path between the extravagance of mainstream cinema and the stark realism of art cinema".[15] Another filmmaker to integrate art and commercial cinema was Guru Dutt, whose film Pyaasa (1957) featured in Time magazine's "All-TIME" 100 best movies list.[16]

In the 1960s, the Indian government began financing independent art films based on Indian themes. Many of the directors were graduates of the FTII (Film and Television Institute of India), in Pune. The Bengali film director Ritwik Ghatak was a professor at the institute and a well-known director. Unlike Ray, however, Ghatak did not gain international fame during his lifetime. For example, Ghatak's Nagarik (1952) was perhaps the earliest example of a Bengali art film, preceding Ray's Pather Panchali by three years, but was not released until after his death in 1977.[17][18] His first commercial release Ajantrik (1958) was also one of the earliest films to portray an inanimate object, in this case an automobile, as a character in the story, many years before the Herbie films.[19] The protagonist of Ajantrik, Bimal, can also be seen as an influence on the cynical cab driver Narasingh (played by Soumitra Chatterjee) in Satyajit Ray's Abhijan (1962).[20]

Growth

During the 1970s and the 1980s, parallel cinema entered into the limelight of Hindi cinema to a much wider extent. This was led by such directors as Gulzar, Shyam Benegal and Saeed Akhtar Mirza, and later on Mahesh Bhatt and Govind Nihalani, becoming the main directors of this period's Indian art cinema. Benegal's directorial debut, Ankur (Seeding, 1974) was a major critical success, and was followed by numerous works that created another field in the movement. These filmmakers tried to promote realism in their own different styles, though many of them often accepted certain conventions of popular cinema.[21] Parallel cinema of this time gave careers to a whole new breed of young actors, including Shabana Azmi, Smita Patil, Amol Palekar, Om Puri, Naseeruddin Shah, Kulbhushan Kharbanda, Pankaj Kapoor, and even actors from commercial cinema like Rekha and Hema Malini ventured into art cinema.

Adoor Gopalakrishnan extended the Indian New Wave to Malayalam cinema with his film Swayamvaram in 1972. Long after the Golden Age of Indian cinema, Malayalam cinema experienced its own 'Golden Age' in the 1980s and early 1990s. Some of the most acclaimed Indian filmmakers at the time were from the Malayalam industry, including Adoor Gopalakrishnan, G. Aravindan, Padmarajan, John Abraham (director), T. V. Chandran and Shaji N. Karun.[22] Gopalakrishnan, who is often considered to be Satyajit
Ray's spiritual heir,[23] directed some of his most acclaimed films during this period, including Elippathayam (1981) which won the Sutherland Trophy at the London Film Festival, as well as Mathilukal (1989) which won major prizes at the Venice Film Festival.[24] Shaji N. Karun's debut film Piravi (1989) won the Camera d'Or at the 1989 Cannes Film Festival, while his second film Swaham (1994) was in competition for the Palme d'Or at the 1994 Cannes Film Festival.[25] His third film Vanaprastham (1999) was also selected to Cannes Film Festival, making him the only Indian film maker who could take consecutively three films to Cannes.

Girish Kasaravalli, Girish Karnad and B. V. Karanth led the way for parallel cinema in the Kannada film industry, while Mani Ratnam has done the same for Tamil cinema.

**Decline**

By the early 1990s, the rising costs involved in film production and the commercialization of the films had a negative impact on the art films. The fact that investment returns cannot be guaranteed made art films less popular amongst filmmakers. Underworld financing, political and economic turmoil, television and piracy proved to be fatal threat to parallel cinema, as it declined.

**Resurgence**

Konkona Sen Sharma and Rahul Bose, in Aparna Sen's Mr. and Mrs. Iyer (2002).

The term "parallel cinema" has started being applied to off-beat films produced in Bollywood, where art films have begun experiencing a resurgence. This led to the emergence of a distinct genre known as Mumbai noir,[26] urban films reflecting social problems in the city of Mumbai.[27]


Other Indian art film directors active today include Mrinal Sen, Buddhadeb Dasgupta, Aparna Sen, Gautam Ghose, Sandip Ray (Satyajit Ray's son) and Rituparno Ghosh in Bengali cinema; Adoor Gopalakrishnan, Shaji N. Karun and T. V. Chandran in Malayalam cinema; Kumar Shahani, Ketan Mehta,
Govind Nihalani and Shyam Benegal[28] and Deepa Mehta in Hindi cinema; Mani Ratnam and Bala in Tamil cinema.