



## Independent Cinema in India: An Emerging Cinematic Form

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### Reviewed Works

Ashwin Immanuel Devasundaram, 2016. *India's New Independent Cinema: Rise of the Hybrid*. New York: Routledge, 292 pp., ISBN: 978-1-18462-6, Price £ 85.00.

Omar Ahmed, 2015. *Studying Indian Cinema*. United Kingdom: Auteur Publishing, 300 pp., ISBN: 9781-906733-67-4, Price £ 27.00.

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Edna Lim and Lilian Chee, eds. 2015. *Asian Cinema and the Use of Space: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. New York: Routledge, 234 pp., ISBN: 978-0-415-70937-8, Price £ 95.00.

Sakti Sengupta, 2015. *Discovering Indian Independent Cinema: the Films of Girish Kasaravalli*. n.p.: Copyright by Author, 298 pp., ISBN: 13:978-1511675192, Price \$14.00.

Recent academic writings that evaluate new configurations and concomitant practices of Hindi cinema become an inevitable means to analyse how academia is invested in re-formulating our perceptions of the particular context of South Asian cinema. Devasundaram's seminal publication *India's New Independent Cinema: Rise of the Hybrid* (2016) allows a nuanced reading of India's emerging Independent Cinema in recent years. His book provides a central argument around the rise of Indie films made in Hindi since 2010. The role of economic mobilisation, political changes, and artistic momentum are some of the trends that are observed by Devasundaram (2016) and Ahmed (2015) alike. In *Studying Indian Cinema* (2015) Ahmed records, a long standing history of Indian Cinema produced in Hindi in the post-independence era, while Devasundaram allows readers to explore the



political economy and theoretical implications of the new hybrid form which he sees as Indie films. On a similar note Sengupta's *Discovering Indian Independent Cinema: The Films of Girish Kasaravalli* (2015) explores how an Auteur perspective or directorial voice is endemic in shaping of Independent Cinema in India.

A thorough case study of Girish Kasaravalli's films provide an in-depth analysis of the politics, emergence and structuring of narrative style seen as dominant in Independent film production. It is important to register how the above mentioned books provide a moment of entry into cinema historiography as well aesthetic development. These works explore the development of the Movement of Indian Parallel Cinema that began in 1946. It is followed by the New Wave Movement which lasted from 1952 till 1976. These three writers add a fresh perspective for re-evaluating scholarly understandings of Indian Cinema in new light, and raise concerns over Independent film ventures. Another noteworthy moment is their continuous exploration of visual space. The notion of space here deals with the constant reproduction of metaphorical and literal reproduction of meaning on the film screen. It also allows questioning how cinema records the changing social order and changing configurations of culture in a material sense. The new global underpinnings that shape cinema are well studied, portraying Asian socio-political concerns. Chee and Lim's work (2015) tries to understand the use of spaces, artistic movements as well as new experiments evident in Independent Cinema.

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Recent scholarly engagements strenuously try to define Independent Cinema, which is creating its niche away from main stream film networks, by eliminating ambiguous interpretations. The primary arguments are centered on concepts mentioned by Devasundaram while testing arguments regarding the interpretation of the political and artistic development available in Ahmed, Sengupta and Chee and Lim (Devasundaram 2016; Ahmed 2015; Sengupta 2015; Chee & Lim 2015).

We observe how Omar Ahmed's book, published almost a year before Devasundaram's analysis of Independent Cinema, particularly defines 'Bollywood' films, popularly understood as entertaining films that contain song and dance sequences, and that are known today as part of Hindi Cinema globally. His book points out how recent debates are shaping future discourses on social issues and what kind of role Indian cinema plays as a catalyst for social debates (Ahmed 2015). Considering Devasundaram's analysis of a case study of eight Indepen-



dent films, we find how a new form of Indie films has emerged that is intelligently negotiating the Parallel Cinema movement, while challenging the hegemony of Bollywood in Indian cinema. The Indie films he has taken up for analysis are *Gandu* (2010), *Dhobi Ghat* (2010), *Peepli Live* (2010), *Lunchbox* (2013), *Harud* (2010), *I am* (2010), and *Ship of Theseus* (2013). It is very crucial to notice that all films were released after 2010. In Devasundaram's view, this time line is indicative of more 'hybridised' visual and narrative techniques in film making, which reflects the socio-political development of this decade (Devasundaram 2016). These eight films contain themes that depict fringe politics and question the agency of its protagonists. These recent Indie films also show awareness of the new consumer economy, depicting cosmopolitan spaces while collaborating with trans-local themes.

### **The Development of Independent Cinema: Social Issues and Political Crises**

The inter-connectedness between Independent Cinema and the Hindi Film Industry asks for a nuanced inquiry in the field of Cinema Studies. Here, existing theories, experimental forms of cinema and their use of space defines the recent emergence of Independent Cinema that runs parallel to the Hindi Film Industry. It is important to notice how in the aforementioned writings Independent Cinema works from a position of imperative knowledge. The ubiquitous notion of space, dealing with marginal identities, political crisis or treatment of violence through visual foray is gaining more validation. Changing demographics of cities in Asia, the economic boom, and changes in gender prototypes are giving rise to new spaces of representation. This form of representation is trying to work away from a traditionalist mode, creating an open-ended discussion on what was considered a tabooed or profane topic for cinematic engagement. The liminal spaces created on screen tend to frame the materiality of everyday lives. These visual frames cut through spaces of the urban political milieu and depict struggles of marginalised identities for example, Dalits, and LGBTQ groups. On another level, recent Independent Cinema is trying to engage with sensitised themes, depicting changing gender norms, extra-judiciary violence, and challenging economic deviations in the post-neoliberal era.

A crucial work that engages with the idea of space and its limitation is Lilian Chee and Edna Lim's edited volume *Asian Cinema and the Use*



*of Space: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (2015). It deals with a non-linear idea of space and its disruption through auteur cinema produced in Asia. This book presents intensive case studies that affect visual frames on many screens in South and South-East Asia and globally. Such linkages are vital to study since the histories of many Asian countries have similar colonial and violent pasts. These moments imbue familiar processes of modernisation, industrial development, and gender extrapolation in twenty first century Asian societies that are straddling with tradition on the one hand and economic liberation on the other.

The skillful portrayal of social issues where identities are on the brink, or the depiction of political or judicial injustices, are some of the most strenuous matters which Independent films are raising today. These films are acknowledging narratives that have struggled in the past to gain a foothold in the mainstream debate. Films produced in last few years have, and continue to produce, new debates around regional segregation, which is seen through the xenophobic apparatus working within the Indian metropolis. At the same time, these films affectively tap into the recent outcry on gender inequality and issues pertaining to violence on the sub-continent. It is apparent how Independent Cinema is no more shying away from showing decrepit social norms which were earlier considered a profane subject matter. Moments of social-political unrest have resulted in cultural and religious intolerance that has caused the flaring up of violence, which is both civil and militaristic in nature. These episodes of ethnic tension and religious disparity create a parallel narrative challenging the role of the Hindi Film Industry's nationalist bend as well as its government backing over the years. These are some of the decisive topics that Independent film makers are engaging with, while articulating irate but subversive issues observed in Indian society. Their mode of representation is not only experimental in nature but has a bold language of assertion to reckon with.

The edited volume of Chee and Lim (2015) contributes to the argument by defining the role of emerging cinematic practices and changing configurations of culture and society at the same time. The contributions further explore the making and the production of films that are grounded in Asian contexts, and at the same time grapple with typologies of changing labour conditions, economy, conflicts and the process of globalisation. By exploring other changing aspects of urban and non-urban communities through flows of capitalism, and by questioning mobility, migration issues, and cultural appropriation, the



authors trace shifts that have resulted in a new texture of cinema that is intrinsic to Asian countries and yet global in nature (Chee & Lim 2015). This inquiry allows readers to understand the emergence of Independent Cinema and shapes future academic discourse. It establishes how cinema in the Indian context uses space differently but intermittently highlights its ubiquitous nature. Independent Cinema produced since 2010 in India comprises a new language of representation, using at times realism in documentary form, creating a hybrid body of text which challenges the reflexive and mimetic nature of cinema in past decades.

These spaces give rise to inter-subjectivities that offer an insight into the city as a space. The politics of displacement, notions of belonging, justice, lack of freedom, and the urban/rural divide play an important role in shaping Asian cinema. This aspect of Independent Cinema works overtly with identities that exist on the peripheries of constrained locations that are also seen as dispossessed estranged in a socio-political milieu, belonging to Diaspora communities, or grappling with processes of alienation (Chee & Lim 2015). Movements of space and identity show vigorous thematic interest as well as new practices in Independent films today. Devasundaram also observes how films like *Lunchbox* (2013) and *Ship of Theseus* (2013) explore stark realities of cities such as Mumbai (Devasundaram 2016). The exploration of visual space and narrative style links the inward journey of characters, at times tracing emotional as well as intellectual movement within the plot.

However, the global underpinning of Independent Cinema opens up new possibilities of interpretation; it works with overlapping themes and splices multiple narrative styles. Many of these Independent films are dealing with subject matter that is local at a glance but connects struggles of human societies on a global level. Depiction of poverty, persistent conflict and contravened politics of the state are raised in Independent films across nations and boundaries. These films are predominantly hinting at the fringe politics that are willing to experiment with very sensitive issues at hand. Independent films constantly mirror urban spaces and conflicted localities, where space creates a montage of performative as well as discursive aspects of urban/rural geographies.

The number of films included in the 'Independent' film category is increasing every year. Their spatial texture, subjective concern, and experimental mode of narration are some key factors that can form



the summation of what might be understood as Independent Cinema. Devasundaram's pioneering work has enabled scholars and readers to delve deeper into multi-layered structuring of Independent Cinema as a genre. He sees New Indie as a divergent form, which is altering the dominant style and content found in Bollywood films. What can be termed as an Independent film emerges from his quintessential analysis of intricate interviews with different directors, who are willing to engage with Independent Cinema and who promote independent ventures in India since 2010. The changing style and content of Indie Cinema is seen as an "ambivalent interstitial space" where the "cinematic narrative of resistance to mainstream socio-cultural and political discourses" are made possible (Devasundaram 2016: 4). Since 2010, Indie films are recording shifts in the political landscape, his case study of films represent an alternative reality of marginalised subjects.

### **From New Wave to 'Indie' Films**

In recent years, the scholarship on Independent Cinema explores how the New Indie film is claiming a new space of political and aesthetic assertion. Gopal notes that three important studios of the 1930s, New Theatres in Calcutta, Bombay Talkies in Bombay and Prabhat in Pune, brought up social issues of the decade particularly dealing with issues of untouchability, or caste discrimination. Working with the radical realism of the time, helped in promoting reformist yearnings through social films (Gopal 2011). These films and the politics of the era were important for the future development of cinema movements in India.

According to Sengupta two important movements emerged out of the development in the 1930s: the 1940s experienced the streak of the 'Progressive Art' Movement (Pragatisheelta) which provided enough ground for the onset of the New Wave Movement (Navodaya) in 1950s where visual experiment was made possible on the elementary level, and that lasted till 1975 (Sengupta 2015).

Similarly, Ahmed traces the emergence and fall of Parallel Cinema, which started in Bengal in the 1950s and 1960s and then gathered momentum in the rest of the country. He establishes how Art House films also found an alternate market which had middle class backing. This middle class was abreast with the European cinematic style and the New Wave aesthetic language of cinema (Ahmed 2015). Ahmed traces how organisations like the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA, founded in 1940s) and the National Film Development Corporation of India (NFDC, founded in 1975) were some of the few the



organisations using films as an ideological tool to emancipate the socio-political messages conveyed through films for the Indian audience (Ahmed 2015: 131).

This trajectory was similar in Kannada or Bengali cinema from where it all started, through stalwarts like Satyajit Ray and Ritvik Ghatak and later known figures like Girish Kasaravalli who expanded the realist work. The emergence of a new artistic movement and experimental form was noticed all over the subcontinent, including Bangladesh and Pakistan, stressing at authorial perspective and a keen inclination for realist visual splicing. It is evident in Sangita Gopal's writing which acknowledges that "cinema's connection to the social is not reflective but productive. At stake is not cinema as a sociology but cinema as a pedagogy" (Gopal 2011: 166). What she implies here is the role of cinema in many given contexts to voice themes that are prevalent in a certain context of time or society, which Ray, Ghatak and Kasaravalli have shown in previous decades.

India's economic dreams were shattering at the end of 1960s; the end of the Nehruvian utopia was another symbolic point shaping a new social realist genre. The promises of a better society, unified identity, and equal social opportunities had left the nation and its subjects in a disgruntled reality. Nehru's modernisation and industrialisation linked extreme corruption to poverty on the grass root level, social unrest led to disdain and exploitation (Sengupta 2015). Films kept on engaging with concerns of untouchability, urban escapes linked to extreme poverty, the rich and the poor divide, lack of justice and the angst of the common man fighting rudimentary socio-political conditions. The time which preceded the socialist/realist hankering of Indian cinema as the New Wave Movement did not vanish per se.

The change in government policies as well as the funding coming from both commercial and government sectors further created possibilities for the production and distribution of Parallel Cinema in India. Many of these production houses aligned themselves with the Film Finance Corporation (FFC, established around 1960s) which funded new projects in alternate studio systems. This was followed by the government's landmark initiative in the 1960s that finally recognised the potential of cinema as an industry contributing to the commercial sector. By the 1980s the non-codified monopoly of the FFC in terms of financial embargo or blockage of film distribution had left cinema and film makers in a muzzling situation. This divergence has certainly given rise to new Independent Cinema. By far, the Chapter "Parallel Voices"



in Ahmed's book, is one of the most convincing. It lays out the fundamental transition from parallel film discourse to the new cinema emerging in the form of Independent films.

The so-called in-between phase of the 1970s and the period of 1980s saw the emergence of 'Art House' cinema in India. It openly showed displeasure with the popular Bollywood genre that engaged in escapist, melodramatic plot lines that were purely entertaining in nature. The Art House film genre has engaged itself in creating subjects of mirth and entertainment, giving autonomy to sensitive social issues through overtly bold socio-political voices. Films like *Sujata* (1959) and *Ankur* (*Seedling*, 1974) are a few examples that were responsible in creating debates on caste politics vis-à-vis a lack of acknowledgement for the socially deprived factions of India.

In Omar Ahmed's own words: "Recent films such as *Dhobi Ghat* (2010) and *Dev D* (2009) straddle the middle ground of Indian cinema, mixing independent ideas with the mainstream elements" (2015: 133). His statement marks a moment of epiphany to what Devasundaram defines at length. Devasundaram notes how Independent films made since 2010 break away from "Bollywood's formulaic uni-dimensionality and its ubiquitous filmmaking conventions and grammar" (2016: 76). With precise aptness both authors delve into the contemporaneous aspect of Independent cinema, and its deviations.

Omar Ahmed's critical approach on studying cinema in India makes a significant observation: certain economic concerns adopted by the directors, like multiplexes, small audience focus or postmodern approaches are key elements that shape 'edgier films' today (Ahmed 2015). These new economic interventions or postmodernist plot structures are crucial points of entry to look at aspects of political economy shaping new Indie films since 2010. Another similar concern is evident in Devasundaram's work, where he assiduously questions 'hybridity' of form and structure in Independent Cinema. He asserts that Indie cinema is a hybrid form which has taken influence from post-colonial Art House and Parallel films (Devasundaram 2016: 17). This hybridity resonates a disjuncture from the "post-globalisation master narrative" of India's claim to neoliberal economy (Devasundaram 2016), thus giving voice to marginal themes away from mainstream representation existing within the Hindi Film industry.

Ahmed claims that 2001 created a watershed moment in Indian cinema through the films that were termed as transnational venture like *Slumdog Millionaire* (2005) and *Life of Pi* (2012). These films are



produced and distributed internationally and have story lines and themes that are adopted from the Indian Subcontinent. These trans-global themes have introduced local narratives, musical scores as well as issues which are endemic to South Asian realities. On the other hand Hindi films like *Kaminey* (*Rascals*, 2009), *Delhi Belly* (2011), and *Shor in The City* (*Noise in the City*, 2011) are some of the films that have used more liberal ways of experimenting with local elements. They have renewed the aesthetic form which has made independent cinema approachable for cine-literate audiences in India and worldwide.

Devasundaram taps into Gopal's claim of 'Hat-ke' cinema which literally translates as 'off-centered' cinema working away from mainstream plot constructions like family sagas and other entertainment films that are seen as part of the Hindi Film Industry (Devasundaram 2016: 61). Ahmed also observes another market strategy behind these global networks of film production and reception. He raises these concerns by looking at a trade and reception-based analysis of Diaspora films, which makes gross profits in the UK as well as worldwide. Ahmed observes that in 2010 in the UK more than twelve million pounds profit was made from Indian films and that also entered into the top-ten foreign category films charts. Distribution from 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox and UTV productions both as a studio system as well as film corporate has enabled a different space for film viewing (Ahmed 2015).

Ahmed is straddling between popular genre and the emergence of Independent films, anticipating a new emergence of aesthetic, whereas Devasundaram reads into the gap through what he calls "subversion of 'filial' morphology" (2016: 22) that creates a hybrid mutant form seen as Independent Cinema which challenges the filial space of Bollywood. His statement is indicative to constant negotiation, at several instances diverging from traditional approaches: there is a synthesis of old thematic structure with new artistic style, taking departure from the generic treatment of plots, thus creating a paradoxical environment of perception. This perception is rampant in finding a more 'hybrid synthesis' of new Independent films that are challenging an aggressive commercial strategy, but adopt mainstream marketing and distribution models. These are just some of the new aspects of Independent Cinema in India today.

Films such as *Bombay Talkies* (2013), *I Am* (2010) and *Ship of Theseus* (2014) build an argument around trans-global cinema and its



aesthetic in terms of art, production line and quality and international collaborations impersonating a realistic but evocative style of Indie films (Devasundaram, 2016). Another intermittent process which Devasundaram explains in his work is the depiction of local spaces in Indie films. He adopts Schaefer's idea of the 'glocal' which predicates global and local underpinnings of cinema produced in India in recent years. Since the 1990s, the dominance of India's globalisation project has increased as a result the gap between metropolis and remote regions is bridged in recent cinema. The emergence of Schaefer's 'binary style dialectic' develops a diachronic structure practiced within the film industry by experimenting with 'exogenous' and 'indigenous' subjects. Here 'exogenous' refers to those factors that affect social norms on a global level; while 'indigenous' factors are those that work at the local level and which are also region-specific at times. The process Schaefer's calls 'glocalisation' attaches itself as a sub-category to local issues, untouched communities and geographies, and is also seen as 'counter-indigenous wave' working within Indie cinema, this is particularly emphasised by Devasundaram (ibid.: 53). We can see in the analysis of films such as *Peepli Live* (2010), which has been shot in parts of Madhya Pradesh particularly Bhopal and Indore that these places do not prefigure in Bollywood's idealisation of certain exotic locales such as metropolitan cities in India and abroad.

The local elements intrinsic to farmers suicide and episodes related to state neglect has been satirised in terms of televised or mediated events. The local flair that adds to the plot construction is indeed a new dimension of Indie films. In Devasundaram's observation and through Schaefer's model, this 'temporal specificity' brings out indigenous concerns that are grave challenges faced by India. Temporal specificity has lend a new anomaly to the aesthetics of emerging Indie cinema, which is multi layered and has a more complex gaze on local issues bringing them into mainstream debate. It also challenges viewers' perception since the over-lapping of spaces forms semblance to various other geographical peripheries. Also, the linguistic pluralism of Indie film is another remarkable phenomenon which most of these films incorporate. The articulation of Indian languages, local dialects as well as English marks an important aspect of cinema that has global recognition as well as demand. These linguistically diverse and diegetic spaces are symbolic in breaking away from the monotonous reiteration of national linguistic discourse.

The representation of subaltern themes and marginal groups creates a resonance with global politics of separation and neglect that remains



incumbent in questioning the narrative authenticity with a complex interwoven plot structure as the case study of Devasundaram shows. Films like *Harud* (2010) and *I am* (2010) deal with youth politics affected by terrorism and judiciary violence in Kashmir. At the same time *I am* (2010) shows the intricate working of multiple narratives and freely talks about homosexuality and the lack of legal representation of marginal groups like Kashmiri Pandits on one hand and the LGBTQ community on the other. In Devasundaram's analysis: "The larger point of emphasis is that the Indies reflect multifarious contemporary Indian narratives through the very lens of globalisation-induced hybridity" (2016: 54). Similarly, films like *Luchbox* (2013) evaluate the 'glocal' legacy of independent cinema. Its nomination for the British Academy Films and Television Arts Awards (BAFTA) throws light at thematic concerns: the city's local element is represented through its labour/indigenous group known as 'dabbawalas.' On a global screen the indigenous labour force is projected as the primordial local element of the city. Constant revocation of local symbols getting transferred globally is one of the main aspects of Independent Cinema today.

Sengupta addresses an important concern of Independent Cinema seen through the case study of Kasaravalli's film *Mane* (The House, 1990). In Kasaravalli's own words, the dichotomy of urban and rural is created through a thought process "I thought that I should have a narrative that is more symbolic [...] I started working on a minimalist narrative, where you are forced to look at things" (Kasaravalli cited in Sengupta 2015: 90). Here both Kasaravalli and Sengupta hint at emerging but "suffocating Urban spaces."

This hankers back to the quintessential relation of space with plot execution, visible in Indie films like *Dhobi Ghat* (2013). *Dhobi Ghat* tends to hinder the metropolitan narrative of Mumbai as the dream location because promises of progress are ruptured; here a nation is found jutting out of region- and caste-based bias on the grassroots level. The (lower) middle class reality hits the rock bottom of class and social structure as reflected in the city's own split. Showing the city's incongruity through its unrepresented people who have made these cities the epitome of capitalist outreach, by fueling into its economy as labour forces films like *Dhobi Ghat* (2013) bring casteist and class-based state politics to the surface. Many such films based within Independent Cinema are trying to highlight processes of dislocation within and outside Asian cities. At the same time, indigenous and



transnational groups contesting for legitimacy are seen in the new brand of Asian cinema and its use of space (Chee & Lim 2015).

While testing Devadsundaram's case study of the film *Harud* (2010) we find how Kashmir as a location stands polemic to the everyday life of its inhabitants who are under a tacit siege, handling traumatic events and persisting segregation. Yet, these stories hold a universal appeal that strikes global audiences in establishing a resonance with other locations or with similar crises without further ideological separation. These stories are grouped around sensitive locations as well as historicities that lay out moments of internal conflict on screen with unquestionable realism. This style of Independent Cinema here maintains local textures on the screen, while the geo-political sensitivity is treated with utter seriousness without altering it in any form. These films do not compromise on aesthetic tensions and authorial/artistic vision, which is one of the remarkable achievements of Independent Cinema today.

In his contribution to Chee and Lim titled "Notes from Elsewhere: Spaces of Longing in Tran Anh Hung's *Vertical Ray of the Sun*" Christophe Robert shows the formation of nondescript cinematic space that had worked to voice a dominant national discourse on screen in the past. By framing the subject of these films through the processes of creating "uncanny" spaces where the subjects in the film are alienated into non-spaces or "elsewhere" (Robert 2015: 32). Films like *Harud* (2010) bring a similar angle on the screen, treating issues of terrorism and sense of belonging which Robert defines as complex spaces. Devasundaram notes how these subjects on screen are struggling to belong, and at the same time, they are trying to subvert violence and minority concerns projected in the film. Directors are practicing assertively to not compromise with their artistic vision by giving into the hands of the nation-state in order to gain legitimacy for Independent film techniques. At times this thwarts their own autonomous voice; they face the serious brunt of censorship's rigid conformity or red taping. For instance, a ban is put on the film before it can be released in theatres and multiplexes. This is one of the major reasons that cause a lack of trust in government lobbies because it infringes the artistes' autonomy.

### **Aesthetic, Narrative and New Studio Avatar**

There is a gap after the period of New Wave Cinema of the 1960s. This can be further explored by tracing the role of the National Film



Development Corporation (NFDC). NFDC had sustained Parallel Cinema from 1970 to 1980 in India. The organisation was responsible for funding films that dealt with showing the underbelly of cities, poverty, and questions of rural poverty versus city slums. Parallel Cinema targeted the new Indian middle class, taking those factions of society into consideration who were the new viewers and informed about a new kind of cinematic form.

The practice of Parallel Cinema revived a space of viewing films which were not entirely Art House in nature but not purely entertaining at the same time. The in-between space of this type of cinema was known as 'Middle Cinema' which emerged much after Parallel Cinema. A new brand of directors was forging a reality of the emerging middle class from the 1980s onwards. The urban middle class population identified and preferred films that depicted non-conformist themes that, up till then, had been treated as a taboo or too profane a subject matter. Middle Cinema accentuated social attitudes of the urban middle class population but demanded a more serious engagement by projecting changing taxonomies of urbanity in post-independence India.

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Devasundaram's work indicates how a non-conformist approach to the financial sector of film making is also responsible for altering production and distribution strategies, paving the way for a new economy removed from non-conformist modes of distribution and market strategy known to work in the Indian film industry. Independent Cinema draws support from Bollywood labels, studios, and production units for financial assistance which is unlike any other Independent Cinema in the world.

The presence of mainstream icons and corporatisation of cinema makes it necessary to reassess one primordial question: is there a difference in cinematic articulation of films as an artistic product? This tension is apparent; we can find agreements and disagreements in recent scholarship. This aspect of Indie cinema cannot do away from the primary components of the industry.

### **Components and Divergence**

Devasundaram uses the allegoric model of the ship from the mythic representation of Ship of Theseus to define Indian cinema since the 1960s. His model demonstrates how the new cinema emerged from old components of the previous cinema movement. Here, the allegory of



the ship represents Indian Cinema which is one unified structure but has various components or sub-divisions. Devasundaram states that various decks and levels of this model signify the different time frames and developments of Indian cinema since 1947. This ship model looks at the crucial developments in Hindi as well as several cinemas working in regional languages such as Malayalam, Kannada and Tamil from the 1970s. The model, presented in the chapter "The anatomy of the Indies" is trying to define regional as well as artistic movements within Indian Cinema (Devasundaram 2016: 63).

The author further states that the 1990s were a watershed moment for Independent Indian Cinema because it gained international acclaim and entered mainstream debates due to changing aesthetic implications, diverse composition and hybridity. It was in this decade that the monolith of the Bollywood super-structure got transformed into multifarious sub-structures (2016: 62). Devasundaram traces how Independent films entered Bollywood mainstream channels, while organising a new space which accepts and subverts the globalisation process in Indian cinema from the 1990s till 2000. This was the time that saw changing economic norms and also transformations in social attitudes among the middle class of the country.

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The trends we encounter in Hindi cinema since 2010 validate Devasundaram's observation on cinema history in India. The new experiments are indicative of a new space, which re-fashions itself by questioning the totalitarian presence of the Bollywood film industry. Here Independent Cinema works in a collaborative process, producing films that emerge out of the same space as mainstream commercial films. Independent Cinema has gathered support from the mainstream film industry but, in creating meta-narratives, sub-genres, and defying commercial inferences, it stands resolute to the inherent idea of subversion and experimentation. One dominant discourse within Indian Independent Cinema is how it works away from Hollywood-style independent film production. This difference remains in the commercial exegesis of the production mode where Independent Cinema attaches interest with commercial sectors or funders.

Unlike Hollywood's sub-category of Independent Cinema which ascribes to an entirely independent financial source without latching on to studio/corporate networks, Indie films in India have financial stakes as well as vested interest in both sources of finance. 50 per cent of the funding comes from independent stake holders that remain outside the Bollywood film industry. Such economic proficiency of Indian Indepen-



dent Cinema is lopsided, it is not delimiting but works outside rudimentary market strategy. Logistic infrastructure and budgeting constraints are few important aspects that allow film makers to restore their aesthetic freedom and work with limited finances. It is far more enabling to work without financial digressions that minimises inclusion of business profiteers. Low budgeting is seen to reduce trade-related risk, while allowing the directors to work unobstructed.

Experimental form and non-conforming narrative style often affect the business profit of the films. To avoid such losses international films screenings and the inclusion of several stake-holders prove to be a key strategy for making a film a lucrative venture. Films such as *Peepli Live* (2010) and *Dhobi Ghat* (2013) are independent ventures which have managed unconventional borrowing, support and assistance from several financial and non-economic units. Big star affiliation like Amir Khan's production/patronage ensured financial sustenance as well as imperative studio support, which advantageously attracted other investors. As Devasundaram describes, "the increasing presence of Bollywood stars in Indie leads to hypothesising about the implication of Bollywood interventions in ubiquitous or commonly identifiable Indie filmmaking codes and strategies" (2016: 82). Films like *Bombay Velvet* (2015) had backing and star appeal of two Hindi film stalwarts Anurag Kashyap and Karan Johar. Films like *Peepli Live* (AKP, UTV), *Dhobi Ghat* (AKP, UTV) and *Lunchbox* adhered to international production backing. These are some of the efficacies that imbue a unique perspective on Indie film-making in India since 2010.

Another key element of Indie cinema is how re-organisation of viewing space is creating a lucrative market economy. Ahmed indicates that Indian multiplexes are re-organising themselves to bridge the gap between people and independent cinema. Multiplexes are showing both commercial as well as independent films which interest audiences into having more choices at hand. This certainly creates more possibilities for independent film production, allowing more directors to emerge on the social scene (Ahmed 2015). This argument is similar to Hill and Athique who claim that these multiplexes are forming a new alignment with Independent Cinema and commercial units like India's "unorganised sector" (Hill & Athique 2013). This allows us to see beyond economic gain and asymmetrical distribution of screening spaces in the form of multiplexes and film theatres.

Both Hill and Athique state that the year 2000 is a symbolic moment for the Indian film industry because it was then that it gained an offi-



cial industry status. Reduction or exemption of entertainment tax allowed the development of commercial cinema, whereas more and more multiplexes sprung up across the country. PVR and INOX (two large multiplex chains) are the names which Indian masses are congruously involved with. The most convincing argument presented by Hill and Athique links the spatial politics of multiplexes and the way they are organised in metropolitan areas. These metropolitans are vital commercial zones of India's emerging economy particularly and hubs for those factions of the Indian populace that fuel the growth of multiplexes. The aforementioned trends indicate how the distribution of films became important in corporatising the film industry, creating heavy commercial gains, whereas Independent Cinema and regional cinema had to find patrons and funders. The funding process here is not just vertical in nature but also gathers a horizontal momentum.

It is evident how spaces for watching films have undergone a transition too. These spaces are multifarious in nature: private screenings, DVDs, and restrained economic conditions are giving way to a third space of visibility in the form of torrents and a boom in film festivals. Meta-data sharing is also responsible in creating multiple viewing platforms across the globe. The availability of torrents allows multiple internet users to watch the film globally therein cutting the costs and taxation, creating a 'hyperlink', which Devasundaram also hints at (2016). This hyperlink marker puts Independent Cinema on a global platform and makes it possible to view especially those films that have been banned in a particular federal state or in the country in general.

### **Modus Vivendi: Politics of Sexual Liberation**

A seemingly invisible but overarching presence of censorship and its laws are predominant in defining the fate of any cinematic production in Indian Cinema. The connection between the rise of Independent Cinema in India and censorship surveillance is crucial to register. The censor board seems to be working according to its own rules, through moral policing rather than as an organisation working in the public interest. There has been a lack of trust between filmmakers and the censor board. The mal-appropriation of assigned rights and austere corruption within the Central Board of Film Certification unit (CBFC) has gained both artistic and public scorn. The statutory body's work is to certify films by approving them appropriate for public viewing in cinema halls. The censor board's constant nagging on visual material



vis-à-vis subject matter that could be pertinent in establishing recent debates on issues of prejudices, subjugation and lack of justice, is a concern that has led to debates. It is often noticed how the censor board stubs films that tend to carry sensitive messages on charges of profanity and sedition. For several decades the CBFC has controlled viewing of films that they consider going against national and public interest. Its independent propriety and governmental liaison is highly debatable since it mars the autonomy of directors and film makers on the grounds of national or cultural morality.

The partisan attachment of CBFC to the government in office is important to notice, particularly the instances where government policies try to regulate what people can see and what they can label as profane visual material. CBFC's censorship policies often infantilise the adult population of the country. This goes to the extent that the screening is controlled by an auxiliary unit that gets to decide what is fit or unfit for public viewing. Films like *I am* (2010), *Gandu* (2010) and *Harud* (2010) were blocked by the censor board on charges of sedition. Devasundaram questions the censor board's authoritarian approach. He asks why the censor board does not react to Bollywood's use of violence and sexist politics on screen, but blocks those artists who work with realist modes of narration through their films (Devasundaram 2016). This rift shows the censor board's biases and a lack of grasp on social issues which some of the Independent film makers are daring to engage with.

These new Indie films are highlighting sporadic changes that have taken place in the last few years. Such controlled visual licensing and surveillance creates a lack of autonomous rigour to bring sensitive issues to the audience. This leads to a subtle maneuvering of visual space via state controlled machinery, sabotaging issues related to LGBTQ communities, and themes of gender emancipation in the Indian subcontinent. Giving way to infringements of artistic independence at times becomes synonymous to blocking human rights voices. The role of cinema is important in challenging normative patterns within a society. Under CBFC's monopolising control, artists and their voices cannot challenge culturally ascertained social behavior or deviant legal verdicts which are imposed forcefully.

On one side films like *Lakshya* (2004) and *Mission Kashmir* (2000) that work to invigorate patriotic zeal and nationalist agendas received easy clearance for release in theatres. Defying terrorist insurgency and validating gallant army encounters pose partial or no threat to the



dominant discourse on India's security campaign. On the other side, showing issues of casteist segregation, crimes against minority groups, the rise in the number of rape cases or gay and lesbian relationships on screen provide specimen for political lobbying and scrutiny. These scenes and depictions are considered too aggressive, violent or amoral for public viewing.

This is noticeable since 1996 when films like *Fire* stirred the Indian film industry. The ban of the film by the censor board showed lack of tolerance for artists engaging with human rights concerns in showing the relationship between a lesbian couple. The outcry of the conservative blocks and banning of the film have affected the liberal functioning of the film fraternity in depicting changing attitudes towards sexuality and the right to freedom of expression in India. Showing same sex love between two women is not only a tabooed subject, but has shown inconsistencies within state policies propagating heteronormativity. Similarly, another film, *My Brother Nikhil* (2005) projects sensitive issues, involving India's AIDS awareness and HIV stigma which permeates into main stream debate in Indian societies. In Chee and Lim's observation, films that work in documentation mode question the changing grid of social anomalies through visual montage, at the same time; they bear the brunt of the limiting legal system (Chee & Lim 2015).

The movement which procured markers of defiant sexuality was rampantly explored in Nandana Bose's writing (2010). Her thorough research based on the Central Board of Certification's correspondence files during the years 1992-2000, brings to light staggering facts about the social apparatuses that work outside CBFC's domain. These social apparatuses have affiliations to political parties as well as right wing Hindu nationalist organisations like Sangh groups or Mahila Morcha organisations in India. Controversial film releases and public up-roars work as external forces that may be working incognito with CBFC. This moral policing is analysed by Bose through the CBFC documents and papers, she points out how Hindi films' overt uses of sexual innuendoes have created moral panic in right wing corridors.

These public discourses highlight socio-historic conformity that gestures towards religious conservatism, growing intolerance and repressive censorship measures (Bose 2010). Bose indicates how general public and right wing political organisations are constantly demanding clarification notices from the Information and Broadcasting Ministry in India. Like Ahmed and Devasundaram, Bose also notices



how *Fire* (1996), directed by Deepa Mehta, bore the brunt of government lobbies conflating lesbian relations as an abnormality and a source of obscenity in a righteous society. Film makers were accused of profit mongering and peddling sex to the "lowest common denominator of taste in masses, serving as gross distortion for films that are trying to change mainstream hegemonic discourse" (Bose 2010: 70).

Emerging themes of changing gender norms and violence are dealt as profane visual material. Consequentially, this practice is hindering public discretion and mirrors art as perverse illustration, misleading the conscience of viewers and audience. The arcane trimming of the film reels and hemming of the public morality hints at a pseudo-moral competency of the censor board in general. Their perennial surveillance of films over experimental themes, for reasons of perceived unacceptable obscenity, shows the censor board's ill-defined nomenclature or lack of comprehensive legal rules. It infantilises educated, socially abreast viewers that demand to see on screen the changing configuration of societies and its future challenges. Bose recounts how a series of letters obtained from the BJP film cell in 1994, addressing the chairman of the censor board, invoked the rhetoric of threatened Indian/Hindu culture, and society and traditional values as under siege from a denigrated Western cultural invasion (Bose 2010). This marks the paranoia in right wing blocks and their stipulation of facts through the politics of fear. The role of Indie Cinema re-establishes the fact that these films are creating new debates, engaging audiences throughout the world to find similarities as well as challenges faced by global communities at large. The shifting paradigms of feminine and masculine roles, violations of free speech, human rights infringements, or extra-judicial and political violence are some of the sensitive issues which Indie Cinema is belligerently dealing with. What these films document under the grid are changing social anomalies, which may produce a healthy tension in a viewer's mind (Chee & Lim 2015: 44).

Whereas it is absolutely debatable why artists are maintaining their stance, despite bearing the brunt of censorship norms, they continue sending their films to be screened in Film festivals, or they simply upload them to social media platforms such as youtube and torrents. These torrents and the virtual airing of films on various other media platforms have not occurred out of a lack of multiplexes or lesser business possibilities. But it has created a space where banning these films allows for an alternate screening practice that is observed globally. Once these films are made available through social media,



they exist in the public domain. Torrents allow an alternate sharing space for a wide range of users to participate and organise films screenings at any time without censorship and geo-political constraints.

Similarly, Devasundaram's case study of eight Indie films urges us to think, why more and more politically challenging or contra-narrative themes are emerging in the new Indies in recent years. Films like *Papilio Buddha*, *Gandu*, and *I am* are part of this intricate yet defiant elucidation of Indie Cinema as observed in recent years. It is important to notice how the censor board tends to function through patriarchal surveillance without being critical towards its own contradictions. At the same time it is conforming to a popular version of Bollywood cinema that delimits women's bodies/sexuality without inquiring the repressive male gaze. Whereas Ahmed's analysis of gender politics in Hindi cinema presents a non-negligible gap, the chapters titled "Feminist Concern" and "Erotic Gaze" stress decoding the masculine gaze over a female body. His evaluation seems a bit discreet in defining the gender concerns in Hindi as well as Parallel Cinema.

The leap from the 1964 production *Charulata* directed by Ray to the eroticised spectacle of courtesan films essentialising Muslim socials, may not bring fresh perspectives. Films like *Umrao Jaan* (1981) and *Pakizah* (1971) have been thoroughly debated in the scholarly sphere of Indian cinema, while what we anticipate in the current readings is to find new trends that show gender issues more openly in the cinematic context. This further castigates the role of mainstream commercial cinema, incapacitated in dealing with social mobilisation on recent sexual violence in India. Commercial cinema's hankering to capitalist interests shows its un-reflexive interest in making sensitised cinema. The role of female characters and casting them on screen as unified entities can be seen in films like *I am*, *Parched*, *Ship of Thesues*, *Dhobi Ghat* and *Peepli Live* where female characters are present in lead roles, having their own agency and asserting their presence on screen as pragmatic, scientific minds (Devasundaram 2016: 45).

It is also a symbolic moment in Indian independent film-making that more female directors are making their debut as authors and vigilantes of equal rights and the fair representation of characters. Film-makers like Anusha Rizvi, Deepa Mehta and Kiran Rao are challenging dominant discourses on Indian femininity and sexuality while working with more non-normative gender role in their films. The fetishisation of the body and maligning sexuality with spectacle has been challenged



as a repressive practice in recent Indie films. The new Independent Indian cinema is seen as a deviant structure, mainly setting the ground for future scholarship to understand visual culture, depicting social messages, and conflicts. Popular item numbers in a Bollywood blockbuster create an erotic rendering of the body as an overtly sexualised object but they do not get reprimanded by the CBFC's own biased gaze while representation of same sex love between two women or men invites scrutiny. Subjects of sexual violence in the form of rape and domestic abuse invoke cultural modesty that should be protected by overarching censorship regulation. Certainly, banning these films hinders the spread of wider social messages and affects growing awareness within any society. This gap constantly demands overhauling the censor board's regulation policy that delimits a film and its aim in covert forms.

### **Political Diegesis**

Hindi Cinema has been known to propagate the national identity of the Indian state since the 1950s. The nationalist discourse and allegiance to the patriotic zeal is of utmost importance in Indian cinema. A rupture in the nationalist debate was created in the 1990s and has become visible since the advent of films like *Maatchis* (*Matchstick*, 1996) that show tensions in the national climate of the country while dealing with issues of terrorism. The film tells the story of a bunch of youth who get initiated into a terrorist organisation. Films like *Maatchis* are important because they hint at India's neo-liberal turn in the 1990s. Devasundaram states that the "traditional-neoliberal narrative combines national Hindu ideology and consumer capitalism" (2016: 36) in the cinema of the time.

Ahmed notices that films like *Water* (2005) directed by Deepa Mehta, show the deep caverns of segregated communities within the discourse of India as a nation. The dominant narrative of traditional values and rituals is taken to question. This film invited many such controversies. *Water* was taken as an attack on Hindu practices and exposed the domination of upper caste Brahminical hegemony since the story revolved around exploitation of widows who were out-casted from traditional Hindu society. A right wing political party, the Shiv Sena, backed by Bal Thakeray not just opposed but blocked the release of this film, organising a campaign against Deepa Mehta (Ahmed 2015: 251). Mehta's trilogy *Fire* (1996), *Earth* (1998) and *Water* (2005) depicts the tension between several religious



communities. The separation of Hindu, Muslim and Sikh communities points to the neglect and divide since the time of partition in 1947. It is very important to take notice how these films were made post-1992. The year is symbolic for the disruption of national harmony and state secularism due to the demolition of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya by Hindu right wing groups and the ensuing riots. These contemporary events have paved way for the recent emergence of Indie Cinema dealing with caste, class and social divides. The re-configuration of the economically thriving nation as well as a progressing middle class shows the disparity of Indian society, which has affected film makers of Independent Cinema alike.

It is observed how Bollywood maintains a privileged over-narration of the national campaign without voicing identities from the margins. The language of Hindi films has created a non-pluralistic identity seen as part of hegemonic caste or class discourses. Indie films are certainly attaching themselves to the politics of representing stories that were left on the fringes. The counter argument, to present the debates in a new light, is one of the concerns of Independent Cinema in India. 'Hindutva' gets assessed as 'Hinduness' while 'Hindu Rashtra' asserts itself as an idiom of the Hindu nation; these are some of the timely debates in Indian society. The emergence of Hindu nationalism in the country is creating a dominant culture giving way to monopolistic idealisation of majoritarian politics within the nation state. This concern has been observed by both Ahmed and Devasundaram. Domineering narrative structures in commercial cinema create class distinctions by eliminating lesser castes, since the representation of the upper strata of the social system is dominant in mainstream commercial cinema. This space is also questioned in Chee and Lim's evocation of Harvey's model of social appropriation, where the emphasis is put on issues of belonging, and the relation of a subject to its location and sense of belonging. The assertion of an identity or class shows entanglement of politics within culture. This entanglement puts the ambition of the nation state into question where the misrepresented faction tries to assert its political will (Chee & Lim 2015).

Devasundaram agrees with Mita Banerjee's remark situating Bollywood in a "deeply majoritarian scenario propagating almost a fundamentalist Hindu vision of nationalism" (Banerjee 2011: 39). Films like *Harud* (2010) and *I am* (2010) dare to question these hegemonic narrative structures by proposing an alternate visual space where the representation of a certain socio-political block can be made possible.



Another independent film that challenges dominant Hindu discourse would be *Chauranga* (2014), depicting the plight of an exploited Dalit boy and his family in a village where patriarchy runs deep through religious coding even seventy years after India's independence. Sengupta brings forth similar underpinnings in Kannada cinema where debates around the minority Muslim population have already made their way into Kasaravalli's Independent films. *Gulabi Talkies* (2008) is one such film where the auteur gets inside the life of people who are living in the margins.

Similar indications are available in Ahmed's book as well, when he writes about how independent ventures create a space for Indian political cinema. He works through the example of *Hazaaron Khwaishein* (2003) which deals with the Naxalite movement and state conducted insurgency. This film is important in the evaluation of the role of parallel films and its politics which delve unabashedly into sensitive political issues. Ahmed's remark on regional cinema is an important concern, he states that the Tamil film industry has organised itself separately from the dominant presence of the Bollywood film industry. The trilogy *Dil Se* (1998), *Roja* (1992) and *Bombay* (1995) by Tamil film maker Mani Ratnam breaks away from rudimentary story lines. These films have plots that revolve around themes of terrorism and lack of communal harmony, showing real life incidences such as the Bombay bomb blast or inter-religious marriages in India. They certainly contribute to Mani Ratnam's style of Parallel Cinema (Ahmed 2015).

When analysing Indian popular cinema, one way of realigning political and cultural frames of reference is to think about the disaggregated filmic system as governed by the cultural experience, if not the clear-cut ideology of modernity. We find similar echoes also in Prasad's writing where he argues that Hindi cinema allows us to question political movements and its relationship with emerging theories. He looks at how the audience analyses films, implicitly questioning representation through historic events, while inviting academic discourses through scholarly inquiry (Parasad 1998).

Attaching Asian cinema and its discourse with South Asian politics of representation is one of the most convincing aspects of Chee and Lim's edited book. The contribution "Ismene and Antigone in Sri Lanka's Black Cinema" by Anoma Pieris, reflects the immense possibilities which can help cinema in South Asia to redefine its space. In her contribution Pieris terms the kind of visual space cinema produces as a



re-assertion of "popular memory in Third cinema" (Pieris 2016: 204). According to her, this type of cinema provides ample space to read the gaps on new wars, trauma as well as agency of minority groups asserting their identity in Sinhala language and identity discourse, where the resistance is embedded in diverting tensions of "post-colonial ethnocentric state policy" after the civil war (Pieris 2016: 204-5).

Similarly, Onir's film *I am* (2010) deals with the mass exodus of Kashmiri pundits, a theme that has never been touched upon in Indian cinema before. The film signposts the stakes of India's so-called War on Terrorism, and shows the neglect cast on one of its forgotten people. Moral policing and vigilance creates a quagmire of doubts when Rashtrya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and Bajrang Dal get involved in blocking the release of films dealing with religious, political and social variances (Devasundaram 2016).

The recent controversy attached to the film *Udta Punjab* (2016) created an image of the state, where authority tried to divulge social consciousness. Fragile cultural morality seemed to have worked against the post-production team of the film. The film's portrayal of increasing drug racketeering and problems of addiction as a social evil amongst youth in the state of Punjab, may have earned a bad reputation for the stagnant government's aid reforms in the region, because it proved the government's incompetency to eradicate the problem of drug abuse in the state. This film was perceived as affecting the culture of the state of Punjab, hurting the sentiments of its inhabitants. Problems such as substance abuse and addiction amongst Indian youth in urban areas are huge national debates today. Despite bearing the brunt of moral policing from the censor board, the film's director and the people associated with its production unit, stood in unison resisting the CBFC verdict to not release the films without cuts.

Films like *Udta Punjab* (2016) mirror society while making cinema not just region-centric but attaching these films to a larger geo-political debate. Jyotika Viridi stresses the idea of "fictional nation" and "national fiction" as a binary where she explains how certain controversies run on the state level within the paradigm of cinema. This demand to fictionalise the nation creates "nonparticularised reference to time and place" (Viridi 2003: 32-3), removing factual linkages of plot with time can disturb the linear narration challenging regimes and authority. *Udta Punjab* (2016) is certainly an important example to



test recent debates around the CBFC. Independent film directors and producers such as Anurag Kashyap, Ekta Kapoor, Vikas Behal and Samir Nair vehemently pushed the message of resistance within the artistic community, without compromising with the plot structure of the film. *Udta Punjab* (2016) was finally released in theatres, while gaining popularity for treating social issues involving drug addiction in the Indian youth in an unabashed manner. It is important to notice that *Udta Punjab* (2016) has not denigrated Punjab as a state but satirised drug addiction as a social evil in any civil society.

The politics of censorship and bans have resulted in a separate space to promote certain films. The growing number of film festivals is another important contribution of Independent film-making in India. The constant assertion of film-makers and directors to send their films to international film festivals is primordial for Independent Cinema. The refusal to compromise with unjustified censorship demands is of great value here. Today in India we see the emergence of many state-based yet international, film festivals catching attention. Film festivals organised in Dharamsala, Goa and Kerala create subsequent spaces of affiliation, laying out promotional strategies for Independent Cinema. Cultural specificity and nuanced engagement with sensitive themes are key explorative moments of India's emerging Independent Cinema. Most importantly, Independent Cinema in India is challenging existing norms and the political machinery of the state by asserting its space away from the domination of Bollywood's narrative style and economic structuring. It creates narrations of resistance and questions neglect through dissident film practices where marginal social groups and themes get represented, gaining momentum for a new artistic oeuvre.

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