



# The Centre Cannot Hold: The Possibilities And Opportunities For Regional Cinema On Bollywood's Fall From Grace

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**Abstract:** RRR's nomination and win in the prestigious platform like Golden Globes has put Indian Cinema on the spotlight. The consequence came forth in the form of a debate- Do we need the western validation to accept any Indian language film as an Indian film? To trace the answer we have to go back to the inception of Parallel Cinema which was nurtured by the likes of Satyajit Ray. The Bengali directors prioritized on "giving a meaning" to the process of making cinema and brought up the issues which were spoken in "dulled whispers". The movies which showed the lives and times of Bengali people started to be considered as the true portrait of Indian cinema world wide. However, in the absence of any major accolade from the west the Bengali cinema was reduced back to its regional status as commercialization ended the Art Cinema and for a long time Bollywood held the center strong. Of late, there seems to be another paradigm shift in Indian Cinema as South Indian films are making their way to the centre. These films which were earlier treated as the 'other' now got a new identity of the 'self'. The journey of both Parallel and Pan Indian Cinema getting the identity of Indian Cinema is the margin becoming the centre. Scorsese's appreciation for Ray and Cameron's fondness for Rajamouli's work is one of the reasons why viewers and critics accepted both their works as pure Indian Cinema. However, this further raises the question of whether the validation from the west is the only way to bring the margin to the center. The answer is provided by the film Kantara which has been able to independently make its way to the centre without any intervention from the west. This paper aims to study the factors responsible for the above paradigm shift and tries to uncover the various post colonial political agendas working behind all these.

**Index Terms** - Validation, Parallel Cinema, Commercialization, Paradigm, Pan Indian Cinema

## I. INTRODUCTION

The face of cinema is changing, Indian Cinema is changing. What is Indian Cinema? Bollywood might have been an appropriate single word substitution for that. But today we cannot even afford a Freudian slip on that. Recently Jimmy Kimmel got trolled for addressing RRR as a Bollywood Film. Films coming from the South industry used to be known by their Hindi titles and were judged on the basis of their cheap-unreliable dubbing. Remake was the only method by which Bollywood paid some respect to the 'other'. After that some curious members of the audience would try to locate the original movie from the South. However, the time has changed and the films coming from the Telugu, Tamil, Malayalam and Kannada industry have snatched the centre stage.

According to the 1991 Indian census, there were 144 regional languages spoken in the country, but only around 30 of them were represented in the film industry, with each of the larger languages having its own film industry, such as Hindi, Bengali, Marathi, Kannada, Tamil, Telugu, and Malayalam. However, many Western critics tend to equate Indian cinema with Hindi language films, often referred to as Bollywood. Since the submission of the abstract for this paper, significant developments have occurred, including the historic recognition of an Indian-produced film at the Academy Awards. Rajamouli's RRR has helped dispel any confusion about Indian cinema's place in the world by cementing its status as a central player. This raises the question of whether we should rely on Western validation to consider any film from an Indian language as Indian cinema. This issue is not new and requires an examination of the history of Indian cinema's evolution.

## 1. THE PARALLEL PAST

The day's discussion revolves around the inception of Parallel Cinema, also known as Art Cinema, which emerged as a global phenomenon that found itself sandwiched between two of the greatest cinema movements of all time- Italian Neorealism and French New Wave. Satyajit Ray and his contemporaries Mrinal Sen and Ritwik Ghatak were some of the pioneers of this genre who created films with a meager budget, moving away from the Masala era of mainstream commercial films, and ushering in the Golden Era of Indian Cinema. The neo-realistic approach of these movies touched upon topics that were previously spoken of in hushed tones. Art Cinema was a reflection of the socio-economic and political climate of Indian society, and most of these films were made in Bengali, adapted from regional literature. These films depicted the daily struggles of ordinary people, class conflicts, the changing landscape of rural India, and the shifting value systems of the time.

Ray's Apu Trilogy was a cinematic masterpiece that caught the attention of the Western world. The first installment, *Pather Panchali*, released in 1953, was an adaptation of Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's novel with the same title. It received critical acclaim and won the Best Motion Picture award at Cannes Film Festival for its genuine and authentic portrayal of impoverished families. The film's relatable cultural depiction transcended language barriers and resonated with Indian audiences as well. Despite his widespread acclaim in India, it was the recognition he received from the West that cemented Ray's legacy as one of the greatest filmmakers of all time. Even in his final days, he was honored with a Lifetime Achievement award from the Academy, which helped raise awareness of his work and introduced his films to a wider audience.

When asked about whether Indian directors require validation from the West, the Academy Award-winning director, Shekhar Kapur, responded with a poignant message. He firmly believed that Indian directors do not require validation, despite the glitz and glamour of the Oscars. Kapur recalled the time when his film *Elizabeth* was nominated for numerous Oscars, and how people suddenly hailed him as an incredible director. However, he questioned why he was suddenly given such high acclaim, when he had previously directed films such as *Bandit Queen*, *Masoom*, and *Mr India*. Kapur maintained that while winning an Oscar is undoubtedly a great achievement and brings global recognition, Indian directors should not rely on Western validation. He praised the Indian director Rajamouli, who proved this point through his outstanding work. Rajamouli's cinematic masterpiece was a true celebration of Indian culture, and despite being made in a quintessentially Indian way, it garnered widespread recognition in the West, proving that validation from the West is not essential for Indian directors to make their mark on the world stage.

Sadly, despite the excellence of Indian Parallel Cinema, the heavy commercialization of the 90s marginalized this movement and allowed the Masala films of Bollywood to recapture the center stage. The government did little to save the Golden Era of Indian Cinema, which saw some of the greatest works in the country's film history. It's worth noting that the decline of Parallel Cinema was not due to its lack of quality, but rather to its lack of financial support and recognition. Nonetheless, the legacy of directors like Guru Dutt lives on, inspiring new generations of filmmakers to explore themes beyond the mainstream Bollywood fare. The same can be said for the work of Guru Dutt. His films, such as "*Pyasa*" and "*Kagaz Ke Phool*," are considered some of the best examples of the Parallel or Art Cinema movement in India. Dutt's treatment of his themes is just as vocal and expressive as that of any other director of the movement, however, the critics of the time did not give the importance to his art it deserved.

## 2. LITERARY READING OF THE CINEMA: THE EAST VS WEST DEBATE

According to Fredric Jameson, an erudite Marxist scholar and critic, our comprehension of art is often obscured by Western ideologies and critiques, even in the case of Third-World texts. These texts, which may appear to be solely personal and driven by a proper libidinal dynamic, inevitably convey a political dimension through the use of national allegory. This means that the tale of an individual's private fate always represents an allegory of the embattled position of the public third-world culture and society. However, the concept of national allegory creates a complicated mapping of Indian Cinema. Parallel Cinema emerged as a vehicle for resisting colonialism, but it was fragmented by its Western counterparts.

Bengali films were created with a pure art form that transcended language and cultural barriers for moviegoers of the time. Despite being distinct from mainstream Indian cinema, the characters in these films embodied a unique national identity. Therefore, the idea that third-world literature is inaccessible is a fallacy, as demonstrated by Partha Chatterjee's work *Nation and its Fragments*.

If nationalism in the rest of the world have to choose their imagined community from certain 'modular' forms already made available to them by the Europe and Americas, what do they have to left to imagine? History, it would seem, decreed that we in the postcolonial world shall only be perpetual consumers of modernity. Europe and Americas, the only true subjects of history, have thought out on our behalf not only the script of colonial enlightenment and exploitation, but also our anticolonial resistance and postcolonial misery. Even our imaginations must remain forever colonized. (Chatterjee, p.5)

It is suggestive that the Western critics' selective admiration of certain works of art is an allegory for imperialism, which should be aptly termed as "colonial allegory". This must imply that when a western critic deals with issues related to nationalism and national identity of our world, they unconsciously or consciously engage in a power dynamic that perpetuates imperialism. In essence, the Western world, through its cultural dominance, can perpetuate harmful narratives and stereotypes about non-Western cultures. This term "colonial allegory" can be viewed as a reminder of the ongoing struggle against imperialism and the need to challenge dominant narratives that perpetuate inequality and oppression.

When a Western critic uses the phrase "look at this," it often carries a connotation of exoticism, suggesting a fascination with the foreign and unfamiliar. However, it's worth noting that not all Indian films that explore themes that are different from the mainstream Bollywood fare are inherently exotic. Take, for example, the song "Brown Munde." We celebrate being called as 'brown' by the westerners. It is obvious that we still enjoy the imperialist hangover. For instance, in 2009, a non-Indian film received the highest number of Academy awards, and this was celebrated by many in India, including those who were unaware of the film's content. However, this film, despite its artistic merit, perpetuated the "portrayal of poverty porn", which is a problematic motif that reinforces Western stereotypes about developing countries.

The British director may claim to use Marxist ideology to explore class struggle in Mumbai, but it's important to recognize the historical context of British colonialism in India. Partha Chatterjee argues that the British colonial project was ultimately driven by their own imperialist ambitions, rather than a genuine concern for the wellbeing of Indian people. As such, any attempt by a British director to engage with issues of class and power in India should be viewed critically, with an understanding that their perspective is shaped by their own position of privilege and the legacy of colonialism. While it's possible for non-Indian filmmakers to create meaningful and insightful works about India, it's crucial to consider the larger context and power dynamics at play in order to avoid perpetuating harmful stereotypes or reinforcing colonialist narratives. Talking about the Bengali drama Chatterjee maintains,

In the case of new literary genres and aesthetic conventions, for instance, whereas European influences undoubtedly shaped explicit critical discourse, it was also widely believed that the European conventions were inappropriate and misleading in judging the literary production in modern Bengali. To this day there is a clear hiatus in this area between the academic criticism and those of literary practice. (Chatterjee, p.7)

### 3. THE REGIONAL CINEMA CHANGING THE DYNAMICS OF INDIAN CINEMA

The current state of viewership highlights a fascinating trend in the Indian film industry: the rise of the directors like Satyajit Ray and S.S. Rajamouli to mainstream prominence, both of whom have been acknowledged and criticized by Western audiences. However, this begs the question: what about the other filmmakers of their time? Are we discussing the themes that are inherently Indian, or are we simply adopting Western perspectives and overlooking the unique elements of Indian cinema? Furthermore, are we even aware of the crucial roles that Indian history and folklore play in shaping the narratives of regional language films? These are important questions that require deeper consideration if we are to truly appreciate and understand the complexities of Indian cinema and its place in global film culture. By acknowledging the influence of Western perspectives and exploring the indigenous themes and histories that shape Indian cinema, we can gain a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of this dynamic and diverse industry.

Kantara (2022) has subtly woven history, folklore and mythology into a splendid social drama of the indigenous. The film set in the 90s, presents a divine presence all around. The nature and its protectors are both loyal to their deity Panjurli. The tribal denizens of the costal Karnataka mystical forest has kept its people united by the yearly rituals like Kambala Buffalo festival and Bhoota Kola. The ecological sense of the people is challenged when the state sends its officers to demarcate the forest land. The protagonist Shiva maps out the plan to save his land and people.

There comes the question of perspective. How do we see the resistance? Indeed it is a fight against the state, however, at the same time it was a fight for the culture- to save the religious sentiments. There is an interesting exchange of dialogues between the forest officer and the protagonist. Shiva's claim "The forest belongs to us. You should be grateful that we're letting you stay in this land." The movie flows without any political agenda which keeps it pure and profane. If compared to its predecessors RRR or KGF, Kantara would possibly stand out for its treatment of the 'self'. And that becomes a problem for the western critics as it does not suit their criteria.

Shiva is a virile defender of his people and their animistic philosophy, but he isn't the conventional, insuperable Alpha male that films such as KGF, RRR and Pushpa have brought back to the Indian cinema mainstream and made a box-office killing in the bargain. Kantara resists the temptation and is none the worse for it." (RRR' Movie Review: Beyond the Spectacular Showmanship., The Hindu)

The dynamics at work in RRR, a recent film from the South Indian film industry, offer an intriguing look at how Indian cinema is engaging with Western influences and narratives. While the film draws inspiration from the acclaimed biopic The Motorcycle Diaries, which follows the journey of a rebel leader who redefined the meaning of freedom, there are notable differences in how anticolonial nationalism is portrayed in the two works. While RRR employs the mythological and historical touch to great effect, it also perpetuates a trope seen in many colonialist films - that of the colonizer bestowing sympathy on the colonized.

This is a problematic portrayal that undermines the fight for true freedom and independence. However, there are also examples in South Indian cinema where filmmakers have tackled these themes with more nuance and sensitivity. For instance, the film Kaala, which explores the plight of slum dwellers in Mumbai, presents a powerful portrayal of the struggle against systemic oppression and colonialism. In this film, the 'other' is not simply the colonizer, but also the entrenched power structures within society that perpetuate inequality and injustice. By engaging with these complex issues in a thoughtful and nuanced manner, South Indian cinema is helping to shape a new and distinct identity for Indian cinema on the global stage.

### 4. CONCLUSION

Indian cinema has been greatly enriched by the creativity of filmmakers from the southern regions. While many contemporary superhero movies often seek inspiration from the West, it's important to recognize the potential of indigenous superhero narratives that can showcase a uniquely Indian perspective. One such example is the Malayalam film Minnal Murali, which follows the story of a young man struck by lightning who discovers his newfound abilities and strives to use them for good. The film explores the clash between

the protagonist and a villain who also gains powers from the same event, leading to a dramatic showdown. The film's themes are rooted in Indian mythology and spirituality, adding depth and richness to the story. While the film may not have garnered the attention of Western critics, it's a significant example of the original and captivating stories that are emerging from the Indian film industry.

Indian cinema has undergone a transformative journey, with once-dismissed films now emerging from the margins to claim their place at the center of the industry. The parallel and Pan Indian Cinema movements have evolved to become part of the larger tapestry that is Indian Cinema. The works of filmmakers such as Ray and Rajamouli have earned accolades from prominent Western figures like Scorsese and Cameron, helping to solidify their status as quintessentially Indian works. However, a question lingers - should validation from the West be the only path to attaining recognition? A resounding "no" can be heard in the voices of those championing films like Kantara and Minnal Murali, which have achieved critical acclaim on their own terms, without needing the West to legitimize their artistry. Through a commitment to indigenous storytelling and a willingness to explore new frontiers, regional language films have carved out a new center for themselves within Indian cinema.

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