

Chalo Cinema: India's Indie Wave

By Shilpa Singru

Though Lumiere Brothers' moving pictures were screened in India in 1896, it was not until early 1913 that Dadasaheb Phalke directed and produced the first Indian film, *Raja Harishchandra*. Today India has one of the biggest film industries in the world. Over 800 films are made every year in more than 20 Indian languages. Bollywood, with its swashbuckling musical romances and violent melodramas, enjoys tremendous popularity all over the world. Infact, Indian cinema is often incorrectly perceived as being synonymous with Bollywood. Nothing could be further from the truth. Parallel cinema in India has co-existed with, and challenged the formulaic popular cinema since the last five decades. Recently, *Time* magazine announced its choice of the “*ALL-TIME 100 best films*”. The five marvelous Indian films on this list showcase the stunning multiplicity of genre and style in Indian cinema: Satyajit Ray's outstanding *Apu Trilogy* (1955, 1957, 1959), about the indomitable Apu growing up in a disenfranchised world; Mani Ratnam's *Nayakan*(1987) a terrific gangster epic in the *Godfather* style; and Guru Dutt's *Pyaasa*(1957) a soulful portrait of an artist's isolation in an indifferent world. *Pyaasa* and *Nayakan* are interesting because they are sophisticated films about the human condition, and yet embrace the stylized delirium of the Bollywood musical. Ray's famous *Apu trilogy* is the crowning glory of the Indian parallel cinema.

Satyajit Ray's first film, *Pather Panchali* (1955) marked the genesis of The Indian New Wave or the *Art cinema* in India. This movement also showcased the genius of Bengali auteurs Ritwik Ghatak and Mrinal Sen. Ray's cinema is replete with poignant, lyrical beauty in the neo-realist tradition, whereas Ghatak's films (*Meghe Dhaka Tara*, *Ajantrik*) contain jarring rhythms that echo the themes of disruption and oppression of common people. In the 1980s Shyam Benegal, Govind Nihalani, Ketan Mehta among others made significant contributions to the Art cinema. Ketan Mehta's dazzling *Mirch Masala* (1985) shows defiant women challenging patriarchal and feudal oppression. *Maya Mamsaab* (1992), Mehta's controversial adaptation of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, is about a woman's privilege to personal and sexual freedom. Shyam Benegal's erotic *Junoon* (1978) meticulously recreates the troubled period of the Indian mutiny of 1857 as a backdrop to the obsessive love between an Indian nobleman and a British woman. His outstanding films *Ankur*(1973)and *Bhoomika*(1977) celebrate women's fight against social injustice.

The 1980s were a dismal period for Bollywood with sub-disco music pounding the airwaves, and pale imitations of Amitabh Bachchan's “angry young man” strutting their stuff across the screen. However, the period saw the advent of women filmmakers who produced a striking body of feminist work. Aparna Sen's *Paroma* (1984) is a Bengali housewife reclaiming her sexuality and individuality through an extramarital affair. Prema Karanth's *Phaniamma* (1982) is a Hindu girl widowed at thirteen, condemned to the moral hypocrisy of nineteenth century India. Mira Nair's *Salaam Bombay* (1988) tells the story of a little boy unwittingly dragged into the quagmire of crime, prostitution and exploitation on the streets of Bombay. Kalpana Lajmi's *Rudali* (1992) is a professional

mourner whose wrenching performances are drawn from the unarticulated depths of her own tragedy.

Today filmmakers like Vishal Bharadwaj (*Maqbool*), Madhur Bhandarkar (*Chandni Bar*), Anurag Kashyap (*Black Friday*), and Sudhir Mishra (*Chameli*) are experimenting outside the popular film with edgy, gritty cinema. *Maqbool* (2004), an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, is an electrifying portrait of Bombay's underworld. In *Chandni Bar* (2001), an exotic dancer in a sleazy "beer-bar" is trapped in a web of crime and sexual exploitation. Anurag Kashyap's *Black Friday* (2004) recreates the terrifying bomb-blasts that rocked Bombay in 1993, the communal rioting that followed soon after, and the police investigation of these incidents. Sudhir Mishra's *Chameli* (2003) shows a strange encounter between a prostitute and a bank employee on a rainy night in Bombay.

In Bollywood, small-budget films like *Jism*, *Girlfriend*, *Murder* and *Julie* have escaped censorship, and are wildly popular with their daring explorations of adultery, prostitution and lesbianism. However, government censorship still exerts a strong influence on Indian films. Noted filmmaker Anand Patwardhan who makes hard-hitting, often controversial documentaries about the nuclear danger (*War and Peace*, 2002), religious violence (*In the Name of God*, 1992) and environmental threats (*A Narmada Diary*, 1995), has experienced censorship of nearly all his films. Recently, filmmakers Anurag Kashyap (*Black Friday*), and Rakesh Sharma (*Final Solution*) have had their share of problems with the censor board. In 2004 Mumbai International film festival rejected Rakesh Sharma's *Final Solution*. It screened instead at *Vikalp: Films for Freedom*, a parallel festival organized by over three hundred documentary filmmakers in response to the censorship at MIFF 2004.

Nowadays a discussion about Indian film must include the cinema of the diaspora. Hanif Qureshi's *My Beautiful Laundrette*, Mira Nair's *Mississippi Masala*, Gurinder Chaddha's *Bhaji on the Beach* and *Bend it like Beckham*, Damien O'Donnell's *East Is East*, Nisha Ganatra's *Chutney Popcorn*, Revathy's *Mitr*, Shonali Bose's *Amu*, are superb indie films that wrestle with troubling questions of cultural, social, and sexual identity in the diasporic world. In India, the small-budget independent film is buoyant with new talent, vigorous experimentation, and the enthusiasm of a discerning audience. India's first queer festival, *Larzish*, with its program of bold, subversive films, has enjoyed successful screenings in several Indian cities. *Experimenta*, India's independent festival for experimental film, presents radical films that challenge conventional brackets of form, content, and viewer expectations. Regional independent films like *Shwaas* (2004), about a young boy diagnosed with a debilitating form of eye cancer, and *Grahanam* (2004), a haunting tale of scandal and superstition in rural south India, have engaged audiences despite their serious subject matter. In Ashvin Kumar's *Little Terrorist* (2004), a Muslim boy inadvertently ends up on the wrong side of the Indo-Pakistani border, and finds an ally in a Hindu teacher who helps him navigate the desert to find his way home. *Matrubhoomi* (2003), Manish Jha's grim futuristic tale, explores a future where female infanticide has tilted the gender balance, and turned men into savage predators. In Aparna Sen's *Mr & Mrs Iyer* (2002), a conservative Tamil housewife finds an unlikely ally while traveling through a riot-torn landscape with her infant son.

As government funding for cinema has declined, cinematic experimentation has migrated to the small-budget independent film made on a shoestring by aspiring auteurs. Independent films promise to be the future of significant cinema in India. The extraordinary films made in India over the last several decades are a testament to this promise.