

Contemporary Indian Parallel Cinema: A Lens on Cultural Shift and Societal Transformation

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Sufiya Ansari

*Junior Research Fellow, Department of English
Faculty of Arts, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi*

Abstract

Indian Parallel Cinema, emerging in the 1950s and gaining prominence in the 1960s–80s, represents a deliberate departure from mainstream Bollywood’s formulaic narratives, melodrama, and escapist tendencies. Rooted in realism, socio-political critique, and regional specificity, parallel cinema functioned as both a cinematic and cultural counter-discourse, reflecting the aspirations, anxieties, and transformations within Indian society. This paper explores the evolution of Indian Parallel Cinema as a marker of cultural shift, examining how its narrative strategies, aesthetics, and thematic preoccupations articulate changing social realities, urban-rural tensions, and postcolonial identities. By focusing on representative films across decades, the study traces the ways in which parallel cinema has influenced contemporary Indian filmmaking and audience sensibilities, highlighting its role in negotiating tradition and modernity. Ultimately, the paper positions Indian Parallel Cinema not only as an alternative cinematic form but also as a lens through which cultural change and emerging societal consciousness can be understood.

Keywords: Parallel Cinema, Indie Wave, Counter Discourse, Digital Age, and Neoliberalism

Introduction

Indian Parallel Cinema, often termed the “Indian New Wave,” arose in opposition to the popularity of mainstream Hindi cinema. Emerging in the 1950s and institutionalized in the 1970s through the Film Finance Corporation (FFC), it attempted to create what Ashish Rajadhyaksha calls “a cinema of responsibility rather than fantasy” (Rajadhyaksha and Willemen 1999).

It is rooted in social realism and presents an India divided by class, caste, and moral disillusionment. While early films by Satyajit Ray and Mrinal Sen recorded rural and urban struggles of a newly independent nation; contemporary filmmakers have reinterpreted its spirit for a globalized, neoliberal India. Satyajit Ray, through his works like *The Apu Trilogy* (*Pather Panchali*, *Aparajito*, *Apur Sansar*), phenomenally captured the quiet dignity and enduring struggles of rural and urban poor, characterized by deep humanism. Mrinal Sen’s work was overtly political and experimental than Ray’s, tackling urban angst, political radicalism, and social inequality with a more aggressive, Brechtian style, especially in films like *Bhuvan Shome* or the *Calcutta Trilogy*. Ritwik Ghatak who is a contemporary of Ray and Sen, focused on the psychological and social trauma of the Partition of India, using powerful, mythological and expressionistic imagery. The foundational phase saw the rise of legendary

figures, mostly from Bengali cinema, who set the standard for cinematic language and thematic depth. However, with the help of NFDC's backing, the movement spread beyond Bengal, fostering talented filmmakers across various regional cinemas. In Hindi/Marathi Cinema directors like Shyam Benegal (Ankur, Manthan), Govind Nihalani (Aakrosh), and Ketan Mehta (Bhavni Bhavai) contributed a lot to the tradition of hard-hitting social commentary, often using non-professional actors and shooting on location to achieve maximum authenticity. In Malayalam/South Indian Cinema Directors like Adoor Gopalakrishnan and Girish Kasaravalli continued the movement in the specific cultural and social textures of their respective states. In the globalized and neoliberal India of the 21st century, Parallel Cinema's spirit continues to persist, though its form has evolved. Contemporary filmmakers have reinterpreted its core characteristic of realism by - De-centralizing Narratives i.e., moving beyond traditional metropolises and establishing film industries to tell hyper-local stories from smaller towns and villages, which include films like Kanatara, Tumbadd, Kottukalli and others; exploring new complexities that addresses modern issues like the impact of economic liberalization, the digital divide, religious fundamentalism, and shifting gender dynamics; blurring lines, while still distinct from mainstream Bollywood, many contemporary directors, often termed the Indie Wave, manage to find a place in multiplexes, proving that a market exists for responsible cinema that doesn't sacrifice thematic complexity for commercial success.

Objectives

This paper traces the evolution of Indian Parallel Cinema as a marker of cultural and ideological shift from its Nehruvian-era origins to its neoliberal and digital reconfigurations. It examines how the movement's narrative strategies, aesthetics, and thematic preoccupations articulate changing social realities—urban-rural divides, class mobility, and gendered subjectivities—while addressing how contemporary indie films (2023–2025) inherit and reinterpret the ethos of realism. The study also investigates the effects of technological and industrial transitions, particularly the rise of OTT platforms, which have democratized distribution but also fragmented audiences and diluted collective viewership.

Methodology

The paper adopts a qualitative design for the analysis of selected film text. The method selected for the purpose is of—discourse analysis. It examines recent films that emphasize the shifting boundaries of parallel cinema. Rather than analyzing films in a cluster, it tries to study the selected films—to map how parallel cinema adapts to contemporary conditions.

Given the limited availability of films beyond festival circuits, this study draws on paratextual sources—press coverage, interviews, trailers, festival synopses, and critical reviews—as primary entry points. This lack of access is not a limitation alone but is itself symptomatic of the broader circulation challenges of independent Indian cinema. Following Ashvin Devasundaram's framing of independent cinema as a site of resistance existing often outside mainstream visibility, this study embraces a methodology that foregrounds both the cinematic text and its mediated presence in festival and critical discourse.

Realism and the Aesthetic of the Ordinary:- Satyajit Ray's Pather Panchali (1955) defined the aesthetic foundations of Indian realism. Ray famously wrote, "Realism in art is not the reproduction of reality but the revelation of truth" (Our Films, Their Films 1976). His storytelling, non-professional actors, and natural soundscapes inspired later filmmakers such as Shyam Benegal, whose Ankur (1974) interrogated rural power hierarchies and gender exploitation. In the 21st century, films like Chaitanya Tamhane's Court (2014) and Prateek Vats's Eeb Allay Ooo! (2019) extend this realistic representation. Both use non-professional actors, long takes, and bureaucratic absurdity to reveal the dehumanizing machinery of the state. In Court, the trial of a folk singer accused of inciting suicide becomes a critique of institutional apathy. As Omar Ahmed observes, "The new wave inherits the humanist minimalism of the old parallel cinema but redirects its gaze to the post-liberalized urban subject" (Ahmed 2018).

Anurag Kashyap's *Kennedy* (2023, Hindi/English): This is a neo-noir film full of thrilling elements. It is stylistically very different. The film talks about corruption and disillusionment, featuring the political failures of the past into the moral disillusionment of the modern metropolis. It also delves into the psyche of an insomniac ex-cop, portraying intense, realistic violence to elaborate about the themes of guilt, justice, and the dark truth of rapidly changing, industry based, consumerist society. Though, it is quite common for the film to not get released in the Indian cinemas because of various reasons. One of which is talked about a lot by Harmanpreet Kaur in her articles referring to an entrepreneurial gap regarding funding based problems, to feature films from Alternative Indian Cinema. Even disappointment of true cinephiles can obviously be seen in these words from an acclaimed newspaper, "Despite its international acclaim, 'Kennedy' remains unreleased in Indian cinemas, which has been a point of frustration for many fans" ("Anurag Kashyap's *Kennedy*"). However, this production and funding gap is not the only reason. Kashyap himself answers why some of his films couldn't reach Indian cinemas in an interview and it's because the system of film industry "values profits over creativity" ("Anurag Kashyap"). His disillusionment finds expression in his own words stating that, "It doesn't matter if *Kennedy* went to Cannes; it doesn't matter if it had such a massive reception at festivals. Forget outside India, they've seen the reception in India, but where is the film?" ("Anurag Kashyap opens"). He even highlighted the environment of cut-throat competition in Bollywood/Hindi Industry to make a blockbuster every time a film is released, in between creativity, passion and artistic elements are compromised. Though these elements of originality, individuality and uniqueness are still there in Malayalam cinema "they don't think they have to create a blockbuster, they do it because they want to, and they help each other" ("Anurag Kashyap on Why").

Suman Ghosh's *The Ancient* (2024, Bengali): The film is directed by Suman Ghosh who is a national award winner and an Indian filmmaker. The films he has worked upon have been to several prestigious film festivals. The work 'Parama: A Journey with Aparna Sen' has been the center of discussion of various online platforms which in itself is a documentary style work of art resonating with characteristics of film belonging to the domain of Contemporary Indian Parallel Cinema. However, his latest feature 'Puratawn: The Ancient' brings back the star legendary actress Sharmila Tagore. It is called and referred to as her comeback after so many years. The screening compels us to reflect upon the film *Mausam* (1975) after so many years. The film represents the long lost tradition of Indian Parallel Cinema which started with great directors and filmmakers from Bengal, a place that originated the movement. The works blend reflections, introspection, social commentary, gerontological perspectives and carry forwards the legacy of deep humanism and complex character formation that began and started with Satyajit Ray.

The story begins with the return of Rittika to her ancestral house with her husband Rajeev to celebrate her mother's 80th birthday. After coming back she realises that her mother is not the same as she was when she left. This idea is also resonated in the film *Pyre* by Vinod Kapari because that too deals with what is referred to as migration, disillusionment of an elderly couple living in Himalayas. When she faces this realization that her mother is not as she used to be, she slowly starts to understand her and begins to agree with her mother's conditions and its irreversibility. It not only helps her mother but she also realises a few new perspectives about life and being. It led her to a larger 'metaphysical enquiry into human existence' and elaborates upon the effect the past has on the current state of every human being. The film puts forward the question of aging, failing memory, reliving the past, a fear of obsolescence and reconciliation into a haunting. It tries to bring forward this lesson that in order to make peace with the present one has to bury what has happened in the past (New York Indian Film Festival).

Abhilash Shetty's *Sunday Special* (2024, Kannada): He is Indie filmmaker and quit his corporate job to pursue his dream of filmmaking. He is a self taught filmmaker. He made debut with the Kannada film *Koli Taal* (2021) and the film *Naale Rajaa Koli Majaa* (2024) is about an 11 year old girl attempts to have chicken on a public holiday. This film underscores the robust nature of regional realism outside of the major film hubs, focusing specifically on the Kannada-speaking world. The inclusion of intimate, local narratives like

this highlights the New Wave's commitment to portraying the granular realities of everyday life and culture in diverse parts of India. Pranati A S in her article refers to this film as a form of political satire. In between all of this, it's worth noting what Abhilash says about the challenges of Indie filmmakers, and it follows as: "Today, indie filmmakers have to either showcase it abroad or just release it on broadcasting sites. People don't want to pay to watch independent films because they probably think it is slow or that festival films are of a certain stereotype" (Daithota).

Goutam Ghose's Parikrama (2024, English/Hindi/Italian): "Cinema cannot change the world but it can preserve the memories of time, capturing the essence of an era for future generations" (Chatopadhyay). He was born in Calcutta in 1950, a graduate from Calcutta University and started his film career around 1973. He was active in the group theatre movement in Calcutta and also spent some time as Photo Journalist. He has made several significant feature films including Maa Bhoomi, Dakhal, Paar, Antarjali Yatra, Padma Nadir Majhi, Patang, Gudia, Dekha, Abar Aranye, Yatra, Kaalbela, Moner Manush, Shunyo Awnko, Shankhachil, Raahgir, Shomoyer Smritimala and Parikrama. His famous documentaries include "Meeting A Milestone (on Ustad Bismillah Khan), Beyond the Himalayas, Land of Sand Dunes, Impermanence (On HH Dalai Lama)" (New York Indian Film Festival). Apart from this, he has won multiple awards for his contribution to the field of filmmaking and as a director. "He is also the only Indian to win the coveted Vittori Di Sica Award in Italy. He was awarded the Knighthood of the Star of the Italian Solidarity in July 2006" (New York Indian Film Festival).

The film is directed by a veteran of the Parallel Cinema movement, Ghose's Parikrama brings a global dimension by incorporating English and Italian languages. It's a story about a teenage boy who migrated and an Italian director who was covering Narmada river pilgrimage. In Ghose's words, it can be termed as "the journey of two humans who are somehow connected with the river and Mother Nature" ("Gautam Ghose"). This film reflects upon the themes of journey, cultural exchange, and identity in a globalized world, while maintaining a deeply rooted Indian perspective. It is also a "cinematic exploration displacement and Narmada river" (Chatterjee). These films emphasize and put forward various regional, glocal, and specific concerns of India in their own unique and creative attempt to tell a story through cinematic medium.

Kaushal Oza's Little Thomas (2024, Hindi/English): "We have to write our stories and pitch it to people who are not as familiar with our culture," ("CIIF 2025"). This film appears to focus on a highly intimate, character-driven story, a signature feature of the humanist minimalism passed down from Ray. By exploring individual emotional journeys and relationships, Little Thomas exemplifies how the New Wave uses close-focus narratives to reveal universal truths about family, belonging, and psychological complexity in the modern Indian urban landscape. Though he avoids this tag of being called an indie filmmaker because he himself states that "some of my finance has come from a studio and outside producers," (Oza). Tanushree Ghosh in her article mentions that Oza was Kapadia's seniors and Prateek Vats batchmate from Film Television Institute of India, she further adds quoting Oza that, these two filmmakers had a very miniscule budget and a crew member of 10 people whereas Oza had a complete vanity van and these two are very different facts to be considered while discussing the post-parallel turn in Contemporary Indian Cinema ("CIIF 2025"). Gayathri NS comments that, "In a world where content is often driven by commercial demands, Oza's dedication to meaningful storytelling and his appreciation for regional cinema is a reminder of the power of films to inspire, provoke thought, and connect hearts" (MBIFL).

Aditya Kripalani's I'm Not An Actor (2024, Hindi/English/German): "Cinema is a religion, big screen is its temple" (Kripalani). The director deals with difficult social issues with a sharp, and contemporary lens. The multilingual nature of this film evokes a narrative centered on identity, performance, and the blurred lines between reality and self-presentation. Its title indicates a meta-commentary on authenticity, extending the New Wave's original critique of commercial cinema's artificiality.

Vipin Radhakrishnan's Angammal (2024, Tamil): This film's Tamil roots and focus on a single character (Geetha Kailasam) emphasize the New Wave's dedication to regional specificity and the power of individual

stories. Angammal is likely a portrait of resilience or struggle, using realism to elevate a localized narrative into a profound statement on social or personal endurance.

Afrad VK's *Rip Tide* (2024, Malayalam/English): Hailing from Malayalam cinema, a regional industry globally recognized for its commitment to realistic and nuanced storytelling, *Rip Tide* continues this trend. By incorporating English, the film may explore the pressures of global migration or the cultural clash between tradition and modernity experienced by the younger generation in Kerala.

Indrajit Nattoji's *Madam Driver* (2024, Hindi): With a short runtime and a focus on contemporary urban professional life (a driver), this film exemplifies the New Wave's modern attention to the intersection of class, gender, and labor in the evolving service economy. It is likely a character study using a realistic, slice-of-life approach to examine social mobility and dignity of labor.

Parallel Cinema as Cultural Counter-Discourse

M. Madhava Prasad identifies mainstream Hindi cinema as “a narrative of national integration and emotional unification” (*Ideology of the Hindi Film 1998*). Parallel cinema exposes the ruptures within that narrative. Mrinal Sen's *Bhuvan Shome* (1969) critiqued bureaucratic arrogance through irony and self-reflexive narration. Similarly, Benegal's *Manthan* (1976) depicted collective resistance and rural empowerment. These films articulated a moral and a political realism that is absent in commercial cinema. The same counter-discursive impulse resurfaces in Neeraj Ghaywan's *Masaan* (2015), which presents Banaras not as a spiritual spectacle only, but as a site of caste prejudice, shame, and moral repression. The river Ganga becomes a metaphor for social purification and continuity. It is juxtaposed against the radical boundaries of caste. As critic Uday Bhatia comments, “*Masaan* revives the humanism of the Indian New Wave in a digitized, self-aware India” (Bhatia 2015).

Negotiating Tradition and Modernity

One of the notions of Indian Parallel Cinema is the conflict between tradition and modernity. Films like *Ankur* and *Nishant* (Benegal, 1974–75) exposes the failure of modern reforms to disrupt patriarchal and feudal power. Contemporary works like Rohena Gera's *Sir* (2018) and Tamhane's *The Disciple* (2020) reinterpret this tension through new contexts. The urban domestic labor and artistic aspiration is represented. *Sir* portrays a cross-class relationship between a maid and her employer in Mumbai, suggesting both empathy and the impossibility of equality within India's class structures. *The Disciple* explores the disillusionment of a Hindustani classical musician caught between artistic purity and modern ambition. Both films interrogate the price of progress. As Ravi Vasudevan argues, “The modernity that parallel cinema interrogates is one of uneven development—where enlightenment coexists with inertia” (Vasudevan 2010).

Contemporary Continuum: The Parallel Spirit in the Digital Age

While the institutional support that once sustained the movement, such as NFDC funding, has declined, its ethos persists. Independent directors now use film festivals, OTT platforms, and crowd-funding to reach niche audiences. Films such as *Court*, *Masaan*, *Eeb Allay Ooo!*, and *Pebbles* (Koozhangal, 2021) form what Ahmed calls “the post-global New Wave—a cinema deeply rooted in local realities yet globally conversant in form” (Ahmed 2018). The use of non-linear narratives, minimal background music, and observational cinematography aligns these films with the formal characteristics of 1970s parallel cinema. Moreover, the rise of regional independent cinemas from Marathi to Malayalam observes the movement's original decentralization of cinematic discourse.

OTT Platforms and Digital Fragmentation

While the digital turn has broadened the landscape of Indian cinema by dismantling traditional barriers of distribution and visibility, it simultaneously produces new forms of cultural and ideological containment

that challenge the emancipatory spirit of the original parallel cinema movement. The proliferation of OTT platforms—Netflix, Amazon Prime, MUBI, SonyLIV, and homegrown portals like JioCinema—has enabled a surge of independent filmmaking, often celebrated as the “new wave” of Indian realism. Yet, as Rajadhyaksha (2009) reminds us, the circulation of images is never ideologically neutral; platforms operate within the neoliberal logic of algorithmic curation, where audience engagement is quantified through data rather than deliberation. This shift transforms the viewing experience from collective spectatorship to privatized consumption, where films once meant to provoke dialogue and dissent are now consumed in isolation on personal screens.

The spatial and affective conditions of viewing thus undergo a profound mutation. Earlier, in the heyday of parallel cinema, screenings of films by Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, or Shyam Benegal functioned as semi-public encounters that encouraged political conversation and cultural critique. In contrast, today’s streaming environment disperses spectatorship across individualized and asynchronous temporalities. As Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Ravi Vasudevan have argued, cinema’s political potential once lay in its ability to forge “publics of engagement”—spaces where aesthetic realism intersected with social realism. OTT-driven fragmentation erodes this collective sensibility, creating what Bhatia (2023) calls “the solitude of streaming,” where dissent risks becoming an aesthetic experience rather than a social intervention.

Moreover, digital capitalism redefines the meaning of “independence.” Although platforms appear to democratize access, they impose invisible constraints through content metrics, market trends, and censorship guidelines. As filmmaker Achal Mishra notes, “even realism now has to fit the frame of watchability.” This commodification of dissent transforms realism into a curated aesthetic rather than a critical practice. Films like *Sir* (2018), *Cobalt Blue* (2022), or *All India Rank* (2024), while continuing the realist lineage of Ray and Ghatak, circulate within branded categories such as “arthouse” or “festival favorites,” designed to attract global, educated consumers rather than mobilize local publics. As Madhava Prasad (2014) observes, neoliberal media economies replace collective participation with individual aspiration, leading to what he terms a “soft depoliticization” of culture.

The contradiction is, therefore, structural: OTT platforms simultaneously revive and neutralize the radical thrust of parallel cinema. The accessibility they offer is offset by a loss of ideological urgency, as the discourse of resistance is absorbed into the logic of recommendation systems and content algorithms. By questioning these paradoxes, this paper situates contemporary Indian Parallel Cinema not as a closed historical movement but as an evolving site of negotiation—between market and meaning, visibility and autonomy, realism and its commodified afterlife. Following Vasudevan’s (2011) argument that cinema is “a space of cultural articulation rather than resolution,” the paper foregrounds the urgency of reclaiming that space amid digital fragmentation. In this sense, the contemporary indie filmmaker, like Ray or Sen before them, must reimagine not only the image of realism but also its mode of reception—ensuring that the politics of seeing does not dissolve into the convenience of streaming.

Implications

Cultural Implications

The cultural implications of the shift in parallel cinema underscore a reconfiguration of Indian identity and spectatorship in the digital era. Earlier, parallel cinema served as a site for collective reflection—representing the lived realities of postcolonial India through regional specificity and everyday humanism. In the contemporary context, this realism extends to the digital space, where filmmakers from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds narrate local experiences for global audiences. However, this democratization of cinematic voice also invites concerns about homogenization, as streaming platforms curate content for transnational appeal. The hyper-local becomes the global aesthetic, raising questions about authenticity and representation within neoliberal cultural production. Despite this tension, the movement continues to function as a living archive of India’s pluralism, offering insight into shifting notions of class, gender, and belonging.

Political Implications

Politically, the transformation of parallel cinema reveals the shifting relationship between art, ideology, and public discourse. The early films of Ray, Sen, and Benegal articulated cinema as a medium of resistance—addressing poverty, caste, and inequality through collective spectatorship and civic engagement. Today, as viewing migrates to OTT platforms, political engagement risks becoming a solitary act, mediated by algorithms that privilege marketable dissent. As M. Madhava Prasad observes, neoliberalism replaces participatory critique with aspirational individualism, where resistance itself becomes a form of consumption. Yet, independent filmmakers continue to challenge state power, social hierarchies, and cultural taboos, using the digital sphere as both a space of subversion and survival. The political charge of parallel cinema, therefore, persists—though reframed through the aesthetics of fragmentation and dispersed publics.

Aesthetic Implications

Aesthetically, the evolution of parallel cinema from celluloid realism to digital minimalism signifies both continuity and rupture. The realist idiom pioneered by Ray and Ghatak has been reimagined by contemporary directors such as Chaitanya Tamhane, Prateek Vats, and Payal Kapadia, who employ long takes, natural soundscapes, and non-linear narratives to capture the alienation of neoliberal life. However, the circulation of these aesthetics on OTT platforms transforms realism into a branded commodity—categorized as “arthouse,” “festival,” or “indie.” This aesthetic codification risks depoliticizing the very form that once stood for radical truth-telling. Yet, as Ravi Vasudevan notes, cinema remains “a space of cultural articulation rather than resolution,” and within this tension lies the enduring aesthetic vitality of parallel cinema—constantly negotiating between art and commerce, resistance and recognition.

Conclusion

Indian Parallel Cinema both classical and contemporary, articulates the complexities of a nation in going through a paradigm shift. It oscillates between the village and the city, the ideal and the real, the individual and the collective. Whether in *Bhuvan Shome* or *Eeb Allay Ooo!*, it consistently transforms the ordinary into a site of inquiry. By transcending the binary of commercial versus art cinema, the movement emerges as a cultural archive of India’s evolving consciousness. As Rajadhyaksha aptly concludes, “Parallel cinema reimagined India not as a monolith but as a mosaic of lived realities” (Rajadhyaksha 2009). Today, that mosaic continues to expand through digital screens, independent voices, and new geographies of storytelling, affirming that the parallel spirit is not a closed chapter but an evolving cultural discourse.

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