

Article

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**Tracing *Anti-Anthropocene*:
Re-imagining the Possibilities of the Cinema, Based on Rural India**



Stree

Abstract: An interesting phenomenon has been happening in Indian cinema for quite a few years now. This article attempts to understand why and what their supposed possibilities are. The centre stage of the drama has been shifted to the suburbs of India, sometimes to the Mofussil, towards the wild even, and the whole narrative revolves around rural parts of India. From Independent to big-budget production, the cinematic space has become more raw, rural, and close to nature. Films like *Stree*, *Kantara*, *Lapataa Ladies*, and *Gamak Ghar*, to series like *Panchayet* and *Mirzapur*, have chosen their space as the outskirts of so-called metropolitan cities. Here, I think the makers make a conscious choice in terms of their production strategy, narrative tropes, etc., particularly in the new age cinema that came from India in the past five to ten years, while unconsciously, this decentering of the city hegemony is opening up a pathway for ecocriticism as well as look for more liberating world order other than the current geological one. If we look back to the decade of the 2000s, we see flocks of filmmakers who came into prominence while telling the story of a city and its people, sometimes telling the tale of marginal people who reside in the slums of big cities. Both the Anurag's (Kashyap and Basu) have a case in hand; if we see their filmography, it will be seen that they wanted to portray a modern tale by showing the unseen dramas of a metropolitan city. I would not like to delve into that, but I would take them as the point of inflexion, just to compare the situation and put up my arguments.

The nub of my argument is that these films, as I have taken the name of the few, would also be considered modern in their own truest sense. These films, the independent ones, along with their big-budget

counterparts, are creating an anti-Anthropocene by going to the outskirts of India, rural India, and focusing on nature closely. I would do a textual analysis of four films, including genres and production values: *Gamak Ghar*, *Lapaata Ladies*, *Kantara*, and *Stree*. These films not only tell stories of marginal people but use the rural space not as a cinematic spectacle but as a reminder to those who have become adversaries of nature in time. By doing so, they remind us of the possibilities of a new world order, which negates human centrism.

Keywords: Anthropocene, Decentering City, Ecocriticism, Hegemony, Independent Cinema, Modern Cinema, Nature, Realism

A Horizon of Breaking Away from Human-Centrism

In the twenty-first century, Indian cinematic images have gone through a lot of changes in quite a short amount of time. Let's consider the history of Indian cinema from its early days. We have generally been saturated with images of studio filmmaking, although I'm taking the alternative or parallel practice of cinema in India as an outlier here. In this particular century after the globalisation of Bollywood, cinematic images have changed quite enormously- two lovers are on an abroad train, romancing on one of the obscure corners of the Alps, heroes studying in a famous first-class university, going to Starbucks or McDonald's, and Bollywood dancers are in a cosmopolitan cityscape. Bollywood was global, and by doing so, it attracted a neo-liberal global capitalist market to India. Then came a particular sequence of movies from the young cinephile Bombay makers, who wanted to make the cinema of the city's marginalised people- the big city, Bombay. From the hearts of slums to the neon-lit *galis* of Bombay came into the periphery of the new cinematic image through the films of Anurag Kashyap and Vikramaditya Motwane. Even the other Anurag, Basu, also made films about a metropolitan city, as the characters are the typically educated city people in *Life in a Metro*, and the town is none other than Bombay. But then, in the next decade, an exciting phenomenon emerged- from cities to rural India, the cinematic space started to move away. The mofussil, the rural, and the outskirts of so-called underdeveloped India have become the telegraph of Indian cinematic images and spaces in recent times. Through this article, I will look for the reasons for this immaculate change and the new possibilities it

presents to scholars. I organised my study around filming the spaces that have represented India recently and not around a history of location shooting in Indian films to underscore the severe problem of categorising films through geographical territoriality. However, it is interesting that I would like to look at this phenomenon as a sincere choice and an appearance of a new consciousness.

There has always been a debate about the “filmed space” and “filmic space”, as the great Indian scholar Priya Jaikumar (2019) suggested in her seminal work *Where History Resides*; I would also like to take that route set forth by her, where I would look into the profilmic spaces or the real spaces where the film resided, not the framed space. My paper sincerely and deliberately doesn't wish to take the pathway of discussing the particularities of the evolution of the film language, the apparatus theory, or any other distinctive attributes of the medium of the film itself. Here, I would like to take some films as my text, by which I would point out the suppositions my article is proposing. This recent phenomenon of moving the cinematic space towards the outskirts is happening in many over-the-top series also- primary instances being *Panchayet*, *Mirzapur*, and even in the case of *Pataal Lok*, where although the focal point may have been the capital of India, the whole story proliferated in the suburbs.

Decentering City in the Indie Productions: *Gamak Ghar* and *Laapata Ladies*

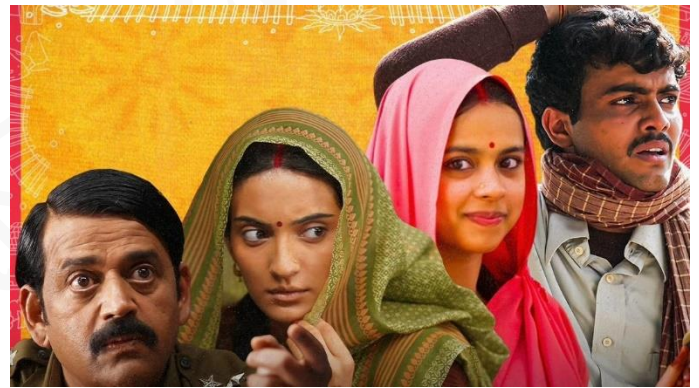
When one points out the possibilities of decentering city hegemony, Achal Mishra's Maithili language feature *Gamak Ghar* (2019) exemplifies the most prominent one. What can we see in that poignantly lighted, distinctly used geometric framed, utmost

realist film? The film explored the ancestral home where people gathered after nearly two decades in the aftermath of childbirth in the family in Darbhanga, Mithila. A purely Bazanian realist film in the 21st century has scrutinised reverting to one's old home. Harmanpreet Kaur's (2022) study also saw this film in the light of the interdisciplinary studies of migration studies and cinema studies to look beyond the normative forms of criticism and to engage with the text through an analysis of aesthetics with the imagination of the filmmaker Mishra's personal lives. In the film, the human narrative takes a backstep as we see peculiarly everyday day-to-day things, undecisive discussions, and even the old songs that cultivate the regional culture have become the primary images. Achal Mishra's *Gamak Ghar* doesn't propound itself to the typical human-centric narrative; it ushers a new pathway of affection. Certain moments throughout the film bring about pure affection- one instance being when a child, along with his elder, went to pluck some mangoes. We see one small hand try to touch the green mangoes. We know a villager boy helps them to pluck the mangoes, and simultaneously, the child loses his concentration; his consciousness shifts to something else, which viewers don't know, as we can only look back to our childhood. In this particular sequence, the whole conversation gets backslidden as the main image is about the beauty and the calmness of the whole space where the sequence takes place.

The whole film is a homage to the simplicity of village life, a celebration of finding nostalgia inside the old home, and an ode to the poignancy of a rural village. Even the film doesn't have conclusive dialogues, as Mishra sincerely avoids that logic and opens up a space for his spectators to introspect. Here, I argue that the film consciously chooses this path to break away from human-centrism and to do away with the city hegemony. However, maybe the characters live in the city, and they decentered that space to navigate this rural pace and find their mental and inner peace.

Now again, let us look at the other text I'm considering here, *Laapataa Ladies* (2023), directed by Kiran Rao and produced mainly by Aamir Khan's production house. Again, it is a straightforward story

with a minimalistic approach and a narrative of comedy in a rural dialect. The film was shot in a fictional space called Nirmal Pradesh, a rural region. Again, in another contemporary film, we see the shifting of the space towards the rural, the suburbs, dysfunctioning or negating the city-centrism that the Bollywood used to see. Even if we go back a bit further, this particular production house produced a film, and director Kiran Rao directed a film titled *Dhobi Ghat* (2011), where the story took place in Mumbai. The film was released internationally under the title *Mumbai Diaries*. Again, from this production house only, we see the starting point of breaking away from the city cinema, as we see *Peepli Live* (2010), a story based upon the suicides of the farmers from the village Peepli, which was again situated in the fictional state of Mukhya Pradesh.



Laapataa Ladies

Although the film *Laapataa Ladies* takes upon the journey of women empowerment in the rural villages of India on the surface level, if we delve deeper, what possibilities should we look into? The film takes us to those rural spaces, and as viewers navigate through those spaces due to the choice of the cinematic space that has been created, it opens up a possibility of eco-criticism, in my opinion. I would like to bring the ideas by Sean Cubitt (2005) in his seminal work *EcoMedia*, where he argued that film criticism should consider textual materiality while discussing eco-criticism. He implied more cynically about the ecocritical writing's preoccupation with the focus of philosophy and ideologies and that practice should be done with. On the other hand, his careful words must be remembered that he wants us to see the things in films, not the films as things. To go further with my

argument, I would like to mention the work of Jane Bennet (2009), who also in her work gave a concept of “thing-power” or “the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle”. Although considering the human privilege only of that agency which understands the “thing-power”, one is compromising human beings' political, aesthetical, and environmental imaginations. In film theory, we already had these debates through the writings of Sigfried Kracauer, Bela Balazs, and Dziga Vertov.

Now, the possibilities I'm considering through these films are solely based on creating a new consciousness of building an ecological sensibility. Texts like *Gamak Ghar* and *Laapataa Ladies* only point towards that horizon through their intimate treatment of nature and the breaking away of city-centrism, proliferating that world order. Although it may seem superfluous that I brought up Jane Benett's idea of things, or say mysterious objects, here I want to clarify that the spaces where these films took place, or the surroundings of the prolific spaces, can also be a consideration while thinking about ecocritical possibilities through these independent or relatively small budget Indian movies.

Thinking Through the Spaces: *Stree* and *Kantara*



Kantara

Kantara was a Kannada language action thriller film directed by Rishab Shetty. Even “Kantara” can be translated as the ‘mystical forest’. I particularly take this film because it is contemporary, released just in 2022. *Kantara* is perhaps the most contextual film text, and I'm arguing an ecological perspective of these films. The narrative relies heavily on a

demigod, an intrinsic mythological prospect, as the demigod saves the whole of the jungle and the environment. Now, why is this consciousness appearing on the surface of some films from southern India all of a sudden? Is this only a consequence, or should we read these texts as the call of time? We all know about the structure of horrors India has produced throughout history, but these periodical horrors have changed the course of the regional space of Indian cinema. We have already seen the impact of the Marathi horror,



Tummbad

Tummbad (2018), which raised eyebrows in India and abroad. *Kantara* also gained critical acclaim in India's 54th International Film Festival, winning the Silver Peacock, a special jury prize. Although the film is a period piece, it takes up a journey through that jungle, where wild animals and the people who spend their lives in the jungle have become spectacles. This film has only one main protagonist, and that is certainly the jungle space. I have already mentioned Jane Benette's ideas; we must see things in the film. So we must remember the myths and jungle, and by giving that agency to the jungle, we can presuppose an ecocritical sensibility in this age of Anthropocene.

Another film text I would like to take up in this discussion is *Stree* (2018), a horror comedy by Amar Kaushik. The film had a budget of 23-25 crore and came under the first instalment of the Maddock Supernatural Universe. I'm not going to lay my thoughts on the subject matter, as the film itself is perhaps the most sought-after and thought-out horror for a long time, and my article doesn't wish to conform to the ideas behind the sociological ideologies of the film. Here, I'm more profoundly concerned with the space of the film, where it took place, the town of Chanderi. Townships like this have

always been places where mythologies have resided since immemorial, specifically in a country like India. These are the spaces where the camera chooses to traverse, creating a certain imagination among the viewers. Films like *Stree*, on the one hand, asserted a strong feminist discourse in the Indian horror scene and, on the other hand, have paved a pathway for possibilities of a world order of anti-anthropocene.

A Possibility of Generating Consciousness



Pather Panchali

In the Indian cinema paradigm, the first prominent film that has been rendered a world-class status has to be Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali* (1955). A film that gave an ode to the Bengal village life and beyond. Adapted from the great Bibhutibhusan Bandopadhyaya's novella *Pather Panchali* (*Song of the Little Road*), which has all the elements of being the most prominent ecologically sensible novel. However, what Ray has sought through his work has been overlooked by Indian filmmakers for a long time. However, since 2010, an inevitable wave of young filmmakers have come to the foray and have innovative ideas. Through their films, I have tried to discuss through the lens of an optimistic possibility of creating a consciousness among the viewers concerning an upcoming world order, which the current Indian films, of course not the whole lot but a group of films, have already presupposed.

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