

Article

O.P. Srivastava

## Parallel Cinema: India's Revolutionary Film Movement



Pillars of Parallel Cinema

Parallel Cinema in India, especially within the Hindi film industry, marked a profound departure from the conventions of mainstream Bollywood. This cinematic revolution began in the 1960s and gained momentum through the 1970s and 1980s, challenging the formulaic narratives and commercialism that dominated Indian cinema. Unlike Bollywood's song-and-dance sequences, melodrama, and star-cantered approach, Parallel Cinema focuses on realism, social issues, and artistic integrity. This movement not only influenced Indian

society and culture but also left an indelible mark on global cinema.

The movement was catalysed by the establishment of the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII) in 1960, which became a breeding ground for a new generation of filmmakers determined to create films grounded in reality and focused on the human condition. Inspired by Italian Neorealism, New Wave French cinema, and the work of renowned filmmakers like Satyajit Ray, these directors brought forward stories that reflected India's everyday struggles, socio-political challenges, and

cultural nuances. Parallel Cinema became a voice for the marginalised and an unfiltered reflection of Indian society.

### Characteristics of Parallel Cinema

Parallel Cinema distinguished itself from mainstream Bollywood in several significant ways. While commercial Indian cinema relied heavily on star power, melodrama, elaborate song-and-dance routines, and predictable storylines, Parallel Cinema was known for its realism and relatability. These films were typically made on modest budgets. They often featured lesser-known actors, allowing filmmakers to explore unconventional themes and take creative risks without the constraints of box office expectations.

One of the primary hallmarks of Parallel Cinema was its focus on social and political issues. These films dared to tackle subjects that Bollywood often overlooked or avoided, shedding light on poverty, caste discrimination, gender inequality, religious tensions, and bureaucratic inefficiency. Parallel Cinema sought to entertain and provoke thought, challenge social norms, and inspire change.

Films like *'Garm Hawa'* (1973), directed by M.S. Sathyu, tackled the painful aftermath of the Partition of India, delving into the lives of Muslims who remained in India post-independence and highlighting their struggles with identity and belonging. *'Bhuvan Shome'* (1969), directed by Mrinal Sen, was another cornerstone of Parallel Cinema, presenting a subtle critique of bureaucracy while capturing the essence of rural Indian life with simplicity and innocence. This film is often credited with

igniting the Parallel Cinema movement, opening doors for a new wave of realistic and thought-provoking films.



*Garm Hawa* (1973)

Parallel Cinema often featured protagonists from the lower or middle classes, presenting their lives and challenges with empathy and authenticity. *'Sara Akash'* (1969), directed by Basu Chatterjee, was an intimate exploration of middle-class life and marital relationships in a small town, shedding light on the complexities of love, societal expectations, and familial dynamics. Such films offered audiences a mirror to their lives, making them feel seen and understood in ways Bollywood rarely achieved.

### Iconic Films and Themes in Parallel Cinema

The themes explored in Parallel Cinema were diverse yet deeply rooted in the socio-political context of India. *'Bhumika'*

(1977), directed by Shyam Benegal, was a biographical drama inspired by the life of Hansa Wadkar, a Marathi stage and film actress. The film delved into themes of gender, identity, and the conflicts women face in a patriarchal society. Through the character's struggles with love, ambition, and autonomy, *Bhumika* offers a nuanced perspective on women's challenges reconciling personal aspirations with societal expectations.



*Bhumika* (1977)

Another iconic film, '*Mirch Masala*' (1987), directed by Ketan Mehta, was a powerful commentary on gender oppression and the resilience of women. Set in a rural village, the film depicts women who stand together against a lecherous tax collector. The film's climax, where the women unite to protect one of their own, remains one of the most memorable and empowering scenes in Indian cinema. '*Mirch Masala*' symbolised

the collective strength of women, a theme that resonated deeply with audiences and underscored Parallel Cinema's commitment to social relevance.

Parallel Cinema also excelled in the realm of satire and dark comedy. '*Jaane Bhi Do Yaaro*' (1983), directed by Kundan Shah, was a satirical masterpiece that critiqued corruption and bureaucratic inefficiency in Indian society. Through its humorous yet poignant narrative, the film highlights the absurdity and injustice in the system, making it a timeless classic that remains relevant today.

'*Sparsh*' (1980), directed by Sai Paranjpye, tackled the sensitive theme of disability with grace and empathy. The film centred on a blind principal of a school for the visually impaired and his journey of self-acceptance and love. '*Sparsh*' was celebrated for its realistic portrayal of disability and exploration of the psychological challenges differently-abled people face. Such themes, rarely addressed in mainstream cinema, were handled with a level of authenticity and sensitivity that became characteristic of Parallel Cinema.

### **Legacy and Influence of Parallel Cinema**

Parallel Cinema has left a lasting legacy on Indian cinema, inspiring a new generation of filmmakers who continue to prioritise content-driven narratives and realistic storytelling. This movement introduced audiences to a form of cinema grounded in truth and reflective of the socio-political landscape of India. The emphasis on social issues, cultural authenticity, and artistic expression set a standard that still influences contemporary Indian cinema.

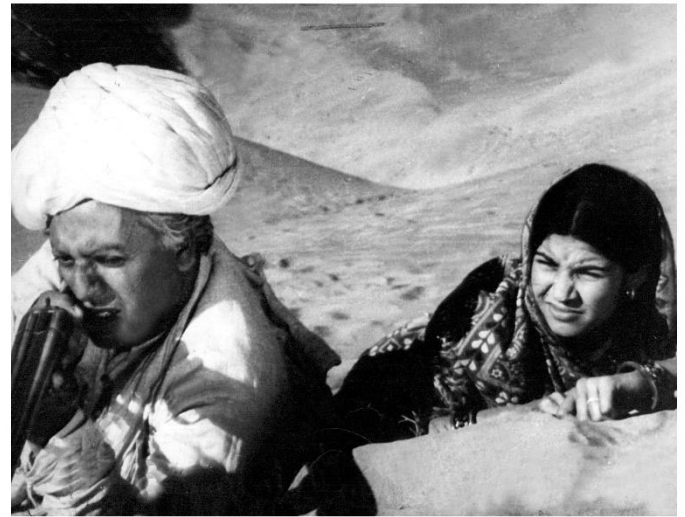


Many contemporary filmmakers, such as Anurag Kashyap, Dibankar Banerjee, Rajat Kapoor, and Ritesh Batra, carry forward the legacy of Parallel Cinema by creating films that tackle complex social themes and offer fresh, realistic perspectives. For instance, Anurag Kashyap's *'Gangs of Wasseypur'* (2012), Rajat Kapoor's *Ankhon Dekhi* (2014) and Dibankar Banerjee's *'Khosla Ka Ghosla'* (2006) are heavily influenced by the themes and storytelling styles of Parallel Cinema, depicting gritty narratives that explore the underbelly of Indian society.

The influence of Parallel Cinema is also evident in the rise of independent cinema in India. With the advent of streaming platforms like Netflix and Amazon Prime, there has been a renewed interest in content-driven cinema. These platforms have allowed independent filmmakers to explore unconventional themes, furthering the reach and impact of the Parallel Cinema ethos. Films like *'The Lunchbox'* (2013), directed by Ritesh Batra, capture ordinary people's intimate, everyday experiences, a hallmark of Parallel Cinema that has now found a global audience.

### **Relevance of Parallel Cinema Today**

The relevance of Parallel Cinema lies in its timeless exploration of universal human experiences and societal issues. The movement tackled themes such as gender dynamics, class struggles, and the human condition, making these stories relatable across generations. As India grapples with issues like corruption, gender inequality, and social justice, the narratives crafted by Parallel Cinema filmmakers remain as relevant today as they were decades ago.



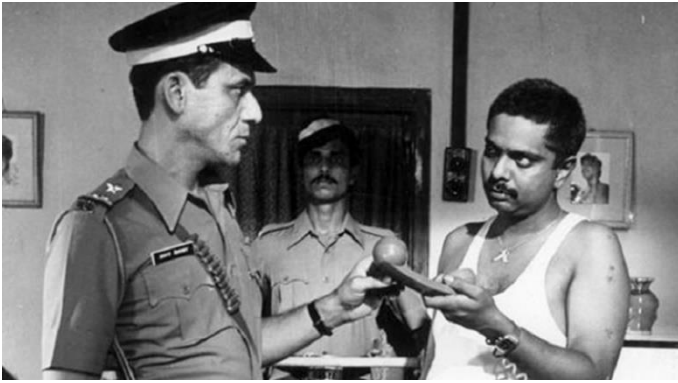
*Bhuvan Shome* (1969)

Films like *Garm Hawa*, *Bhuvan Shome*, *Bhumika*, *Nishant*, *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaro*, *Ardh Satya*, *Akrosh* and *Mirch Masala* continue to resonate with audiences because of their poignant critique of systemic issues and their empathetic portrayal of marginalised communities. These films serve as a reminder of the power of cinema as a tool for social change, encouraging audiences to reflect on the world around them and question the status quo.

Furthermore, Parallel Cinema's impact on global audiences has solidified its place as an essential cinematic movement. The authenticity and relatability of these films have attracted international acclaim, showcasing Indian cinema's ability to tell stories that transcend cultural boundaries.

### **Conclusion: The Enduring Spirit of Parallel Cinema**

Parallel Cinema in India was more than just an alternative to Bollywood; it was a revolutionary movement that redefined what Indian cinema could be. By focusing on



*Ardh Satya* (1983)

realism, social issues, and artistic expression, Parallel Cinema carved out a unique space in the cinematic landscape, challenging the norms of mainstream entertainment. The films of this movement are celebrated for

their artistic merit and enduring relevance in addressing socio-political and cultural issues that continue to shape Indian society.

Today, the spirit of Parallel Cinema lives on through the works of filmmakers who prioritise meaningful storytelling over commercial success. As audiences become more discerning and seek content that reflects their realities, the principles of Parallel Cinema continue to inspire and shape the future of Indian cinema. The movement serves as a testament to the power of film as a vehicle for change, and its legacy will undoubtedly influence Indian and global cinema for generations to come.

**O.P. Srivastava is a writer-filmmaker based in Mumbai. In 2015, his documentary *Life in Metaphors* got the National Film Award as the Best Biopic.**