

Article

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## **Cinematic Mortality: The Shifting Portrayal of Death in Indian Films Across Different Eras (1913-2025)**



### **ABSTRACT:**

This article aims to study the evolving portrayal of death in Indian cinema in each era, reflecting its cultural, philosophical and political transformation over time. Further, it examines how death has been depicted from its early representations in the silent era rooted in religious doctrines and mythology to later being used as a dramatic tool in mainstream cinema and as a tool of social critique in parallel and independent films. By analysing key films from various eras, namely silent, mainstream, parallel and contemporary mainstream and independent cinema, the study tries to highlight how Indian filmmakers have perceived and reshaped the narrative of mortality; the article also considers border cultural and socio-political shifts that the nation has undergone and the audience reception that have influenced cinematic narratives illustrating how the medium grapples with the complexities of mortality and its meaning.

### **Introduction**

Death has always been a predominant theme concerning Indian philosophy and literature; the concept of death is an integral part of the collective Indian subconsciousness. Death in India is not just seen as a bleak end but a beginning of life; birth and death are seen as a continuous cyclic process in India. It is an integral concept in Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism that deals with moksha (liberation or salvation), which involves escaping the cycle of birth and death (samsara). Each tradition has its take on the nature of samsara and the means to transcend it to attain the ultimate state of liberation. Buddhism reinterprets the cycle of birth and death as

something that's governed by craving and ignorance, and once a person can transcend these two to reach Nirvana, a state beyond suffering and rebirth.

### **The Silent Era of Indian Cinema**

The silent era of Indian cinema, from 1913 to 1934, was a formative period that set the stage for the country's cinematic traditions, some of which still follow a century later. During this era, death was often portrayed as a cosmic event tied to concepts like religious beliefs, karma and divine justice rather than being depicted as an individual tragedy. Hindu mythology heavily influenced early narrative traditions. Hence, films of this era framed death as a natural and necessary transition rather than a life coming to an end. They often reinforce the nature of existence as cyclical using concepts like reincarnation and liberation.

However, this era witnessed cinematic innovation and a social revolution, and immense socio-political changes happened in India. The silent film era also coincided with the Indian independence movement, an ongoing struggle against colonial rule that eventually led to the rise of national sentiments; where Mahatma Gandhi was advocating nonviolent revolt against the Britishers, call for swaraj or self-rule was resonating all across the country and cinema started becoming an emerging medium to echo nationalistic and moralistic views. These socio-political conditions later shaped how themes like death, sacrifice and destiny were interpreted.

### **Depiction of death in silent films**

Most silent films were mythological epics that depicted dharma and karma as key forces governing life and death. These forces provided an allegorical framework for narratives of perseverance and sacrifice, reflecting the aspirations of freedom movements.

The lack of sound and dialogue made filmmakers heavily rely on visual storytelling, using methods of exaggeration, symbolic gestures, and interluding titles to convey the emotions and context of the scenes.

Common themes involved in the portrayal of death in the silent film era are:

- 1) Reincarnation, where death is seen as a transition into another form of existence.
- 2) Divine Justice to restore a cosmic balance.
- 3) Martyrdom and sacrifice, where characters die for a noble cause or out of devotion.
- 4) Divine intervention where gods or demons perish humans.

### ***Raja Harishchandra (1913) BY Dir. Dadasaheb Phalke***

It's India's first feature film based on the legend of King Harishchandra. In this film, death is symbolically represented as a sign of morality. King Harishchandra sacrifices his wife and son for honesty, showcasing his unwavering righteousness.



***Lanka Dahan (1917) BY Dir. Dadasaheb Phalke***

This film centres on the burning of Sri Lanka from the epic Ramayana. Here, death is depicted as a divine form of retribution, where godly forces punish the demons. This film symbolically reflects well with the audience, reinforcing the idea that any form of oppression would be ultimately defeated, supporting their freedom struggle.

***Bhakta Vidur (1921) BY Dir. Kanjibhai Rathod***

This is an allegorical film disguised as a mythological story but a commentary on British rule. Here, death is portrayed as a moral reckoning in which the righteous attain salvation and the corrupt souls meet their fate. The British banned the film because they recognised its nationalistic nature.



***Sant Tukaram (1921) BY Dir. Kanjibhai Rathod***

A biopic of saint Tukaram where his death is shown as an ascension to the divine realm, where they show spiritual devotion transcends mortality.

***Pati Bhakti (1922) BY Dir. Bhalji Pendharkar***

This film centres on the concept of sacrifice in marriage, and the protagonist's death serves as a warning lesson in devotion and fidelity.

***Sati Savitri (1923) BY Dir. G.V. Sane***

This film focuses on the theme that with unwavering devotion, the nature of fate could be altered. The protagonist, Savitri, brings back her dead husband alive, outwitting the god of death.



***Buddha Dev (1923) BY Dir. Dadasaheb Torne***

It is a film that follows the events of Buddha's life and deals with his renunciation of material attachments. Death is shown here as a mere illusion, and the film emphasises spiritual awakening over material existence.

***Har Har Mahadev (1924) BY Dir. Nanubhai Desai***

This film focuses on God's cosmic nature in balancing creation and destruction. Death is shown as the mandatory force that drives the cycle of existence.

***Raja Harischandra (1928) BY Dir. R. Nataraja Mudaliar***

This is a remake of the original 1913 film, and it still emphasises the same core values, reinforcing moral concepts like sacrifice and perseverance. It also sees death as a moral trial.

## **Audience Reception**

Audience received such films with deep reverence and with invested emotions; rather than seeing death as a tragic event, they perceived it as an affirmation of their existing religious beliefs; many even saw these films as an extension of religious discourses to strengthen their faith and morality, but as the freedom struggle gained momentum the same films gained a political significance. They were seen as a symbol of resistance against the Britisher's rule, where divine justice was interpreted as the eventual triumph over the long struggle.

As Indian cinema transitioned into the sound era, these themes evolved. Still, the influence of silent films remained strong, shaping the narrative structures and ideological foundations of Indian storytelling for decades.

## **The Portrayal of Death in Indian Cinema (1950-2000)**

With the invention of sound in Indian cinema in the late 30s, In talkies, death was dramatised with more intensity and emotional impact with music, dialogues and dramatic use of sounds, which allowed filmmakers to depict grief, lamentation and other reflections on mortality closer to reality. Mournful songs, powerful monologues and dialogues, and the usage of appropriate background music added emotional weight to the portrayal of death scenes. As filmmaking matured, melodramatic depiction of loss became a constant in social dramas, where the death of a character catalysed transformation, revenge or redemption.

Between 1950 and 2000, Indian cinema witnessed drastic transformations, reflecting broader socio-cultural, political, and technological shifts, existential struggles, social justice, and personal tragedy. Death was no longer seen as a cosmic event but used as a metaphor to critique social norms and oppression within the social system and also as a personal grief exploration of human emotions with greater depth.

## **The Parallel Cinema Movement and Its Approach to Death:**

The late 1960s saw the substantial rise of the parallel cinema movement, where films introduced a more unglamourized and close-to-reality depiction of death, departing from a commercialised melodramatic appeal. Filmmakers depicted death as an unavoidable consequence reflecting poverty, socio-political failure, and systemic failure. Rather than using death as a dramatic tool like mainstream cinema, films from the parallel movement presented death with a stark reality without any moralistic or heroic event associated with it.

Filmmakers like Satyajit Ray, Mirnal Sen and Shyam Benegal showcased death in a way that reflects real-world tragedies. Their main focus was on themes like human suffering, death's randomness, and social consequences. *Aparajito* (1956), directed by Satyajit Ray, explored the theme of what impact would a parental death have on a young boy, while *Nishant* (1975), directed by Shyam Benegal, explored the brutalist nature of feudal oppression where death represents social injustice. The influence of global cinema affected the narratives of Indian filmmakers, leading to nuanced storytelling techniques and well-constructed narratives, leading to a more substantial psychological depth in characters.

Common themes in the portrayal of death during this period include:

1. **Martyrdom and Sacrifice:** Patriotic and selfless in settings of war or films dealing with themes of patriotism.
2. **Revenge and Retribution** by killing as a means of restoring justice.
3. **Tragic Love and Family Honor** by Emotional portrayal of deaths to restore honour and unrequited love.
4. **Social Injustice and Systemic Oppression** by unjust death as a consequence of poverty, corruption and discrimination.
5. **Existential and Psychological Anguish** by Philosophical and Existential reflections of death in parallel and arthouse cinema.
6. **Urban Violence** as a consequence of gang war, assassinations or films dealing with the underworld.

### **Notable Films from Parallel Cinema and Their Treatment of Death:**

#### ***Bhuvan Shome (1969) BY Dir. Mrinal Sen***

In this film, death is portrayed as an ironic and necessary evil for social transformation, focusing on the divide between the people from the power circle and the rural.

#### ***Aparajito (1956) BY Dir. Satyajit Ray***

It deals with the theme of detachment and personal growth and how the death of a parent impacts an aspiring young protagonist.



#### ***Nishant (1975) BY Dir. Shyam Benegal***

It explores the brutality of feudal oppression and how death is an inescapable consequence of unchecked power and social hierarchy.

#### ***Manthan (1976) BY Dir. Shyam Benegal***

In this film, the death of an individual represents the larger rural community he is a part of, focusing on the struggles of an oppressed rural community.

#### ***Ardh Satya (1983) BY Dir. Govind Nihalani***

In this psychological drama, death is shown as a consequence of the moral dilemmas of a police officer struggling within a corrupt system.

#### ***Salim Langde Pe Mat Ro (1989) BY Dir. Saeed Akhtar Mirza***

This film is a take on communal violence and how death affects marginalised communities.

## Notable Films from Mainstream Cinema and Their Treatment of Death:

### *Mother India (1957) BY Dir. Mehboob Khan*

This film showcases death as a moral resolution, where the protagonist is forced to kill her son, symbolising the triumph of righteousness for a greater cause over personal emotions and family.

### *Mughal-e-Azam (1960) BY Dir. K. Asif*

In this historical drama that deals with the tragic love story of Salim and Anarkali, death is portrayed as an act of defiance and honour under the weight of destiny and power.

### *Guide (1965) BY Dir. Vijay Anand*

In this film, the protagonist sacrifices his life as a self-imposed atonement at the end of his character transformation from a flawed man to a spiritual guide.

### *Anand (1971) BY Dir. Hrishikesh Mukherjee*

This film offers a deeper philosophical take on terminal illness. The protagonist embraces death and his condition with an optimistic perspective, influencing others to celebrate life rather than mourn death.

### *Sholay (1975) BY Dir. Ramesh Sippy*

This movie revolutionised action cinema in the Indian landscape, where death is both shown as a tragic loss and a form of retribution. The sacrifice of key characters' lives adds depth to the revenge narrative.



### *Satya (1998) BY Dir. Ram Gopal Varma*

This film revamped the gangster genre in Indian cinema, which offers a hyper-realistic look into the lives of gangsters where death is seen because of violence that leads to an unresentful cycle of retribution.

## Audience Reception:

As Indian society evolved, so did the reception of violence in films. With the advent of action, revenge-driven killing gained popularity in the 1980s, giving rise to the Angry Young Man Trope. The 1990s saw a shift towards hyperrealistic portrayals of deaths with socially relevant narratives.

## The Portrayal of Death in Indian Cinema (2000-2025)

With the turn of the century, Indian filmmakers started embracing more introspective, nuanced and unsettling portrayals of death, while mainstream movies continue to use death as a

dramatic device. Independent filmmakers continued to explore death as an existential crisis in terms of spirituality and social reflection. Filmmakers started delving deeper into personal narratives, questioning the meaning of mortality, old age, euthanasia and the transition between life and death. With wider internet access to international films and the rise of streaming platforms, filmmakers gained more creative freedom to showcase death as a plot point and an intricate philosophical and emotional experience.

### **Evolving Themes in the Portrayal of Death**

1. **Death as Liberation** BY Investigating the perception of death as a form of existential liberation.
2. **Euthanasia and Mercy Killing** BY exploring assisted death and its ethical and legal implications.
3. **Fear of Mortality:** How the ageing and elderly approach mortality and confront death.
4. **Death and Bureaucracy** BY Emphasizing how systemic indifference impacts the treatment of the dead.
5. **Social and Political Commentary** BY using death as a concept to critique the class divide, capitalistic nature of the society and institutional failures.

### **Independent and mainstream Cinema’s Take on Death (2000–2025)**

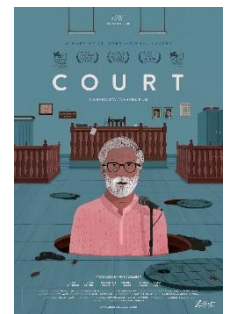
Films in this period sustained aspects of realism, using death as a lens to probe individual and social struggles. Meanwhile, mainstream films still resorted to using death as a dramatic event and glorifying it. Independent films, on the other hand, aim to offer a raw and unsettling perspective on mortality, focusing on the dying process, grief, and how it sociopolitically affects others involved or related to the dead.

Filmmakers like Chaitanya Tamhane, Lijo Jose Pellissery, Leena Yadav, and Sanal Kumar Sasidharan have explored death intimately, unfiltered, and, at times, absurdly, constantly challenging the audience to reconsider their perspective on life and death.

### **Notable Contemporary Films and Their Treatment of Death (2000–2025):**

#### **1. *Court (2014)* BY Dir. Chaitanya Tamhane**

This film questions the legal system of the country and how a state’s indifference can lead to death without any accountability; the film revolves around a court trial of a folk singer whose song has allegedly incited another man’s suicide.



#### **2. *Masaan (2015)* BY Dir. Neeraj Ghaywan**

It presents death as an existential reality and the way it shapes our lives, interweaving multiple stories of loss, grief and redemption set against the burning ghats of Varanasi.

**3. *Piku* (2015) BY Dir. Shoojit Sircar**

This film is a tender tale that follows the journey of an ageing dad who is obsessed with mortality and his pragmatic daughter. The film perceives death as a peaceful release.



**4. *Mukthi Bhavan* (2017) BY Dir. Shubhashish Bhutiani**

This meditative film presents death as a spiritual acceptance and focuses on the story of a son who takes his father to Varanasi, who believes that he is dying and spending his last days in the holy city would grant him salvation.

**5. *Ee. Ma. Yau* (2018) BY Dir. Lijo Jose Pellissery**

This film critiques bureaucracy and the social hypocrisy that surrounds death and how societal pressure dictates one to perceive death in a dark, comic way following the aftermath of a man's death in the coastal village of Kerala.

**6. *The Last Color* (2019) BY Dir. Vikas Khanna**

Yet another meditative film on how societal taboos affect one's life, this one revolves around the story of an elderly widow who, after years of oppression, finds joy in her final days, when death offers her a transformative closure.

**7. *Kantara* (2022) BY Dir. Rishab Shetty**

This film goes back to the old ways of blending folklore with divine justice, offering a mystical take on death revolving around a young tribal boots kola performer's clash against a forest officer.

**8. *Thalaikoothal* (2023) BY Dir. Jayaprakash Radhakrishnan**

This film centres around the tradition of senicide practice in rural Tamilnadu, where ritual euthanasia is performed for the elderly in the family, confronting the audience with ethical and moral dilemmas about dignity and death.

**Audience Reception:**

Films provoked discussions about the absurdities of funeral traditions, forcing viewers to question the ethics of life-and-death decisions and creating an air of acceptance and humour in the face of mortality.

**Conclusion:**

The portrayal of death, Just like Indian Cinema in itself, has undergone a tremendous transformation, reflecting the shifting perspectives of society over decades, from the mythological and religious interpretation of death in the silent era to mid-century melodramatic depictions to the 21<sup>st</sup> century's introspective and contemplative approach. Each



phase of cinema has shaped how the Indian audience perceives mortality. While mainstream filmmakers continue to resort to using death as a narrative-driven or dramatic element, Independent filmmakers have brought in more nuanced and socially relevant perspectives, not just showcasing it as a sorrowful spectacle. Be it a meditation of personal grief or a commentary on systemic failure, a subject of contemplation and even dark satire, filmmakers have succeeded in capturing human existence in all its complexity, constantly adapting to the social and artistic landscapes.

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