

Article

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## Beyond The Thumb - The Role of a Film Critic: A Gatekeeper, An Influencer or Something Else: A Report



I was privileged to attend a 90-minute round table interaction held on November 26, 2025 at the Kala Academy Auditorium, Panjim, during the 56th International Film Festival of India from November 20 to 28, 2025 in Goa organised by the National Film Development Corporation under the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India. The house-packed session, titled “*Beyond the Thumb – The Role of a Film Critic: A Gatekeeper, an Influencer, or Something Else,*” was among the masterclasses organised by the National Film Development Corporation. The theme was particularly engaging and aptly captured the evolving and crucial role of film criticism in the digital age.

The discussion brought together well experienced film critics. The moderator was Davide Abbatescianni of *Cineuropa*, based in Rome, who has extensive experience covering international festivals and film journalism. The panellists included Barbara Lorey de Lacharriere, a Paris-based German film journalist associated with FIPRESCI and Elizabeth Kerr, a writer, reviewer for *Screen International* and regular contributor to *The Hollywood Reporter* and *South China Morning Post*. Renowned Indian film critics Deepa Gahlot, Sudhir Srinivasan and Baradwaj Rangan were also present.

The discussion attempted to redefine the modern function of the film critics in an age of instant reviews and user-generated contents. It explored whether the critic remains as a

gatekeeper of quality, an influencer of public taste or if their deeper value lies elsewhere in nurturing critical thinking and enriching the audience's engagement with cinema.

To make the discussion lively and comprehensive, the moderator Davide Abbatescianni structured the panel around four thematic blocks: *(a) The Shifting Role of Film Criticism, (b) Critics as Influencers vs. Gatekeepers, (c) Responsibility, Ethics and the Industry and (d) The Future of Criticism.* This framework was shared with all the speakers in advance of the round table discussion to facilitate a more focused and meaningful exchange of ideas.

*The Shifting Role of Film Criticism* examined how the profession has evolved over the passage of time and what has been lost or gained in the process. The discussion was guided by questions such as: How do each of us define our role as film critics today? Has criticism become more democratic or more fragmented in this age? Is the authority of the traditional critic still relevant in a world dominated by instant opinions? And how has the relationship between critics, audiences and filmmakers changed over time?

*Critics as Influencers vs. Gatekeepers* addressed the growing impact of digital platforms. The panel appropriately reflected on questions such as: With social media and review aggregators blurring the line between critic and influencer, should this be seen as a threat or an opportunity? Does a critic's online visibility now outweigh the depth of their analysis? How can critics balance their personal voice with editorial responsibilities? And should critics embrace the role of cultural influencers or resist it?

*Responsibility, Ethics and the Industry* focused on the critic's function within the broader film ecosystem. Key questions included: How should critics manage potential conflicts of interest in festivals, press junkets or sponsored events? Should critics support their local film industries or remain entirely detached? What role should critics play in championing diversity, inclusion or new voices in cinema? And how can criticism maintain its integrity amid PR-driven media environments?

Finally, *The Future of Criticism* explored issues of sustainability, innovation and mentorship. The discussion raised questions such as: What might film criticism look like in the next decade? Can AI or new formats such as video essays, podcasts and substacks strengthen critical discourse? How can the next generation of critics be effectively trained and supported? And could greater collaboration across regions and media platforms provide a meaningful way forward for film criticism?

### **On the Round Table Event**

With the headlines-*Film Critics Debate the Evolving Role of Film Criticism at 56 IFFI*, the Press Information of Bureau of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India released a striking news story on the roundtable event which reads as follows:

“Reaffirming the vital role film critics, journalists and reviewers play in the global film ecosystem, the 56th International Film Festival of India (IFFI) hosted a compelling roundtable discussion titled “Beyond the Thumb – The Role of a Film Critic: A Gatekeeper, an Influencer or Something Else?” The session brought together renowned critics from across the world to

explore the shifting landscape of film criticism in an era defined by digital disruptions, social-media influence, and rapid content consumption.

The discussion was moderated by Davide Abbatescianni and featured eminent film critics Barbara Lorey de Lacharrière, Deepa Gahlot, Sudhir Srinivasan, Meghachandra Kongbam, Elizabeth Kerr, and Baradwaj Rangan.

Opening the conversation, Davide Abbatescianni highlighted the dramatic shifts redefining film criticism today. While mainstream commercial cinema may not rely heavily on critics, he noted, independent and debut filmmakers depend profoundly on thoughtful, credible reviews. He also expressed concern about the lack of editorial control in the era of over 150,000 online publications and the growing fragmentation of critical discourse. Davide Abbatescianni warned that with AI-generated content on the rise, the future of criticism may face a “slippery slope”.

### **“Critics Must Raise Curiosity” – Barbara Lorey de Lacharrière**

Barbara Lorey de Lacharrière stated that a critic’s primary role is to serve as a mediator between cinema and audiences, helping viewers discover films beyond the mainstream. Having written extensively on Indian regional cinema and Turkish New Wave films for European journals, she emphasized her passion for introducing lesser-known cinema to wider audiences. She cited shrinking print space and the shift to digital platforms as major challenges, noting research from France indicating that 80% of cinema writers cannot rely solely on criticism for their livelihoods. She also remarked on the growing emphasis on personal branding, where critics themselves become “products”, especially for younger audiences.

### **“Democratization Has Led to Fandom, Not Criticism” – Deepa Gahlot**

Deepa Gahlot questioned whether the ongoing democratization of the field is a boon or a bane. She warned that much of today’s online criticism is shaped by fandom, lack of depth, and access-based influence, where some reviewers are paid to give ratings without real analysis. With audiences increasingly consuming cinema on OTT platforms, she noted a dilution in the appreciation of cinema’s richness and craft.

### **Shift to Digital Is the Most Dramatic Change – Sudhir Srinivasan**

Sudhir Srinivasan underlined the shift from print to digital media as the most transformative change. Having moved from writing to producing short video reviews, he acknowledged that audience engagement habits have evolved, but insisted that his approach to criticism remains unchanged. He countered concerns about ethical decline, noting that while earlier a handful of powerful media houses dominated criticism, today’s “thousand little voices” make the ecosystem more democratic. He expressed faith that audiences can distinguish between genuine and sponsored reviews.

### **“We Need More Awareness about Film Culture” – Meghachandra Kongbam**

Representing FIPRESCI (The International Federation of Film Critics), Meghachandra Kongbam emphasized the need to promote film culture and strengthen public understanding of the medium. While accepting that democratization has created some confusion, he argued that independent filmmakers still rely heavily on critics to reach audiences. He noted that with the Government of India recognizing film as part of the creative economy, formal conclaves on film criticism would be valuable.

### **“Critics Must Find Their Own Voice” – Elizabeth Kerr**

Elizabeth Kerr highlighted the surge in platforms and the resulting diversity in content demands. As a writer for multiple outlets with different editorial priorities, she stressed the importance of critics developing their own distinct voice, style, and audience. She voiced concern about Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) who are often hired by distributors and naturally inclined to give positive reviews, calling it a significant ethical challenge today. She urged critics to evaluate films on their own terms and avoid dismissing any work for a single flaw at the cost of its larger merits.

### **Baradwaj Rangan on the Participatory Culture of Digital Media**

Baradwaj Rangan reflected on his journey across print, digital, and blogging since the early 2000s, and noted that digital media introduced instant feedback and participatory culture, radically expanding the number of critical voices and reducing the influence of traditional gatekeepers. However, with heightened competition, critics now face pressure to publish reviews immediately upon a film’s release—contrasting sharply with earlier practices of Sunday review columns. He cited examples from Pauline Kael and Roger Ebert to illustrate how earlier eras offered critics more time and space to shape cultural conversations. Today, he argued, critics must navigate “the gaming aspect” of anticipating public reaction, especially with Gen Z’s preference for sensational, fast-paced content.

As film criticism continues to evolve in an increasingly digital and democratized environment, the panelists collectively underscored the need for authenticity, depth, critical independence, and adaptability. The round table reaffirmed that while formats and audiences may change, the essence of criticism—thoughtful engagement with the cinematic arts—remains vital to the health of the film ecosystem.”

### **Building Greater Awareness of Film Culture and Film Medium**

I emphasised the importance of cultivating a deeper film culture and strengthening public understanding of the film medium. While acknowledging that the democratisation has created certain ambiguities, I argued that independent filmmakers still rely significantly on credible critics to reach wider audiences. Noting that India has officially recognised film as a vital component of the creative economy, I advocated for the development of more structured

platforms and formal conclaves to nurture thoughtful criticism and foster informed public engagement with cinema.

### **An encouraging trend: Democratisation of Criticism**

The democratisation of film criticism, in my view, is an encouraging development. Since film is the one of the mass communication media, the film criticism must always exist in the mass. It reflects a growing awareness of cinema's power in contemporary society. Today, people increasingly recognise that films serve more than entertainment and they shape culture, identity and the collective public imagination. The more voices that participate in the conversation around cinema, the richer and more dynamic that conversation becomes.

### **Film: The most influential medium**

Among the major mass communication media—press, radio, film, and television, cinema occupies a unique position for its powerful characteristic of audio-visual medium. This speaker having chosen a learner from the early age as a student of Journalism and Mass Communication in the Banaras Hindu University in the late seventies and professed the field for the last four decades, is of the view that films possess an almost magical ability to bring diverse audiences across the world together through a shared visual and emotional experience. Through international film festivals, we can have glimpses into different societies and cultures around the world on how people live, what they struggle with and what they dream of. In this scenario, cinema has become a powerful medium for fostering empathy and bringing humanity closer together.

What makes film so impactful is its immersive nature. Sitting in a dark theatre, surrounded by sound and moving images, audiences are drawn completely into the narrative unfolding on the screen. With modern technologies such as surround sound, advanced projection systems and digital innovations, the cinematic experience has become even more compelling and immersive.

Because of cinema's profound influence on society, a number of important international organisations dedicated to film culture were established over the years. These include the International Federation of Film Critics (FIPRESCI) founded in 1930 in Brussels, the International Federation of Film Producers Associations (FIAPF) established in 1933 in Brussels, the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAF) founded in 1938 in Paris and the International Federation of Film Societies (FICC) established in 1947 in Cannes. The very existence of these organisations demonstrates how much cinema requires continuous care, discussion and institutional support. Each of them contributes, in its own way, to the promotion of thoughtful filmmaking and the development of global film culture.

International film festivals organised under the framework of International Federation of Film Producers Associations serve as important meeting points for filmmakers, film archivists, film society activists, critics, scholars, students and cinephiles. Such festivals rely not only on filmmakers but also on those who preserve films, write about them and promote

film appreciation. Without the involvement of critics and film journalists, who bridge the gap between films and audiences, the true meaningful purpose of a film festival would be incomplete. This is where the role of the film critic becomes especially significant. Good criticism encourages viewers to discover new perspectives while also inspiring filmmakers to push the boundaries of their craft.

### **Indian Film Industry and Government Initiatives**

India is often described as a subcontinent because of its geographical expanse, diverse landscapes, distinctive geological evolution and extraordinary cultural and ethnic diversity within Asian continent. The country is also remarkable for its linguistic richness. According to an official report released in 2018, more than 19,500 languages and dialects are spoken in India as mother tongues,

The scale of India's film production reflects this diversity. According to official data from 2024, the country produced 2979 feature films and 1200 video films in 58 languages. However, due to limited promotion and distribution, many films with artistic merit still remain unnoticed by wider audiences. Interestingly, even very small communities such as *Sherdukpen*, *Tai Phake* in the Northeast India with the populations less than 10,000 have produced feature films, demonstrating the deep cultural engagement with cinema across the country.

Indian Film Industry is therefore, one of the largest in the world, producing the highest number of films annually. By redefining the Indian film industry as India's creative economy, the Government of India has undertaken several measures to place the sector on a more structured and progressive path.

In a recent event of FICCI Frames 2025 held on October 7 in Mumbai reported in the media, Mr Sanjay Jaju, Union Secretary of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, described the current moment as the 'next golden age of creativity'. He emphasised that India should aim to become the world's production hub for films, animation, gaming and immersive media. Highlighting emerging opportunities, he pointed to the growing potential of technologies such as artificial intelligence, 5G direct-to-mobile broadcasting and international co-productions, encouraging the filmmakers to create stories that resonate with global audiences.

He also lauded the success of the World Audiovisual and Entertainment Summit (WAVES) which was held recently. He described it as a movement rather than a one-time initiative, with its next edition scheduled for 2027. The summit, he said, has helped strengthen India's global creative outreach with parallel events being hoisted in Melbourne, Busan and Toronto.

For film critics, understanding such government policies and initiatives is also essential, as they play an important role in raising public awareness about developments within the industry. At the same time, for these initiatives to achieve their full potential, a meaningful collaboration between the policymakers and film journalists or critics is equally

important. Critics not only interpret cinema but can also play an important role in building up the broader cultural and industrial transformations shaping the film landscape.

### **Few Challenges of Film Critics in India**

#### ***Limited Access to diverse cinematic culture.***

Although India produces thousands of films in numerous languages every year, critics often face limited access to independent, regional or festival films. Mainstream commercial releases tend to dominate distribution and media attention overshadowing many smaller but significant works. This imbalance restricts critics' ability to engage with the full diversity of Indian cinema and hinders the development of a more holistic film culture. In recent times, a collective of independent filmmakers has also raised concerns about the lack of equitable access to theatres demanding fair opportunities for their films to reach audiences.

#### ***Lack of Institutional Support***

Unlike many Western countries, where film criticism has developed within strong academic and journalistic traditions, India still faces a shortage of institutional support for the discipline. There are relatively few formal training programmes dedicated to film criticism. Many media organisations tend to treat film reviews primarily as entertainment content rather than as serious cultural analysis.

For this reason, film schools and media institutes need to intensify efforts to introduce and expand courses in film criticism across the country. Such initiatives would help cultivate analytical skills, historical awareness and a deeper understanding of cinema among aspiring critics. In the past, several reputed film journals played an important role for nurturing film culture in India. Publications such as *India Film Culture* by the Federation of Film Societies of India, *Cinemas in India* by the National Film Development Corporation, as well as *Cinema India-International*, *Cinemaya*, *Deep Focus*, *Cinewave*, *Screen* and *Filmfare* provided valuable platforms for film journalists, critics and cinephiles.

The growth of both the film industry and the art of cinema depends greatly on the presence of high-quality film journals. Such publications not only promote film culture but also offer critics a space for thoughtful, well-researched and carefully crafted writing. Strengthening these platforms is therefore essential for sustaining a vibrant culture of film criticism in India.

#### ***The Impact of Influencers***

The growing presence of influencers in the media has, in many ways, begun to disturb the sanctity of genuine film criticism. Particularly in major cities, the influence of social media personalities can be clearly seen in the promotion of large-scale Bollywood and pan-Indian productions. Influencer-driven publicity has become a significant part of film marketing strategies, with promotional content flooding social media platforms almost continuously.

The situation can become even more problematic in smaller cities and regional markets, where a limited number of local films are produced but are sometimes promoted through questionable means. In certain cases, films receive paid or purchased awards from little-known national or international festivals. When such recognitions are widely publicised on social media alongside genuine festival achievements, it can create confusion among audiences and dilute the credibility of authentic film festivals.

As a result, the general public may find it difficult to distinguish between truly significant festival honours and self-promotional claims. This troubling trend not only undermines the reputation of legitimate film festivals but also prevents deserving films from gaining the recognition they merit. In the long run, such practices risk burying meaningful cinema under a wave of self-generated publicity and misinformation.



## Why Critics Matter

Since the film criticism has become more democratic today, largely because cinema itself has become an essential and widely consumed cultural medium, there is an urgent need to strengthen film education and critical training among audiences, aspiring critics and young cinephiles.

In this context, it is worth recalling the wisdom of the legendary Indian film archivist P. K. Nair, who once observed: "I believe film education has two strands – one is training the filmmaker and the other is training the audience and both are equally important. The audience that has grown up within a different kind of cinema viewership needs to be educated in a wider and deeper appreciation of different kinds of films made in different places at different times in different genres by different makers. The filmmaker and the audience must be on the same wavelength because if there is a gap between transmission and reception it can create problems."

His insight reminds us that the growth of cinema depends not only on the development of filmmakers but also on the cultivation of informed, sensitive and critically engaged audiences.

## **Conclusion**

Film critics are an integral part of the rapidly expanding film industry. Their contributions deserve recognition, support and encouragement.

Policy makers must explore ways to ensure that diverse films reach the masses, while transforming the perceived challenges of the digital age into opportunities. Such efforts would contribute to the broader vision of the Government of India, which recognises the film industry as an important component of the nation's creative economy.

At the same time, the Government of India is moving forward with ambitious plans to position the country as a global production hub for films and audio visual media. To further accelerate these efforts, film critics and journalists must work in collaboration with policy makers and industry stakeholders. In this context, it would be a positive move for government authorities to convene a national conclave of professional film journalists and critics to discuss strategies for realising India's aspiration of ushering in "the next golden age of creativity" in the film industry.

Film critics, scholars and academicians have played an essential role in shaping, interpreting and safeguarding the art of cinema since the very birth of cinema. Their voices remain vital in guiding audiences, encouraging filmmakers and sustaining a vibrant and thoughtful cinematic culture.

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