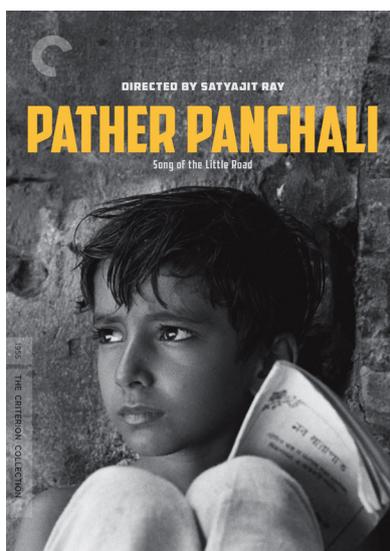


## Fifty Years of Indian Parallel Cinema



Pather Panchali (1955)

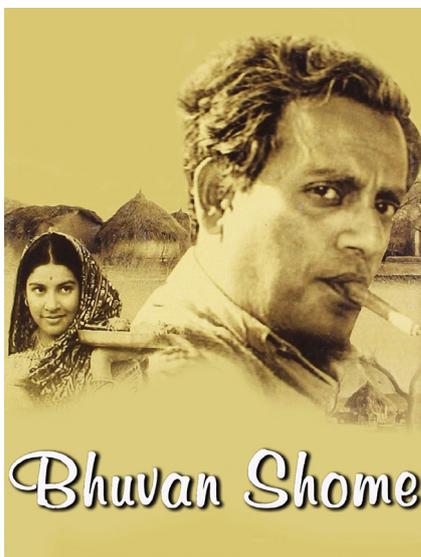
The term “Parallel Cinema” was first coined in Hindi as “Samantar Cinema” by Arvind Kumar, then editor of Hindi film fortnightly *Madhuri* of the Times of India group. The epithet caught on as “Parallel Cinema” as it became increasingly clear that its sensibility was different from the formulaic cinema in the mainstream box-office. Though there were honorable exception of film-makers who experimented with non-formulaic films earlier too, Parallel Cinema’s first glimpse came through in 1955 in Satyajit Ray’s *Pather Panchali* a Bengali film. It won an award at the Cannes Film Festival and put the Indian cinema on the world map. The critical acclaimed received by *Pather Panchali* the world over sowed the seeds of a cinema different in sensibility, form, its narratives. It triggered a churn in Bengali cinema and led to the emergence of Mrinal Sen, Ritwik Ghatak and other directors who chose narratives which were starkly different from the popular grid of songs-dance-fight-star. But, the rest of the Indian cinema

followed the pattern of formula films.

This was set to change in the next few years. Visionary Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru took the initiative to introduce film culture in India and took multiple measures towards it. The government framed a film policy based on SK Patil Committee’s report in 1951. It recognized film as an art form of equal importance as literature, painting and dance. A year later in 1952, the First International Film Festival of India was held in Mumbai. In 1953, the National Film Awards were introduced.

Satyajit Ray had already sowed the seeds of Film Society Movement in 1947 and the government encouraged it as a part of inculcating film culture. By 1959, the Federation of Film Societies of India (FFSI) was set up and Ray became its President. He remained President till his death in 1992. The government also established of three key institutions to promote good cinema – the Film and Television

Institute of India (FTII), the National Film Archive of India (NFAI) in Pune and the Film Finance Corporation which was later renamed as the National Film Development Corporation). The winds of change were visible in sensitive audience and Mrinal Sen's *Bhuvan Shome* (Hindi) was released at Mumbai in 1969 and ran for 25 weeks at a matinee show at Dreamland Cinema. This marked the arrival of Parallel Cinema in Hindi mainstream cinema. *Bhuvan Shome* was thousand miles away from the popular formula of Hindi Cinema and yet attracted the audience. *Bhuvan Shome* gave new idiom to the then prevailing commercial cinema.



Bhuvan Shome (1969)

*Bhuvan Shome* was followed by *Sara Aakash* (Basu Chatterji), *Anubhav* (Basu Bhattacharya) - all financed by Film Finance Corporation. After that Shyam Benegal's *Ankur* (1972) was released. It was accepted by majority audience and established that alternate cinema can also be popular. Many technicians graduated from the film institute became established technicians. For example, K. K. Mahajan photographed *Bhuvan Shome*. Govind Nihalani, who graduated from the Bengaluru institute, photographed Benegal's *Ankur*.

Soon after the success of *Bhuvan Shome*, Samantar Cinema emerged in regional languages. *Shantata Court Chalu Aahe* (Marathi),

*Bhavni Bhavai* (Gujarati), *Swayamvaram* (Malayali), *Samskara* (Kannada) were made one after another. It was evident that Samantar Cinema had come to stay with the release of *Ghatashraddha* (1977) by Girish Kasarvalli. It won the coveted President's Gold Medal and Kannada Cinema was recognized as bastion of pure cinema.

The Directorate of Film Festivals seized the opportunity and introduced Indian Panorama Section in IFFI at Chennai (then Madras) in 1978. Since then, for last 40 years, IFFI has showcased the Indian Panorama section with 20 films every year.

The arrival of multiplex theatres enhanced the experience of viewing cinema and tickets rates increased. Dominated by the popular cinema and a galaxy of stars, the low budget Parallel Cinema in Hindi found itself without theatres. Many believed that this would sound the death knell for the Parallel Cinema. But, it was not true at all. The irrefutable evidence of this was the fact that the Indian Panorama showcases 20/25 films made in all languages each year at IFFI. It is true that compared to the average production of 2000 films every year in India, 20/25 films is but a drop in the ocean. But it does not mean that the alternate cinema is dead.



Ankur (1972)

Ghatashraddha (1977)

Despite 50 years of Parallel Cinema, good films made in one language are not necessari-

ly reaching the audiences of another language. Only exception of Satyajit Ray's Films. Now, the I & B Ministry has decided that Indian Parallel Cinema should reach every state and film societies, the creators of an aware audience, have been asked to be the catalysts once again. Due to the linguistic and cultural diversity of our cinema, European Critics often refer to our cinema as Indian Cinemas. Though the cinema is beyond languages, each language cinema has got its own ethos. Cinema should use universal language. Mainstream Hindi film makers often say that if their hero is wearing lungi, the northern India audience may not accept him and they have to depict him in suits and trousers. If the rich Parallel

Cinema reaches across India, it will kill this myth, but the audience needs to be cultivated for this change to happen.

At the advent of Film Societies the sensitive audience was created all over India to welcome Parallel Cinema. So now Film Societies should create audience for the other Indian language cinema. It may be noted Hollywood created its audience in India with great efforts. The Metro Co. started distribution in India in 1929 and first Hollywood film Ben-Hur celebrated silver jubilee in 1959. Film Societies have to strive for all India audience for Regional language films. It is difficult task to cultivate the test but not impossible.

---

*Mr. Sudhir Nandgaonkar is a former President of FIPRESCI-India.*