

REFLECTIONS OF REFLECTIONS ON REFLECTIONS: THE INDIAN NEW WAVE ORIGIN STORY AND ITS CONTEMPORARY MANIFESTATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Post-pandemic The Hindi film industry is struggling to position itself in the spectator's sentiment and subconscious, but its sordid power hierarchical structure embedded with star systems and their simultaneous ballyhoo by media houses has left it in a dry state of empty cinema halls and unsparingly poor critical reviews. This paper wishes to revisit the offbeat, eccentric, and auteur-driven revolutionary cinematic new-wave movement in India, which metamorphosed the form and content into an unhackneyed format, extending the film literacy of the country and also clinching international acclaim for its taste and credo. I shall further analyze a few of those endeavors while highlighting the points of transformation of this new-cinema aesthetic rendered in India and underscore the reasons for its effervescent nosedive simultaneously

Keywords: *New wave, avant-garde, neoteric, cinematic stylistics, postmodern, humanism, demurral cinema, augmented dramatic spectrum.*

The centrally funded government-sponsored film finance corporation, which was actually modelled on Britain's national film finance corporation, was set up in the 1960's in India, proffering loans bearing low interest rates for producing criterion cinema under the leadership of our former prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. The forerunners of this Indian new wave cinematic pirouette are the Bengali parallel art directors—Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak, and Mrinal Sen. Extensively throughout their films of the 50's and 60's, they rejected commercial cinema values (extravagance and artifice), themes and stylised aesthetics (high production values), but instead they rendered a metamorphosed form (drawing from the Italian New Wave and the French New Wave) embodying a dynamic charge towards understanding and transforming Indian society. The international laurels of Satyajit Ray and the radicalized formatted templates of Ghatak and Sen. This was the beat of impetus behind the FFC, which was set up on the recommendation of the SK Patil film enquiry committee report of 1951. The FCC-funded projects

of Satyajit Ray, which manifested into *Charulata* (1964), *Nayak* (1966), and *Mahanagar* (1963), also produced a great body of work which inspired the new wave of directors subsequently. The interesting FFC story, which furthermore delineates the two phases of the new wave, is that, as briefly stated by B.K. Karanjia, " by 1968 the entire paid up capital disappeared, with generating incompetacy in leveling with commercial filmmakers at the box office, and how the race was lost before it even began."¹ To change the course of this lackadaisical cinema movement, the chairman of the FFC committee, acting on several suggestions reckoned by the former I.B minister of 1964, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, made these propositions to provide financing to low-budget films by promising directors from the film institute or outside, while also contextualizing great Hindi and national language narratives. This formulaic blueprint launched the first phase of radical experimental cinematic endeavors, which aimed at cinematic realism throughout its form and content. A surge of these

auteur-driven, avant-garde, and modernist films came from filmmakers like Mani Kaul, Basu Chatterjee, Kantilal Rathod, and Mrinal Sen, followed by several others, who produced a triumphant evolution of the language of cinema in India through their cinematic stylistics. They swiftly adapted the tenets of representational ambiguity and sanctimoniousness of the social order and unraveled the complexities plaguing Indian society through their aestheticised form and narratives. It's important to note that the new wave wasn't a manifesto signed by filmmakers, rather it was a neoteric movement to produce alternate content and spectatorship embracing experimental modernity. The quartet of films that came in 1969 that circumscribed these aesthetics were *Uski Roti*, *Bhuvan Shome*, *Sara Aakash*, and *Kanku*.² It's essential to observe how *Kanku*, directed by Kantilal Rathod, paved the way for funding an alternate film movement in the Gujarati film industry wherein extraordinary work came from B. V. Karanth and Girish Karnad in Kannada; John Abraham, Adoor Gopalakrishnan, and Aravindan in Malayalam; and Buddhadeb Dasgupta in Bengali to extend the new cinema wave all across the Indian subcontinent. The other critical components of this campaign were several sponsored international film festivals, alternate screening spaces; inauguration of film societies; advancement of the Film Institute; institutionalized national awards; professionalization of acting; and cinematic technical functions while promoting Indian films abroad to foster an alternate culture of cinema. In addition, a variety of offbeat films that were not state-funded but infused the political aesthetic of social order critique were mounted on Shyam Benegal's *Ankur* (1973) and then *Nishant* (1975). This culminated in the crowdfunded film *Manthan* (1976), in which Benegal received 2 Rs. from each of Gujarat's 5 lakh farmers to produce his developmentalist film, criticizing "upper caste violence, exploitation, and hypocrisy."³ The austere criticism of Brahminical social order also formed another constituent of the political new wave that illuminated the violence exhibited by Hindu society's caste structure in BV Karanth's *Chonana Dudi* (1975), Patabhi Rama Reddy's *Samskara* (1970), Girish Kasarvalli's *Ghattashradha* (1977), and Govind Nihalani's *Aakrosh* (1980). The ruralist political films about feudal oppression were Benegal's *Kondura* (1977) and Gautam Ghose's *Maabhoomi* (1979). The transformation of the 40's ordered Muslim social, which marks a stark departure from the grandeur and nostalgia of its erstwhile version in the

undercurrents of this new wave. They positioned the endangered Muslim identity post-the traumatic Partition of the country and the formulations of Pakistan and Bangladesh, sequencing the narrative dealing with communalism. This can be observed in *Garam Hawa* (1974) by M.S. Sathyu and Ismat Chughtati, *Salim Langde Pe Mat Ro* (1989) by Saed Akhtar Mirza or Rajinder Singh Bedi's debut *Dastak* (1970). The disastrous transformation of the FFC can be accredited to the twin factors of undersupply in both distribution and exhibition of these films, as the envisioned alternate theatre space, a chief component of the new wave scheme, wasn't accomplished, laying these films down to marginal spectatorship, which remains a problem present till date in Indian cinema. Several films like *Bhuvan Shome* did fairly well on the box-office front, but most of these Prayog films failed to find any inlet into the commercial distribution network, and as they didn't, they didn't earn back profits from exhibition, which consequently led to the exhaustion of capital from FFC and unpaid loans from producers. This marks the end of the first phase of the Indian New Wave and it was only post the Emergency period in 1980, an extension to the FCC was formed-The National Film Development Organization. This hallmarks the resuscitation of the new wave, now in transit to the 2nd phase where auteurs like Mani Kaul, Saied Akhtar Mirza, Shaji Karun, Aravindan, and Govind Nihalani, who conceptualized and with finesse in their respective stylistic aesthetics, stage the concerns of the new wave through their radical, trailblazing realist form and content. I shall be discussing the thematic, ideological, aesthetic, performative, and formal aspects of these new wave films through -

- a) Mani Kaul's "*Uski Roti*" (1969), b) Mrinal Sen's "*Bhuvan Shome*" (1969), and then c) Kamal Swarup's *Omdarbadar* (1998).

I shall also be tracing the aesthetic reflections of the new wave cinema in India to the present day, while the objective of this essay is to identify stylistic cinematic choices that were inspired by the ideological aesthetic tenets of the Indian new wave and, furthermore, highlight the domains of abstraction and symbolism in these films. These films responsibly adhere to the Indian melodramatic form while cannibalizing it with technical experimentation that simultaneously plays a role of internal decolonisation from within the society that represents India's modern social and cultural stance that keeps the round-the-clock refractions of the

Indian New Wave around us to critique and compose India in its "real' frame.⁴

USKI ROTI (1969) DIRECTED BY - MANI KAUL

This film was adapted from the writings of the Nahi Kahani Movement (a short story by Mohan Rakesh) and is set in rural Punjab, where Balo (played by Garima) waits for her husband Sucha Singh (Gurdeep Singh), who's a bus driver passing the stop where they meet.

Uski Roti, in its structure, is an experiment with cinematic form which renders a slow temporal visual poetry. The non-dramatic dialogue delivery and the absence of musical symphonies are elements of this time-standing still film. The dramatization of the interiority of these characters is furthermore achieved through the utilization of a criss-crossed 28 mm wide angle lens and a 135 mm telephoto lens by KK Mahajan, the cinematographer. The telephoto lens is used to highlight the physiological stimulus, whereas Mani Kaul, through multifarious techniques, expresses and manipulates real time by expanding and contracting it. The story unfolds. The non-linear narrative of Uski roti and the compositions of Balo's unhappy marriage are often static, forming beautiful melancholic tableaux. One day, when Balo doesn't reach the bus stop on time,

she gets browned off. The next day, she drives away and doesn't wait for her. The true-blue In the midst of her waiting, she rests under a tree and converses with the old man who had inquired about her well-being. Why were you late arriving at the bus stop to meet your husband? She replies, " because of a man who was troubling (polite for assaulting) her sister." The film's ending sequence has a shot of Balo sitting with her back to the camera looking at her sister's tattered clothes, and her stunned body is composed tightly in this shot, as seen in fig.4 , intercut with her sister's hand close-ups. The next shot is of the assaulted sister looking up at Balo after getting up from her earlier position, where she asks her "I don't have my pirandi?" Where is my pirandi? And in the subsequent shot, the hand of Sucha Singh emerges from a shadowed penumbra, and how in the next shot composed of Sucha, the camera tilts up until he's out-of-frame and it's just tenebrosity (like this moment and Balo's fate). The hallucination/dream-like meeting of Balo with Sucha, her malapropos husband, wherein before they part ways again, he expresses his concern over her journey back. This is followed by a series of shots where, to capture the disoriented life she has through a Bretchian appeal, Balo directly faces the camera right before she jumps axis from the left side of the camera to the right side of the camera as seen in (fig.1,2,3). This whole concoction of disenchanting Balo's life is reflective of her trauma in a toxic marriage with a sexual predator.



Fig.1- Balo is composed in a close-up on the left of the camera.



Fig.2- Balo on the right side of the camera, jumping axis from fig.1.



Fig.3- Balo looks directly at the camera in the last shot.



Fig.4- Balo Composed facing her back with her assaulted sister in the background.



Fig.5- Close up of hands.



Fig.6- Pillow shot(Ozu) of the man disappearing slowly in the idyllic landscape.

This journey of waiting, exhibiting Balo's own doldrums, is cinematically captured in an avant-garde aesthetic by Mani Kaul, wherein the auteur, through his non-conventional ending, leaves the audience longing for a resolution which is subtextually framed and composed for them. This logic is important to observe how new wave cinema films were stimulating for the spectatorship domain, wherein the cinema demanded participation and self-interpretation. These thought-proving, mind-bending, unconventional narratives became a lexicon for the Indian new wave. Several shots in the film are held for long durations and the sedated-edit places several Bresson-like frames of inanimate objects (C.U-Bottle, hands, human body, feet, shoes) with non-synchronous visual imagery. Even the acting style adapted in this film is starkly resonant of non-dramatic Bressonian acting, characterized by monotonous intonations without any inflection.⁵ Through all of these devices, the play directly and constantly distances the audience from the characters, but he was producing an inlet for layered spectatorship through technical experiments. The wide shots of the Punjab landscape are expansive, dusty, seemingly desolate and evocative of the horrendous trauma the state went through during the 1947 partition. The meandering melancholia of this unhappy marriage is finally contained, with Balo's tired eyes looking straight at the viewer. Mani Kaul, through this highly cinematically stylised and

craftily rendered film, created a new zone in the dramatic spectrum of Indian cinema by redefining and re-inventing the characteristics of cliched drama into a sensory intellectual motion picture.

BHUVAN SHOME (1969), DIRECTED BY MRINAL SEN

Now I shall move to another sequence, which is in the film *Bhuvan Shome* (1969), wherein during his introduction sequence one can observe the legion of experimental techniques and the formation of a new visual comic form which expands the cinematic dimensions of the new wave movement. The story unfolds through Bhuvan Shome (played by Utpal Dutt) in a satirical, comic fashion, which in actuality also reflects the humanizing of a self-righteous, middle-aged widower, a disciplinarian who's a westernized colonial railway bureaucrat who encounters the reality of his post-colonial nation when he travels to Gujrat on his bird-shooting adventure.

The film is also based on a story by Balai Chand Mukhopadhyay, much like the template of several other new wave films. Mrinal Sen utilizes various visual effects such as freeze frames, animation, editing techniques (jump cuts, change of aspect ratio, frame rate changes, freeze frames) and an original soundtrack, often employing the mickey

mousing technique as observed in figures (7,8,9). In the introduction scene, which is beautifully layered with Amitabh Bachchan's narration, he exposes the hypocrisies of Bhuvan's character, smoking a cigar and riding in his fancy horse carriage. The aspect ratio suddenly changes when Bhuvan's individual narration begins to explain his obstinate behavior. This non synchronous voice over of Bhuvan's and cutting back to Amitabh's narration creates an interplay of characterized perspectives (third person and first person) simultaneously. The scene intercuts with closeups of the cart's wheels, Shome's face, and the high-angled, tightly framed top of the horses. The narrator then describes the landscape of Calcutta, where Bhuvan's home is from, culminating in a paced montage of images featuring Swami

Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore, Ravi Shankar, and Satyajit Ray, as seen in figure 9. The visual characterization of the city-Calcutta also includes footage of riots in Bengal during political rallies in the 1960s. These political commentaries and the use of cinema-verite aesthetic documentary footage to subtextually sketch an element cinematically are another motif of the new wave. Back to the Shome's exposition sequence, where now he's pacing up and down his veranda wearing a shirt with a tie-freeze frame and a jump cut to him wearing a robe over the shirt. We see a short animated sketch describing Shome's mechanical lifestyle without his presence, but yet those animated inanimate objects render a comic symphony of Shome's character.

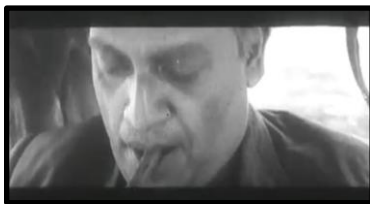


Fig.7- Change in Aspect Ratio during the Introduction Sequence



Fig.8- Usage of documentary footage of Satyajit Ray.



Fig.9- Freeze -frame during Shome's escape from the animal.



Fig.10- Usage of Calcutta Riots documentary footage from the 1960's.

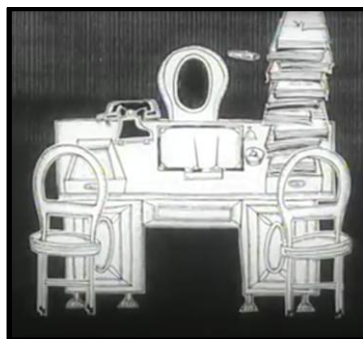


Fig.11- In-Transit Animation in the Introduction Sequence



Fig.12- Amalgamation of realist and animated components renders a new form of visual representation.

OM DARBADAR (1988), DIRECTED BY KAMAL SWAROOP

Now, the second phase of the new wave movement can be further explained through Kamal Swarup's 1988 film. This endless dream of a cinephile satirizes the entire nation while visually unfolding as a postmodernist aesthetic that refracts a linear narrative. This film was produced by NFDC in 1988, which achieved several accolades in the festival circuits, but in India it was banned for various obtuse censorship reasons, wherein it only found a commercial PVR (digitally restored) release in 2014. The underground cult popularity of this Dadaist film is often labeled as "the great Indian LSD (drug) trip."⁶ The plot of the film is not easy to discern, with a narrative that follows the dreams and imaginations of the protagonist, Om. The utilization of non-professional actors is similar to its predecessors to avoid the star spectacle in the film. We witness a melange of audio-visual experiences that are stitched together with jerky editing, ad-libbed dialogues, and syncopated character arcs.

*Sing it. 'Tis no matter how it be in tune, so it make noise enough. - Jaques, As You Like It, 4.2*⁷

This film conforms to this Shakespearean thought where Kamal Swaroop curates an experimental coming-of-age film that navigates between magical realism and realism. What the audience is presented with is a young boy undergoing an existential wave and quirky parts

wherein he's famous for holding his breath underwater to what he calls "the non-cooperation movement of breath".⁸ The sustained push and pull between modernity and spirituality or tradition is amplified with several visual compositions wherein social order anxieties and paranoia are constructed to paint the interior consciousness. The songs in this film accentuate the trip off into unknown realms that are amalgamated into real and phantasmagorical worlds, capturing their color, cacophonous chaos, and caricatured characters.

- a) Meri Jaan A & Meri Jaan B" (fig.13) - Where the jazzy singer is singing "AAAA Mohabbat Humsafar Hoja , BBBB Mohabbat Humsafar Hoja" in a colorful visual wedding dance number shot intricately with several magnifications and a trippy editing style, which has inspired Anurag Kashyap's Dev D and Gangs of Wasseypur with similar dance numbers and usage of song and dance technique but with cultural finesse and ulterior motives.
- b) Buntiy Babylon se - Babli telephone se, with its unusual lyrics, maneuvers the young-couple's relationship through various stages, and finally the asynchronous susurrating sounds reach a climactic point wherein Om throws his bicycle from the hill, as seen in fig.17.



Fig.13- Visual from the off-beat song "Meri Jaan A & Meri Jaan B."



Fig.14-Aesthetic Compositions of social-commentary through framing.



Fig.15- Breaking of the fourth-wall during the introduction of Phool Kumari - the Bombay girl.



Fig.16- Digital animations that come in between the narrative.



Fig.17- Still from the end of the song, Bunty Babylon se - Babli telephone se.



Fig.18- The turtles and tadpoles are utilized in this narrative to create a virtuoso spirit animal, interior consciousness.

The inability to reach its own audiences and consequent financial non-viability could be considered an integral reason that consecutively destined the New Wave movement by the mid-1990's, but it's essential to take note that its multiple echoes of cinematic innovation and experimentation are manifested in the digitalised, 21st century indie films.

From the lyrical poetic cinema of Ghaywan in *Masaan* (2015), where he captures the unique character of a small town which has been wrestling with life and death for ages. To Chaitanya Tamhane's *The Disciple* (2020), which is a plodding, lonely tune of an Indian classical singer battling existentialism and his traditions. Films like *Sardar Uddham Singh* (2021) by Shoojit Sarkar, *Quissa* (2013) by Anup Singh, and *AMU* (2005), directed by Shonali Bose, courageously delineate the traumatic history India has lived. Anurag Kashyap's cinematic oeuvre spans *Black Friday* (2004), *No Smoking* (2007), *Dev D* (2009), *That Girl in Yellow Boots* (2011), *Gangs of Wasseypur* (2012), and *Raman Raghav 2.0* (2016), defining self-reflexive filmmaking that, despite numbered elements, composes a landscape of societal evils. Vishal Bhardwaj and Ritupurno Ghosh, through their Shakespearean adaptations, chiefly *Omkara* (2006), *Haider* (2014), and *The Last Lear* (2007), reminisce the Indian new wave movement and carry on the legacy of the new wave-experimenting with the form with a focus on keeping their art socially conscious. As explored in this paper,

it is clear that through a ruptured exhibition distribution module, the new wave couldn't achieve what it was set out to do, but it inspired and mentored several young filmmakers and academics to intercept and interpret the cinematic geniuses that our country produced from 1969 onwards. In 2022, it's time for Indian cinema to look back at this momentous new-wave movement and reinvent themselves to cater better to its spectators honestly while not taking their spectatorial agency for granted.

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