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The Cinema of India: Need of Indian Film Theory

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Abstract

With what outlook should one construct, analyze or dissect film theory? Should one view cinema as a medium of mass communication? Propaganda? Entertainment? Art? Or should cinema be considered a concoction of them all? In trying to formulate a film theory, dealing with all these elementary characteristics of cinema poses a serious problem. Gaston Roberge notes that – *A theory of movies would tell us what a movie is, what it is made for, how it is created in images and sounds, and for whom it is made*[1]. The questions respectively deal with the content of a movie, the validity of the content in terms of the prevailing socio-political circumstances, the form of the movie and the target audience of the movie. Now, obviously, it is required for Indian cinema to be able to provide at least a level of generalization in answering the aforementioned questions to be considered to have a theory of its own. The purpose of this article would be to investigate whether or not such a generalization (subsequently, a film theory) is possible for Indian cinema, and then to delve further to find out how much of that theory is rooted in our original outlook toward audio-visual art. Now obviously the span of one article does not allow analysis of every type of cinema produced in as cinema-crazy a country as ours, where almost every state has its own regional cinema, independent cinema, art-house cinema and recently, underground cinema. For the purpose of the present article, therefore, we would restrict ourselves to the popular Indian cinema, namely Bollywood productions that some critics coin as commercial or entertainment cinema.

Key words: Indian Film Theory, Bollywood, Indian Cinema and Natyasastra

The Indian Perception of Art

Cinema, although primarily a product of the 20th century, has in fact borrowed so heavily from all sorts of art forms in its journey to maturity that to comprehend even the most primitive and simplistic of film theories, one must have an idea of the mammoth history of evolution of all art forms and the ideas and the philosophy that shaped them. India has always had a very well constructed indigenous theory of art, at times similar, at other times markedly different from that of the west. I would like to discuss in this context two texts that are the pioneers of Indian perception of art – the *Kāmasūtra* by Vātsyāyana and the *Nāṭyaśāstra* by Bharata Muni; the former is concerned about a philosophy of art as a whole while the later is a detailed account of the aesthetics and technical construction of the audio-visual, an Indian counterpart (albeit much more detailed) of Aristotle's *Poetics.*

In his commentary of Vātsyāyana's *Kāmasūtra,* Yashodhar Pandit (11th-12th Century A.D.) mentions six limbs (note, limbs, not parts, as art, in the orient, was considered to have a "Rhythmic Vitality", not a mere representation of life, but a living, breathing being in itself) that constitute Indian art.

रुपभेदाः प्रमाणानि भावलावण्ययोजनम्।
सादृश्यं वर्णिकाभंग ईति चित्रं षड़ंगकम्॥

Tagore (1947) explained the six limbs in the following manner –

1. Roopbheda – Knowledge of appearance.
2. Pramanani – Correct perception, measure and structure of forms.
3. Bhava – The action of feelings on forms.

4. Lavanyayojanam – Infusion of grace, artistic representation.
5. Sadrisyam – Similitude.
6. Varnikabhanga – Artistic manner of using the brush and colours.

Tagore (1947) further observed that in Indian art, as in philosophy, the purpose of creation was not only to represent appearance, but to pierce the mystery of existence to discover the true nature of appearance (Roop). The word "*Bheda*" can be interpreted as "*to differentiate*" as well as "*to penetrate*". Abanindranath Tagore was more inclined to go with the latter for he believes –

> *...the writer deciphers the mystery of the universe and finds the true nature of Brahma through analyzing the four stages depicted in a 'Pot' artist's canvas. Art, therefore, was never a whimsical practice in our country; it was deeply rooted in our perception of knowledge (Gnyana) and deeds (Karma)* (Tagore, 1947, p.12).

The Indian art was hence about discovering the absolute (*Brahma*) from *within rather than from without.* The rhythm of vitality was rooted in consciousness, in perception of the world around and the world beyond. Allowing human perception so much importance in a primitive time was unheard of in the western philosophy, for the political implication of encouraging original, individualistic perception could be huge. It could upset rigid social frameworks and usher in anarchy in a heartbeat; but it did not. The reason behind this is rooted in the politics that governed the philosophy and consequently the art of the time.

In primitive times, when political institutions first came into existence, the concept of a political philosophy was absent. Superstitions, taboo and dogma regulated social life and law. The advent of a kind of stability in social structure began with the discovery of agriculture allowing man's "love of knowledge" (literal translation of 'Philosophy') to finally find a rigorous doctrine. As the means of production grew complex, so did the social and political structure, finally giving birth to the sovereign state. Stability of the state was of concern to sustenance of civilization and hence giving solidity to the authority, thus ensuring obedience to monarchy becomes imperative. The primitive civilization of the early Vedic society, in the tranquility of their idyllic existence, could afford to impart much importance upon individual perception, but as the society grew complex, it was soon realized by the intelligentsia (namely, the Brahmins) that entertaining original perceptions could lead to struggle for authority in a society so burdened with class differences and exploitation as the later Vedic society. This phenomenon is not particular to the Later Vedic Period though; the difference in folk culture and the culture patronized by the monarchy has been in existence since the dawn of civilization. Debaprasad Ghosh writes –

> *Panini clearly differentiates the two classes of artists – a) The folk artists, those who make paintings or sculptures according to the needs of the village folk; and, b) The court artists, those who have the monarch as their patron and whose art is made in accordance with the taste or order of the king* (Ghosh, 1986, p.2).

The difference in the aesthetics of the court art and the folk art can be found in the archeological evidence of the Indus Valley civilization which thrived over 1500 years before the Vedic civilization took root in India. The handmade statues of the *Mother Goddess* were the perfect examples of folk art, while the *steatite seals* exemplify the court art of the era; the former is all about a casual ease and swiftness while the later is about grace, majesty, beauty and perfection. In these two markedly different types of artistic expressions, lie the eternal dichotomy of popular culture and elitist culture which Aristotle in Greece and Bharata Muni in India endeavored to solve with their theories of aesthetics

documented in *Poetics* and *Nāṭyaśāstra* respectively.

Cooking Up The 'Formula'

Indian cinema, born with *The Flower of Persia* (1898; dir. Hiralal Sen), had been, for over a decade, a mere imitation of the work of the new medium's Western fathers until it adapted to a more indigenous theory of the audio-visual language, both in content and form, in 1913 with *Raja Harishchandra* (1913; dir. Dadasaheb Phalke). The importance of the movie is not merely rooted in its huge success among the masses, or in its departure from the general practice of the period of imitating the style of Western moviemaking, it is the political implication of the success that marks *Raja Harishchandra* as a representative of Indian popular culture in cinema as opposed to those made up to that point, representing the taste of the elite, the British rulers and the enlightened (English educated) sophisticated urban audience of India. Yves Thoraval notes that –

> "*It is significant that Phalke was least interested in the Westernized section of Indian society which comprised regular viewers of foreign films, and that in equal measure, the English-speaking press largely ignored him. Phalke's objective was to create an indigenous form of the Seventh Art and to make it a profitable national industry"* (Thoraval, 2000, p.7).

So we can infer that the very first full-length feature directed by an Indian moviemaker already declared the commencement of the universal war between popular culture and elitist culture, and with that, ushered in a new type of cinema, very different in content, if not so much in form, from Western cinema. To analyze the importance of this groundbreaking movie in context of development of an Indian film theory, we have to go back to the four questions mentioned in the introductory section.

Raja Harishchandra tells the story of a mythical Indian king of Ayodhya who sacrifices all his earthly possessions, his kingdom, his power and even his wife and child for justice. The selfless suffering of the king is finally recognised by the Gods and he is restored to his former glory. The story is taken from the Indian epic *Mahabharata* (although different versions of the story can be found in the *Aitareya-Brahmana* and the *Markandeya Purana* as well).

The implication of the story in the socio-economic and political circumstances prevailing in India at that time was huge. The novelty of moving picture had only just begun to wear out. The masses were hungry for more than just a moving image projected on screen, they were hungry for stories. In a conservative society dominated by agrarian rural economy in a feudalistic setting, where illiteracy was rampant, American and European movies, incomprehensible in their alien contents to most of the Indian audience, were failing to make an impact beyond their familiar domain of the urban hubs of western education. At the same time, the explosion of Indian nationalism at the beginning of the 20th century, the growing discontent with the British colonial rule, the partition of Bengal in 1905 leading to the *Bangabhanga Movement,* the resurrection of the Hindu philosophy by the charismatic Swami Vivekananda – all these factors together called for a medium powerful enough to unify masses to produce material that communicates a content that the masses can comprehend, feel for and act upon. D.G. Phalke, coming from an orthodox Marathi Brahmin family, well versed in Sanskrit, a student of art and architecture, clearly tapped into the nationalist (*swadeśi*) sentiment of the masses and gave birth to the Indian popular cinema. The '*formula'* he cooked up with *Raja Harishchandra* and followed up with films like *Bhasmasur Mohini* (1913), *Lanka Dahan* (1917), *Kaliya Mardan* (1919) or *Bhakta Prahlad* (1926) was soon taken up by

contemporary Indian moviemakers all over with such films as *Sati Anasuya* (1921) or the openly 'Gandhian' *Bhakta Vidur* (1921) by Dwarkadas N. Sampat in Bombay, *Sairandhri* (1920) by Baburao Painter in Kohlapur or *Satyawadi Raja Harishchandra* (1917), a remake of Phalke's original by Rustomjee Dotiwala in Bengal (Thoraval, 2000, p.9-11).

In choosing the form of cinema, the content undoubtedly plays a great role – the *mise-en-scène,* namely the decor (set), the costumes and make-up, the lighting etc. are completely dictated by the content of the movie. But in those early years of cinema another great concern in choosing the form was equally, if not more important than the content – the audience's exposure to the medium. Legend has it that the first close-up of an actor's face used in cinema by D.W. Griffith was met with extreme hostility from the audience who were not accustomed to see a 'severed' head on screen. While the extent of hostility may be exaggerated, the fact remains that the limited exposure to the visual language can prove to be fatal to the understanding of a shot or a sequence of shots.

The failure to communicate effectively is detrimental for any art form in general but for popular media, in particular, it's absolutely inexcusable. Phalke, hence, making movies at a time when people's exposure to the visual language is next to nothing, when cinema does not have the advantage of providing audible explanations of complex events depicted on screen, in a country where most of the target audience would not be able to read the explicatory notes due to illiteracy, had to go for a content that was associated with everyday lives of most Indians – mythology. The familiarity of the content made watching its visual translation easy for the audience. They know the story, all they want to know now is how it unfolds and that they can do without the help of the explicatory texts. Even then Phalke supposedly arranged for *"oral accompaniments of texts and chants, in view of the large-scale illiteracy in the country"*(Thoraval, 2000, p.6). This would be Phalke's biggest contribution to Indian cinema – depicting on screen a content familiar to the masses. Phalke introduced the concept of predictability to Indian cinema and this predictability is what gives Indian cinema its uniqueness. Rajinder Kumar Dudrah observes –

> "*It is the very predictability of the Bollywood narrative that provides its pleasure, with the strength and reassuring familiarity of the narrative provoking anticipation not of* ***what*** *will happen next, but of* ***how*** *it will happen"* (Dudrah, 2006, p. 49).

As Indian cinema began taking its first baby steps to maturity, it stepped out of the mythology formula but tapped into the same '*swadeśi'* sentiment, only more openly, with clearer subtexts and historical rather than mythical allegories with Baburao Painter's *Sinhagad* (1923) or V. Shantaram's *Udaykal* (1930) based on Shivaji's struggle against Aurangzeb, but with distinctive overtones of the Indian struggle for independence. The clash of the elitist and the popular culture is directly addressed in *Bilet Pherot* (1921, Dir. Nitish C. Lahiri), one of the first social satires, which would also go on to exploit the anti colonial government sentiment of the Indian audience, and at the same time, mock the English educated urban population, advocates of a more westernized cinema.

Politics of the 'Popular'

The said examples of early trend-setters in Indian popular cinema, which, owing to their immense commercial success, soon gave birth to a profitable industry for producing movies, were all about making the audience *identify* with the situations depicted in the movies. Now, popular cinema all over the world has been about the audience being able to completely identify with the content. What, then, is the difference between

the western popular cinema and their Indian counterpart theoretically? Of course the predictability and the nationalist overtone in content have been there, but the major difference has been strictly an economic one. Cinema is the progeny of technological advancement brought forth by a capitalist economy. The British imperialism, although it had created a market for western products, cinema among them, in India, never uprooted the feudal modes of production governing the indigenous economy of the country. To sustain and eventually advance, capitalism needs a steady supply of skilled labour. And to manufacture skilled labour, it needs education. Growth of education system, hence, is a prerequisite for advancement of capitalist economy and that is just what happened in the west with the advent of capitalism. In India, however, a feudal mode of production being predominant, formal education was, as in any feudal society, an alien concept. The trend continued as late as the late ’80s to early ’90s when liberal economy finally began anchoring on Indian soil. This is probably the reason that popular Indian cinema began to assume a different appearance, in both content and form, after the ’90s. To comprehend the essence of this transformation of Indian cinema we have to pick up from where we left off in ‘the Indian perception of art’ section of this article.

Both Bharata’s *Nāṭyaśāstra* and Aristotle’s *Poetics,* apart from their similarity in content and thoughts, were written in times of political turmoil in their respective countries. While the Greek city states were torn apart first in the Persian War (500 B.C.) and then the Peloponnesian War (404 B.C.) giving rise to severe discontent among the citizens leading to rising disrespect for authority; in India, the rigid and preferential doctrine of the Later Vedic Society, riddled with class and gender disparity, was being challenged by Jainism (540 B.C.) and Buddhism (450 B.C.) leading to the lowest and the most populated strata of the Vedic class structure converting to the new religions to break free of the discriminating and exploiting social order. So, in both cases, the aristocracy was finding a hard time keeping the masses in line. This was the reason that the high and mighty of the period began sweating to find a way to communicate with the masses in a language comprehensible to the masses. The court artists started to try and develop a folk art as the elites found it necessary to influence the popular culture. About ancient Greece, Professor Amal Kumar Mukhopadhyay writes that, even amidst rising discontent among the citizens against the aristocracy and the discriminating structure of the slave society –

> “*...both Plato and Aristotle were determined to maintain, at any cost, the social and political fabric of the city states. Thus their political doctrine was, by no means, a tract of any fundamental change. They... speculated on the possible ways to firmly establish order and harmony without upsetting the existing framework.”* (Mukhopadhyay, 2014, p.6).

At the same time, as the social discrimination was reaching a critically high point in the Later Vedic Period in India, as the lower strata of the social structure, namely the *Sudras* and even in some cases the *Vaissyas* found themselves in a bottomless pit of despair as the *Brahmins* kept interpreting the *Vedas* in accordance with their interests, discontent among the masses reached a point where they chose to convert in large numbers to the much more liberal doctrines of Buddhism and Jainism. By 200 A.D. the Vedic society was falling apart. This was the time when, according to Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, began *The Sūtra Period* in the history of Indian philosophy.

> *“This period witnessed such a rapid growth in the volume of literature of the various schools of philosophy that it gave rise to sutras as a means of encapsulating the literary works. The concept of commentaries emerged to further facilitate*

> *the understanding of these sutras. Whereas the active minds discussed and debated philosophical issues in the earlier period, this period critically analysed the ability of the human mind to address philosophical Problems"* (University of Calicut, School of Distance Education, 2011, p.5).

It was probably in this period, amidst debates among the intelligentsia about how to resurrect the Vedic society, that Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra* was written. In explaining how *Nāṭyaśāstra* came into being, Bharata explains –

> *"People became addicted to sensual pleasures, were under the sway of desire and greed, became infatuated with jealousy and anger and [thus] found their happiness mixed with sorrow, [...] the Gods, with Indra (Mahendra) as their head, (approached) Brahman and spoke to him, 'We want an object of diversion, which must be audible as well as visible. As the Vedas are not to be listened to by those born as Sudras, be pleased to create another Veda which will belong to all the colour-groups (Varna)'. [Brahmana, Ksatriya, Vaissya and Sudra]"* (Roberge, 2010, p.50).

It's a curious timing, of course, for the Gods to suddenly take pity on the *Sudra*'s inability to study the Vedas. More curious, however, is the use of the word *'diversion'* in characterizing the *Fifth Veda.* It closely resembles the more direct approach of Kautilya or Machiavelli in suggesting methodical exercise of deceit to keep the subjects in line. Recreational entertainment not only represents social stability, it also, and more importantly in times of political turmoil, can divert attention from the actually prevailing social instability.

The next thing to note is the demand for a medium audible as well as visible i.e. satisfying two senses of the audience at the same time. *Nritya* or dance has probably been an older audio-visual medium, its roots extending as far back as the primitive cultures, but dance probably was a more of a ritualistic performance than entertainment in primitive times. The dance of destruction (*Tandava)* of *Shiva,* the God of an indigenous fertility cult later adopted by the Aryans is an example of such a ritualistic dance common among tribal communities. The transformation of ritualistic dance to a form of entertainment took centuries and when it did, it characterized court art or elitist art, an entertainment suiting the taste of the monarch, while among commoners, dancing remained a ritualistic exercise, like when Krishna, growing up as a Vaissya boy in Gokul, dances after defeating Kaliya, the great snake, in battle. Hence, in the epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* we find evidence of the existence of dance as a form of entertainment in the courts of kings and the Gods, but not among the subjects or the tribes. The common subjects in the Epic period and people of the earlier tribal societies danced not for their own entertainment but for the entertainment of the kings and the Gods. But after *Nāṭyaśāstra,* the roles reversed – the aristocrats and the intelligentsia began producing elaborate audio-visual entertainment for the common masses. They meticulously formulated a doctrine for the new art by analyzing the lifestyles, the likings and disliking, the language of communication of the commoners.

The language plays an important role here. Note that the *Vedic* religious texts and teachings were all in *Sanskrit*, a language not popular with the common masses, while Buddhism and Jainism adopted *Pali* and *Prakrit,* spoken languages of the common people, respectively, to spread their teachings. *Nāṭyaśāstra* clearly campaigns in favour of using such languages comprehensible to the masses in producing drama, be it the spoken language of the time or music, a language that evokes similar feelings universally, and yet, the text of *Nāṭyaśāstra* itself is written in Sanskrit. Therefore, even if the guidelines therein are meant to produce the perfect entertainment for the

commoners, the guidelines themselves are meant for the educated few on the top stratum of the social structure. The case is the same with *Poetics* as well – they are meant to help create entertainment *of* the people, *for* the people, but definitely *not by* the people.

Coming back to cinema, Gaston Roberge notes –

> "*When cinema started in the West, the dramatic performances in Europe had already moved away from the tradition represented by Poetics"* (Roberge, 2010, p.47).

India, however, continued with the doctrine of *Nāṭyaśāstra* for years to come. The reason for this difference in approach is rooted in the different paths the evolution of the two cultures took. The west, with the advent of capitalism and the consequent spread of education and industry, encountered a much more complex lifestyle where an outlet for their emotional release became necessary. The initial oversimplification of the class structure brought on by capitalism, the advancement of technology, trade, communication, the invasion of consumerism, increase of buying power of the proletarian class led to the oppressed class' ability to tell their own story through cinema. Great directors like Charles Chaplin, Frank Capra or John Ford rose out of the humblest of origins. Chaplin was virtually illiterate, Ford never received college education; Capra came out of a ghetto for Italian immigrants and paid his way through higher education working odd jobs starting from newspaper selling to waiting tables. Capra later wrote that his college education had "changed his whole viewpoint on life from the viewpoint of an alley rat to the viewpoint of a cultured person."

These directors had viewed the lives of common people from such a close proximity, with such an unromantic viewpoint, that they could effortlessly emote the audience in a subtle cerebral level. This cerebral subtext is what characterized Western cinema and theatre up until the moment Bertolt Brecht brought the subtext out in the open by detaching, rather than involving the audience with the content. On the other hand, Indian society, still under the idyllic feudal framework, followed its established doctrine of audio-visual art. The forefathers of Indian popular cinema, therefore, are all scholars. They invoked emotions through their immense understanding of the audio-visual language and skilful craftsmanship, clever choice of content and use of layers upon layers of religious and mythological subtexts.

Pre-independence cinema, therefore, was dominated by contents lifted from history and mythology, carefully crafted so as to be an analogy of prevailing Indian society, deliberately pricking at the nationalist sentiment of the masses, facilitating the struggle for independence. The *formula* was simple – stories should be familiar to the audience, the content taken from mythology, folklore or history; the heroes must be larger than life, someone the audience would look up to, be inspired by; a plethora of emotions should be played out in quick succession, with regular insertion of song and dance numbers, generating as broad a range of emotions in the audience as possible; and finally, a morale must ooze out of the whole experience, a morale that the learned movie maker would ultimately be preaching to his ignorant audience. To quote *Nāṭyaśāstra* once again –

> "*[Brahma said] I shall make a fifth Veda on the Natya with the Semi-historical Tales (itihasa), which will conduce to duty (dharma), wealth (artha) as well as fame, will contain good counsel and collection [of other material for human well-being], will give guidance to people of the future as well as in all their actions, will be enriched by teaching of all scriptures (śāstra) and will give a review of all arts and crafts (śilpa)"* (Roberge, 2010, p.50).

After independence, in the unchanged socio-economic structure of the country, the formula remained in use. Popular Indian cinema

essentially remained a morality tale with larger than life heroes at helm, using all sorts of emotions and genre mash-ups to involve as many people in the narrative as possible. The religious and mythological texts gradually came to be more hidden as subtexts, references or symbols in the narrative, but never extinct. A clear distinction of good and evil was imperative. The hero changed appearance with the changes in the political environment – the mythological hero standing tall for justice or the allegorical prince declaring freedom from Mughal conquerors in pre-independence India became the freedom fighter hero in the '50s, the peasant hero during the Green Revolutions, the tranquil lover boy hero during the idyllic planning periods, the soldier hero during the Indo-Pakistan and Indo-China wars, the Angry Young Man hero during the '70s as a discontent started bubbling against the single party democracy of the country and so on. But this is a characteristic of popular cinema all over the world. What is unique in India is that in all these different phases of the socio-political environment, in all these different appearances of the hero, the narrative structure remained exactly the same – a mash-up of everything starting from comedy, action, thrill to melodrama, romance and tragedy with song and dance numbers, often unrelated to the narrative, inserted in regular intervals – the ultimate dish of audio-visual experience cooked up by Bharata Muni.

But all that changed after the '90s with the intrusion of globalization which, in effect, officially declared the demise of feudalism in India. The feudal system and the feudal modes of production might have been in the coffin for some time, but the coffin was finally nailed shut as the Indian market began to swell with foreign products, Indian media, with foreign programmes and Indian culture and education with western thoughts and ideas. In the popular formula for Indian movies, genre never played a major role as Indian popular cinema was, in effect, all genres rolled in one. Rajinder Kumar Dudhra writes –

> "*Popular Hindi films are often referred to as 'masala' movies, because a good movie 'blends the masalas in proper proportions' (Thomas 1985: 124), expertly mixing an ordered succession of modes, from comedy, to romance, to melodrama. The very swiftness of the transition from one form to another, that to a Western eye may seem improbable, is a mark of a film-maker's skill..."*(Dudrah, 2006, p.49).

It was in the '90s, when capitalism took root in India, that Indian cinema finally found a popular movie trying to break out of the formula set for over 9 decades and trying to squeeze drama out of cut-throat realism. The commercial success of *Satya* (1998, Dir. Ram Gopal Verma) was a unique and unprecedented phenomenon for Indian cinema, which set a new tone for all upcoming popular Indian movies.

The Language of Indian Cinema

In the construction of popular cinema, most critics dismiss the idea of imparting as much importance on the form or the cinematic language as the content. Even more so, because the development of Indian cinematic language has always been so greatly influenced by the Hollywood style of storytelling that discovering the factors dictating the small nuances of uniqueness in the cinematic language of India is extremely difficult, and yet –

> "*There is a different aesthetic tradition at the root of Bollywood, that critic Ravi Vasudevan traces back to the 'frontal' style of classic Indian painting and performing arts that 'goes against Western laws of perspective in their lack of depth and stylistic emphasis on surface'*(Dudrah, 2006, p.49).

Court art and folk art in India, especially in case of paintings, evolving side by side for over 3000 years, have borrowed heavily from one another to create similar stylistic approach. The absence of rigid frames like in Western art allows

a single canvas of the Indian painter to depict the whole lives of mythical heroes through different incidents. A more spiritualist philosophy and mythology sews in the collective unconscious of the Indian painters the notion of the falsehood of the physical world. The realistic depiction of depth or perspective, hence, was of no import to the Indian painter who was more inclined to discover the absolute (*Brahma*) and consequently dismissed the false physical reality which exists only to deter us from reaching there.

Finding such a stylistic expression in the early days of cinema was near impossible. Everything about the new medium was about capturing physical reality on celluloid. At the same time, after the Indian renaissance of the 19th century, the close knit conservative Indian society was suddenly exposed to western notions of art and philosophy and the educated section of the Indians soaked them up. The brilliant Raja Ravi Varma "*considerably influenced religious and popular Indian painting by 'modernising' it in the direction of European 'naturalism'"*(Thoraval, 2000, p.6). D.G. Phalke was greatly influenced by the paintings of Ravi Varma and his films bear distinctive similarity in compositions, decor, costumes and use of properties, locations and depth with the paintings of Varma.

The truly unique linguistic development of Indian cinema, however, began after the advent of sound. Ever since Alam Ara (1931, Dir. Ardeshir Irani) Indian cinema till date has been known all over the world for its excessive use of music. Indian popular movies are not *musicals* in the strict western sense of the genre. While Musicals in the West are movies that are all about singing and dancing, in India, song and dance numbers play a more independent role in a movie, although no less integral to the narrative. It may often seem unrelated or even unnecessary for the development of the narrative, but actually it is this use of song and dance numbers that transcends the movie from the mere audio-visual representation of a story to a milieu of the audience with all their repressed emotions and pleasures and cravings. Music is a universal language that can create similar emotional response in people distanced by political or geographical boundaries, castes, creeds or colours. Hence popular cinema, in particular, all over the world has made extensive use of this medium as a shortcut in involving its audience with absolute ease and rapidity. Indian cinema takes the trend a bit further by introducing separate segments dedicated to song and dance in every single movie. The music has a unique characteristic of being grandiose and simple at the same time. Music director Kalyanji observes the true nature and politics of Bollywood music as –

> *"We try to write songs so simple that they can be hummed by everybody. Every song should be as simple as a nursery rhyme. This is where our art as music directors lies"* (Jeremy-Marre, 1985, p.142).

The essence of popular Indian music lies in its very simplicity that can reach out to the masses before the narrative itself can and this is precisely the reason why songs are released in India prior to the release of a movie. Even though the stories themselves are designed by combining bits and pieces of every genre to connect with maximum number of people, the music connects with *all*. The music itself is essentially an effortless combination or fusion of all sorts of music starting from Indian classical music and folk music to Western pop, Latin American, Middle Eastern and African music. Indian classical music has been the epitome of court art, crafted by brilliant musicians and aesthetes while the folk music was more concerned with words or stories, essentially sermons preached with the help of catchy yet simple tunes. Bollywood music gives birth to a new kind of Indian music which borrows heavily from both and more and yet retains a unique and original character. It has assimilated in itself the doctrine of *Ragas* and hence is able to sow the seeds of the subtlest of emotions in the

audience's subconscious, and the lyrics of the folk music as well as their simplicity. The grace of the classical and the ease of folk together give Bollywood music its originality and popularity.

Dance, once a ritual among the masses and an entertainment for the kings, was assimilated in audio-visual art since Bharata Muni. Dance has been more incorporated in Indian dramatic performances than the rest of the world. Dance-drama was not a form of audio-visual performance that developed over time as in the West; in India, and probably also in Japan and China, it was the *only* type of drama. The dance was acting, the whole performance wasa narrative in itself. In a dance, the exaggerated movements and expressions (*Mudra*) transcended the physical boundaries of the narrative and delved into the realm of a spiritual, abstract super-reality which is at par with the essence of the Indian perception of art. The apparently unrelated song and dance numbers in Bollywood movies also tend to give the audience a feel of this transcendental world beyond the claustrophobic reality created by the camera. While silent film makers could not venture beyond this physical reality, with the advent of sound Indian movie makers immediately took up song and dance sequences to be used as portals to that spiritual realm. Rajinder Kumar Dudhra writes – "Bollywood song and dance numbers complement this by playing an extra-narrative role of linking a film to Indian tradition, quoting classical performance or religious imagery"(Dudrah, 2006, p.48).

He goes on to explain – "Song sequences often directly provide a route back to the mythic discourses (of, for example, Ram and Sita, Shiva and Parvati, Radha and Krishna, or of Sufi and Christian traditions within South Asia) from which Indian art forms stem, so that stars become identified with mythic figures, and their story becomes a metaphor for another, even more deeply familiar, story." *(Dudrah, 2006, p. 48)*

So in the way the dance sequences in Bollywood movies were mostly shot – in their grand sets, exuberant colours, bizarre costumes, hoards of back-up dancers appearing out of thin air – lied the very deliberate intention of the movie maker to take the audience on a trip to fantasyland, away from the drudgery of the realistic settings of the narrative. In many cases song and dance sequences are inserted to smooth out the transitions between segments conveying widely different sensations, say, a romantic sequence and a thrilling sequence.

Dance has affected not only stage acting but also screen acting in India. The exaggerated expressions and body language of a dancer has been central to extra-narrative exposition in Indian popular cinema. The camera language too has walked hand in hand with this unique style of acting. In cinema the audience involvement is at the maximum for the screen acts as if a window through which the audience peep into the world of the characters. The movements of the camera mimic a person's vision to give the audience a feeling of being present right in the middle of it all. Western popular cinema has, therefore, been continuously maximizing camera movements to make the audience connect more and more with the narrative, all the while trying to make shots lengthier, the movements jerkier, in a word, continued, uninterrupted and hence, more realistic. Indian popular cinema, however, walked a more classical route with camera movements, representing the tranquillity of social life with steady movements and in most cases, with no camera movement at all. They were more inclined to involve the audience not with movement but with extremely physical acting and incessant close shots of the actors' expressions. An average Indian cinema would have way more close-ups than their counterparts from the rest of the world. This trend also finds its root in the different audio-visual folk art forms of India – "***Jatra*** *in Bengal...* ***Kathakali*** *in Kerala,* ***Lila*** *in Orissa,* ***Swang*** *in Punjab,*

Tamasha *in Maharashtra,* ***Krishna Lila*** *in Uttar Pradesh,* ***Nautanki*** *in Northern India, etc"*(Thoraval, 2000, p.21). The almost dance-like physicality, the over-expressive body language, the melodramatic orations, the exaggerated expressions are all tools of emotionally, rather than cerebrally, involving the audience.

Another tool Indian popular cinema has made almost exhaustive use of in their visual construction is the application of religious symbols. What is surprising is that with conservative Muslims constituting nearly a third of the rural audience for Indian popular cinema, they are startlingly filled with Hindu symbols and iconography. Probably the reason behind this is rooted in the behavioural and festive nature of pagan religions. Celebration of worship consistently outshine the actual worship as religious practices keep on taking the appearance of social festivity, and reasons for such celebrations are in staggering abundance in any pagan religion such as Hinduism. Moreover, most of the Abrahamic religions have heavily borrowed their mythology from the pagans. Hence, relating with the archetypal source mythology does not seem to pose a serious problem.

CONCLUSION

The form of Indian cinema was hit hard by the wave of capitalism in the '90s. It gradually started to become more genre-centric. Realism intruded in a big way and began rendering the supposedly unrelated song and dance sequences unnecessary. They became more and more narrative oriented, rooted in reality or clearly identifiable as a character's fantasy. When cinema was still a newborn in the West, barely starting to crawl, the Western capitalist aggression and its consequent imperialism had already brought about something that turned the Western movie maker's perception of life, of good and evil, upside down – the *First World War*. The trauma of watching death at close quarters is what gave birth to the *German Expressionism,* and as hoards of German directors started migrating to the US, the dark world of *Film Noir* was born. Then came the second great crisis of capitalism – a depression, the likes of which the world had never seen before. The growing discontent against the authority of the desperate, starving, jobless people made them identify more with the degenerate gangsters who evade the authority and make a lavish living for themselves. While in India the *angry young man* of the '70s had a similar shade about himself, he was more of a victim of circumstances and necessarily the victim of a villain, a tragic hero at the most. It was after the '90s that full-blown degenerates, villains and anti-heroes began really dominating the screens. The morality tale as prescribed by Bharata Muni began fading off as the spread of education begged questions about morality itself. The clear distinction between good and evil started to wear out. The contents started to become more and more western as the western goods began crawling into the Indian market and western culture into the television screens. Today, standing in the second decade of the 21st century, it can be conclusively declared that the content of Indian popular cinema is being engulfed by the culture imported from the West along with the liberal economy.

But liberal economy has brought about something that can be a blessing for Indian cinema – the digital technology. Because cinema is staggeringly dependent on technology, local manufacturing of that technology is a definitive edge which India never got to enjoy. The Western capitalist countries manufactured all the technology used in cinema. Starting from camera to camera accessories, film negatives, sound recording equipments – every single piece of technology had to be imported with staggering amount of import tariff which made them super expensive. Moreover, every new technology was custom made to fit the aesthetic or linguistic need of some foreign movie and all Indian movie makers could do is borrow the technology and

imitate the language that particular piece of technology helps create. This has been the reason why even after being the largest producer of popular movies, the popular film language in India could never really place itself among the most uniquely innovative or constantly evolving cinematic languages of the world. But the introduction of digital technology has made the process of movie making much cheaper allowing much more room for experimentation with form. Movies like LSD (2010, Dir. Dibakar Banerjee) have been exploring new and unique language of popular Indian cinema with the help of this new, less expensive technology. It is hence my firm belief that even though in the turn of events the content of Indian cinema, which has always been so uniquely Indian, would inevitably get more and more Westernized, a new Indian form is likely to emerge breaking free of the long domination of Western audio-visual aesthetics over the language of Indian cinema.

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[1](Roberge, 2010, p.11).