

Yale FOX INTERNATIONAL FELLOWSHIP

DISTRIBUTION AND EXHIBITION OF THE NEW INDIAN CINEMA

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Distribution and Exhibition of the New Indian Cinema

Many voices are silenced in popular commercial cinema. This potentially results in both blindness to other points of view and the perception of many communities that they are not fully fledged members of society. This is especially true in India, where the world's largest commercial cinema industry misrepresents the voices of oppressed minorities. This policy brief argues for the need for state supported non-commercial cinema which is effectively distributed and exhibited. It will make this point through a concise historical examination of the case of the new cinema in India.

The Mumbai-based Hindi film industry is one of the largest centers of film production in the world. In 2011, over 3.5 billion tickets for popular Indian films were sold. In 2015, while 707 full feature films were produced in the US, the Indian film industry produced 1966 films. These movies are distributed and exhibited through an efficient network of private distributors.

The story of Indian art cinema is starkly different. The government of India launched the National Film Development Corporation in 1975 with the specific purpose of producing and distributing art cinema to the public. However, out of the 300 films produced and financed by the Corporation, just a handful reached cinema halls. Indeed, ironically, the Corporation's films were better distributed abroad, where they were widely shown in international film festivals, sent for awards, and had better circulation in film societies and universities. **Also, numerous Indians knew of Indian new cinema only because of the Sunday afternoon slot on national television, which also stopped in the 1990s.**

The distribution and exhibition of art cinema has been a point of concern for radical filmmakers across the world. According to Mike Wayne, "While access to cultural production has become easier with the technological development of cheaper and lighter recording equipment, the means of disseminating cultural products and of gaining access to audiences lies in the domination of distribution and exhibition by monopoly capital."ⁱ To democratize and introduce additional ideas and voices into the public sphere was the drive behind new and radical cinema. The onset of neoliberalismⁱⁱ in India in 1991 purged any remnant of non-commercial logic in culture. It promoted no state investment in training, production, distribution or exhibition, more censorship, rigid copyright and monopoly restrictions.ⁱⁱⁱ

While I do not aim to discriminate against popular cinema, I certainly wish to advocate for the necessity of getting new cinema to reach a wider audience. Unlike popular cinema, art cinema does not reinforce a popular, monotonic concept of culture. It deals with the local and provides diverse ways of looking at the world. Taking up stories from everyday life, it projects them more realistically on the screen. While living in an age of populism where politics and culture are getting rapidly corporatized, it is important

for us to nurture the “other” cinema which questions the system without fear or favor. In a country like India, it can only happen by active support from government agencies, and autonomous public bodies. Today, when conditions of distribution and exhibition are shaping cultural content and production, it becomes crucial that the homogenization of culture is challenged and autonomy of the new/independent filmmakers is protected.

Policy Implications

The first issue is public broadcasting. I would suggest a revival of public broadcasting agencies like the national public television channel, Doordarshan^{iv}, and re-strengthening of autonomous film production houses like the Films Division and the Corporation. The Corporation should revive its ties with Doordarshan and establish new, more democratic connections with satellite and digital television channels by giving them more incentives in the form of subsidies to telecast the Corporation’s films. Recently ZEE Classic, a private television channel, set an example by showing Corporation’s feature films every Saturday from July to October 2016. Similarly, the **Public Service Broadcasting Trust (PSBT)** can be used as a model organization. A UNESCO report praised it for offering “an innovative model for developing a shared public culture of broadcasting focused on diversity, accuracy, impartiality and marginalized audiences.”^v The Trust operates in partnership with the Films Division, Doordarshan, and several other international organizations. The Trust films have a weekly slot on Doordarshan, and a window on NDTV (a news channel) has been revived.

The second policy suggestion would be flexibility in copyright^{vi}, whereby the filmmaker could allow multiple methods of copying and distribution of his/her work for non-profit purposes. The Corporation, as the producer of these films, must sell the telecast rights at subsidized rates or at no cost for not-for-profit screenings. Also, public institutions like the National Film Archives of India (Pune) could be less strict in lending the copies to not-for-profit screenings organized by film societies and clubs. It could itself screen the films more regularly and take a lead in creating a democratic and public space for exhibition of new cinema. Regional governments could support by waiving the entertainment tax on new cinema films.

This takes us to the third recommendation, to create more theatres and cinema houses for art films. In 1980, the Corporation had thought of investing into low-cost rural open air cinemas. Today when private producers have started supporting independent films, the government could seek their help in building low-cost rural open air cinemas, and create chain of art cinema houses in urban regions. The **independent film clubs and societies** across metropolitan cities have been more accessible and successful in exhibiting new cinema. The need is to motivate and tap into such non-traditional spaces of exhibiting cinema. Multiplexes have also created that niche audience for “art-y” cinema.^{vii} They can be used as an alternative commercial space to release art house cinemas, and art house cinema halls could be used to release commercial cinemas during times when art cinema supply is low.

The fourth policy suggestion is to promote international tie-ups. As early as 1987-88, the Cinemart Films, Montreal, Canada, proposed to distribute the art feature films and documentaries produced in India. It was also noted that the Corporation was willing to let the Cinemart Montreal to handle sales/exhibition of their feature films. The policy makers can revive this initiative. The government might appoint an agent and take on lease some of the smaller cinema houses for the regular screenings of Indian films on a commercial basis in markets abroad. This agent could also explore other possibilities for distribution and exhibition of India art cinema in the television and art theatre circuits in overseas markets.

Notes

ⁱ Wayne, Mike, *Political Film: The Dialectics of Third Cinema*, London: Pluto Press, 2001, p.78.

ⁱⁱ Neoliberalism must not be simply understood as some set of economic structures; it rather has a far dangerous capacity of modelling the overall exercise of political power on the principles of a market economy.

ⁱⁱⁱ Kapur, Jyotsna, and Keith B. Wagner, eds., *Neoliberalism and Global Cinema: Capital, Culture, and Marxist Critique*, New York: Routledge, 2011 (Introduction).

^{iv} Doordarshan (DD) is the national television channel of India.

^v PSBT website home page, <http://www.psbt.org/>, date accessed 3 November 2016.

^{vi} Read Liang, Lawrence, "Shoot, share and create: Looking beyond copyright makes sense in film", <http://infochangeindia.blogspot.com/2004/11/shoot-share-and-create-looking-beyond.html>, date accessed 31 October 2016.

^{vii} Read Athique, Adrian, and Douglas Hill, *The Multiplex in India: A Cultural Economy of Urban Leisure*, London & New York: Routledge, 2010.