

Film Appreciation
Prof. Aysha Iqbal
Department of Humanities and Social Science
Indian Institute of Technology, Madras

Lecture - 43
Parallel Cinema from India

Good morning.

(Refer Slide Time: 00:12)



Welcome to the very last lecture of this course. And, this is something that has been long in the pipeline parallel cinema from India. I have been talking about this topic for quite a while. And, whatever we have been talking about, we have been talking about so much of International cinema – French, European; particularly, I am talking about Eastern European countries; we have talking about cinema from Hungarian, Poland. We have also talked about cinema from Sweden and Greece. So... And, also not to forget Italian neo-realism; and, all these has been leading to this – the very last section that we are going to do today; that is, parallel cinema from India.

I am basically going to focus only on the art house cinema and which is so important to understand, because Indian cinema is basically associated with song and dance rituals with melodrama. All of you are aware of this; we have been talking about these things for quite a while. Now, parallel cinema was a product or a result or a consequence of exposure to international cinema. And, I am talking about international art house cinema

from various parts of Europe particularly. So, French New Wave, Italian neo-realism, Swedish art house cinema, Hungarian cinema. Most of which was cinema of routed let us say in socio-political conditions of those countries; and, not to forget of course, Soviet realism – something that we have already talked about earlier in one of our previous classes.

Before we venture into the entire upsurge of parallel cinema, New Wave Indian cinema, let me also give you introduction to some of the films that happened even before that – the entire New Wave cinema movement that was late 60's, early 70. Now, this is just to draw your attention to the fact that, cinema of social consciousness has always been there in India. We talked about Jagte Raho and Boot Polish when we were discussing history of Hindi films. We also talked about Bimal Roy's classics Do Bigha Zamin, Sujata and Bandini, which were also not so main stream films. I mean if you compare those films to what you witnessed in the 70's, except that those films had very established stars; more or less, those films are also extremely grounded in social realities of India. So, this is what we have to be very careful about. I mean we have also talked about films such as Chetan Anand's Neecha Nagar, which is about the binaries between the has and the have not sent; Neecha Nagar is very symbolically, it means the lower city.

Now, before all that, we also had Duniya Na Mane by the great film maker V. Shantaram, whose film also have referred to earlier, particularly, Doctor Kotnis Ki Amar Kahani and Jhanak Jhanak Payal Baje and also Do Aankhen Barah Hath. So, again, V. Shantaram's Duniya Na Mane, which is a 1937 film is a feminist film much ahead of its times, which is a story of a young girl Nirmala forced into a marriage to a widower. Now, her way of rebelling against the arrangement is to refuse to consummate the marriage. The film was based on a Marathi novel and is memorable for its social realism along with the psychological debts given to the characters. So, this was one film. And, another very important film apart from Jagte Raho, Boot polish, Do Bigha Zamin is also Teesri Kasam; again it starred main stream actors such as Raj Kapoor and Waheeda Rehman; it was produced by the lyricist Shailendra and directed by Basu Bhattacharya. This is based on the story by Phanishwarnath Renu a renowned Hindi literary author. The name of the story was Mare Gaye Gulfam. And, the film revolves around Raj Kapoor, who plays Bihari bullock cart driver and his love for a notch girl. So, the movie won the president's gold medal for best film. Here is a sequence from Teesri Kasam.

(Refer Slide Time: 05:33)



From here onwards, I will be focusing on the parallel cinema of the late 60s, early 70s. So, the entire movement, which reached its pinnacle in the 70s. Now, what is parallel cinema? Internationally, it is also known as the art house of ((Refer Time: 06:03)) kind of cinema. It existed alongside more popular and mainstream Indian cinema and was not so commercial in nature; I mean the focus was definitely not on mindless entertainment; it was not just song and dance although, many of these films had their own repertory of actors and also music directors, For example, Vanraj Bhatia and Hansraj Behl. So, all these movies were... They employed that ropes, but changed the cinematic grammar and idiom of cinema – the way Indian cinema was told. Of course, it all goes back to the great Satyajit Ray. But, again Ray was in the 50's and his Pather Panchali; and now, we are already in the 60's. But, all these experimental filmmaker – they look towards Ray as their more immediate influence.

Now, it is also noteworthy that, the exponents of parallel cinema looked towards European art house cinema rather than the big budget Hollywood productions. A driving force behind the growth of so-called parallel cinema in India was the establishment of NFDC, which is National Film Development Corporation of India. This was an institution launched with an intention to create and also encourage quality Indian cinema in all languages. Initially, it was named Film Finance Corporation, that is, FFC. But, later, the nomenclature changed to NFDC after few infrastructural changes. It was NFDC's vision to support evolving ideas that may not be commercially viable to take topics and themes such as, which are very relevant to the Indian context, but which

would not find a great market outside among the mainstream producers or so. NFDC decided to produce and finding these films. So, since its establishment, NFDC has supported and financed hundreds of films in more than 20 Indian languages. Most important films and they are some of the best films that India has ever produced; they are such as Massey Sahib, Making of Mahatma, Salaam Bombay, Mirch Masala, Rudaali and Train to Pakistan.

Now, soon after its inception, FFC took charge of the so-called non-commercial cinema. And, amongst many others, one of the earlier filmmakers who got benefited from this institution was Mrinal Sen. So, his first film titled Bhuvan Shome, which is a 1969 film. Mrinal Sen introduced a new kind of Indian cinema. This was followed by the great Mani Kaul, who directed a film called Uski Roti in 1971. Now, most of these films went on to receive national recognition as well as international awards. We must also remember that, it was NFDC's co-produced Gandhi that got 8 Oscars in the year 1983. Now, we come to two great directors. I will also be talking about Mrinal Sen. But, let me begin with Mani Kaul and Kumar Shahani's cinema. They are the foremost names that come to mind; they are renowned; they are discussed; they are... They are... They inspire a lot of academic discussion. Unfortunately, the films are not so easily available and accessible to us even in DVD format.

Now, Mani Kaul has always been interested in creating films that are modern in their aesthetics. Uski Roti is a 1970 film by Mani Kaul based on a story by the same name by Mohan Rakesh. It is considered a landmark in the history of New Wave Cinema in India. In Mani Kaul's own words, the film is about waiting; it is deliberately slow, because you see many of these early art house filmmakers were accused of making the so-called dreadfully slow and non-entertaining films. These allegations came because this kind of cinema was just not familiar to the Indian audience unless and until they were exposed to world cinema. By world cinema, I mean films by masters such as Fellini or Bergman or even let us say the Greek masters or the Hungarian masters. So, also we have done Robert Bresson, the French film makers. So, unless and until you are familiar with that level of international cinema, it is very difficult to appreciate films, which are set in... Most of these films were based in rural settings; they did not have song and dance ritual; they had very non-glamorous unknown actors in the leading roles. So, these things just did not appeal to the Indian audience.

Now, Uski Roti is the story of a woman called Balo, whose life revolves around her

irritable and indifferent husband. He is a truck driver; she walks for miles every day to get food for her husband and she waits for him as he drives past the village. The film is to Hindi cinema what a *Pather Panchali* was basically to the Bengali audience or even *Meghe Dhaka Tara* by Rituparno Ghosh. So, these two classics of Bengali cinema and Mani Kaul's work can only be compared to those masters. So, Kaul takes an ultra-realistic approach and the film is much in the Bressonian way of film making with lot of attention paid to visual appeal. And also, he takes a minimalistic approach. This is something that we have been talking about. When we discussed Bresson, he also relied on silence and also plenty of emphasis on body parts such as face, eyes and most notably hands again like Bresson.

Mrinal Sen's *Bhuvan Shome* is again a great piece of filmmaking. *Bhuvan Shome* has played by the actor and theater exponent Utpal Dutt. So, he plays the title character, who is an upper middle class and disciplinarian Bengali officer in the railways in the 1940's. He is a lonely widower. In his 50s, we are told that, he has even dismissed his son from his job when he went on a leave without permission. Now, his subordinates dread him and curse him behind his back. But, *Bhuvan Shome* is definitely not interested or he does not bother about all these. However, 25 years down the line, *Bhuvan Shome* starts getting bored of his monotonous life. He seeks escape in a holiday and sets off on a bird hunting trip to a village in Gujarat. His new world consists of simple village folks, a bullet car drive, a longer muddy tracks, wild animals; and also, he comes in touch with a simple village girl Gauri. The movie won the national award for the best film, best director and also best actor for Utpal Dutt. Here is a scene from *Bhuvan Shome*.

(Refer Slide Time: 14:16)



Mrinal Sen's another extremely important film is *Akaler Shandhaney*. This movie literally means in search of famine. And, in this film, Sen takes filmmaking as the subject. The story is that of a film crew coming to a village to reconstruct the man-made Bengal famine of 1943. So, it is a film about film. Now, Kumar Shahani's *Tarang*. He tells his tale of an internally fragmented family of industrialist and the equally divided body of workers at his factory. The link between them being the ambitious wife of a dead worker; here it is played by Smita Patil, who begins an affair with the manager of the factory, that is, Amol Palekar. The film had a strong Marx's ideology. And, Shahani examines the class struggles on multiple fronts. In the writing that, nearly or very clearly recite the labor theory of value and also various voices, which we hear for power. And, this is very important to understand that the film is ((Refer Time: 16:19)) in Marx's dialectics.

Tarang is a film within a film again. And, we are regularly shown that, Patil and Amol Palekar – they are famous actors, who were playing these characters. Shahani's *Maya Darpan* is also set in a small town at a time following the nation's independence in 1947. It is a film about transition and transformation. His film *Char Adhyay* is based on Rabindranath Tagore's short story and the director synthesizes the elements of painting, theater, music and dance in the film. The film deals with a themes of love, pain and betrayal. Another important film of this period is M. S. Sathyu's *Garam Hawa*, which is also Balraj Sahni's last work. The story focuses on the tragedy of the partition and its aftermath. This we have to remember that, the tragedy of the partition was not dealt with

or a long time on screen. So, it was just hinted at in some films. But, this was one film that took the entire subject head on.

Balraj Sahni plays a character called Salim Mirza and aging Muslim shoe manufacturer and effectively portrays the crisis of the Muslim community forced to choose between India and Pakistan. He refuses to join the hordes of disperser's refugees on either side of the border. The film is full of despair. Mirza has to face constant communal tension, frenzy. He suffers financial drawbacks and setbacks too. And then, finally, he loses all hopes when his daughters slashes her wrist after being amended by her fiancé. Mirza decides to leave the country; however, the end is quite optimistic when Mirza's son and here we find Farooq Sheik; that was his first film. And, while ((Refer Time: 18:43)) to the railway station, the family comes across a secular communist rally. And, Mirza's son decides to join this. And, the family eventually changes its mind about living the motherland.

So, now, I come to one of the greatest filmmakers of the Indian parallel cinema, New Wave Indian cinema and particularly who has made films in several languages, but primarily in Hindi, that is, Shyam Benegal. His films belong to the peak period of the New Wave cinema in India. He is a very prolific and quite successful filmmaker. And, he has remained so. He has retained his position since his debut feature Ankur. His concern have more or less remained for the weaker section of society, the oppressive feudal customs and also exposition of the patriarchal Indian society. Ankur was his first film 1974, which was made with a budget of 5 lakh rupees and touches upon the themes of adultery cast and exploitation. The film also marked the debut of Shabana Azmi. Here is a scene from Ankur.

(Refer Slide Time: 20:13)



Benegal's *Nishanth* is one of the grittiest films ever made. It had an ((Refer Time: 20:27)) of the best of actors from parallel cinema. The heart of the film is Sushila – Shabana Azmi's character, who is abducted by the local landlords. This even serves as a catalyst for awareness and causing – and causes an appraising among the oppressed villages. In the revolutionary climax – in the revolutionary climax, the villages invade the landlord's mansion and kill the entire family. Only one brother manages to escape with Sushila. And, we are also told that, Sushila and that brother are now emotionally bound together. So, the proud chases them through the rocks and both of them are finally, killed. The film was written by Vijay Tendulkar and it won a claim at international film festival such as Cannes and Berlin.

Benegal's *Bumika*, which is a 1977 film is based on Marathi actress Hansa Wadkar and had superlative performances by Smita Patil and Amol Palekar. The film deals with a story of an actress desperately searching for happiness in the world of entertainment. Three Great Minds from the theater and cinema had worked on the film Girish Karnad, Vijay Tendulkar and Satyadev Dubey. Benegal sets the film in the 30s and the 40s and shoots all the flashback scenes in black and white and the rest in color. Benegal tried to provide the mass history of that period along with technical advancements in the film industry. *Manthan* written by Vijay Tendulkar has the distinction of being financed by thousands of farmers, milk co-operatives in Gujarat with contribution of 2 rupees each as well as by the National Dairy Development Board. *Manthan* was the third part in a trilogy of films dealing with rural oppression. And, it is a film, which framed Benegal as

a very fiercely political voice in Indian cinema. It is focused on the efforts of... See we have to remember that, it is based on true events and focuses on the efforts of urban liberals; and, role is played by Girish Karnad and his men who come to the village to help rural farmers establish a milk co-operative. The film was inspired by the true story of the White Revolution, the World's biggest dairy development program that took place in India during the 1970s. At first, the villagers are suspicious of the city folk and reluctant to join the co-operative. The villagers are under the influence of a greedy dairy distributor, who exploits people, particularly the Dalits and pays them pittance for the milk.

Junoon is Shashi Kapoor produced film and directed by Shyam Benegal. The film focuses on set against the backdrop of the first Indian mutiny of 1857. We have Jennifer Kendal, Shashi Kapoor's wife and she plays the role of an Anglo-Indian Miriam Labadoor. Her husband is murdered by Indian sepoy in a church. Miriam and her young daughter Ruth has played by Nafisa Ali – they find shelter in the house of a Pathan Javed Khan, that is, Shashi Kapoor. Javed is smitten by young Ruth although he is already married to... He is already a married man and his wife is played by Shabana Azmi. Miriam tries to hover the situation by promising Ruth to Javed on one condition, if the British loosed Delhi in the mutiny. The film was produced by Shashi Kapoor in his filmwala company, which was Shashi Kapoor's commitment to promote good cinema. It was based on a novel – A Flight Pigeons by Ruskin Bond. Here is a scene from Junoon.

(Refer Slide Time: 24:47)



Benegal and Shashi Kapoor came together again in Kalyug. Kalyug is set in

contemporary times. And, Benegal co-wrote it with Girish Karnad. It is a reinterpretation of the epic Mahabharat and is set against the urban and industrialized backdrop in Bombay. The film is narrated like a thriller mapping business entries and family politics between two warring families – two warring business families. The epic allusions provide a point of reference for the extent of greed, corruption and ruthlessness among the allied business families in India. The film was generally reviewed quite favorably, yet there were detractors, who criticized Benegal for losing his way among the commercial filmmakers and also compromising particularly by having people – casting stars such as Raj Babbar and Rekha. Here is a scene from Kalyug.

(Refer Slide Time: 25:56)



Trikal is a nostalgic family drama situated in times when Goa was under the Portuguese rule. We are introduced to a number of quirky characters in the opening of the film. The film was a period piece, where plenty of attention is paid to sets, locations and costume of that period. Trikal is in Benegal's horde towards slice of India's past. Here is a scene from Trikal, is 1985 film.

(Refer Slide Time: 26:32)



Benegal's other works include *Mandi*, *Arohan*, *Susman*, *Suraj Ka Satvan Ghoda*, *Mammo*, *Sardari Begum*, *Zubeidaa*, *The Making of Mahatma*, *Well Done Abba*. As I told you already, he has been very prolific and it is practically impossible to discuss his entire oeuvre. But, a great filmmaker whose cinema needs greater attention.

Now, I will move on to another contemporary great filmmaker, that is, Aparna Sen and her *36 Chowringhee Lane*. This is an English language film, which was produced by Shashi Kapoor starring Jennifer Kendal. And, it is an elegiac portrayal of old age isolation and courage. So, Jennifer Kapoor plays Miss Violet Stoneham, who is an Anglo-Indian teacher of English in Kolkata. A young Bengali couple brings brief joy in her life and they use her hospitality; however, at the end, she is cruelly rejected by the upwardly mobile couple at the end. And, we see her walking alone on the streets of Kolkata followed by her pet cat and reciting lines from *King Lear*. And, we feel – we realize how *King Lear* – her own life mirrors – the predicament of *King Lear*. The film is a brilliant representation of the city of Kolkata in transition.

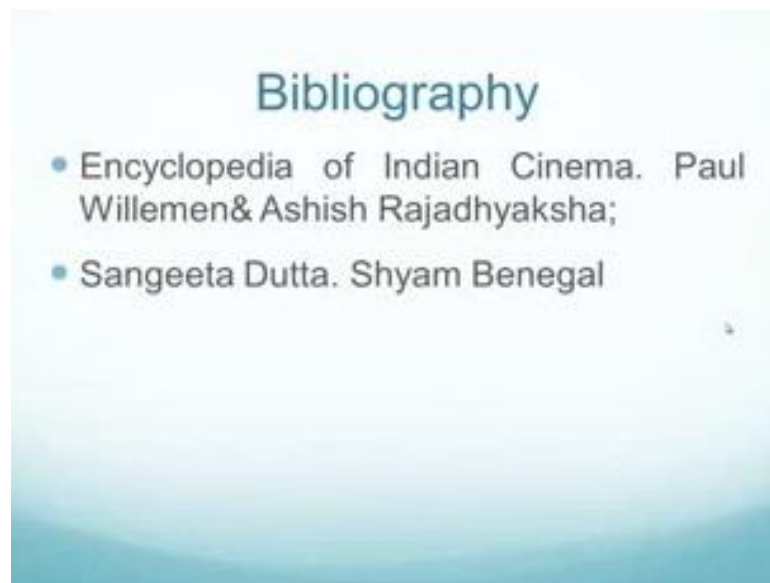
Coming to the 80's, *Ardh Satya* is at the center of the parallel cinema. See the entire movement just was on the wane by the mid-eighties, but still there are wonderful films and I would like to focus on those films. *Ardh Satya* is at the center of the great films of the 80s. It is a cop drama directed by Govind Nehalani. And, it was scripted by Vijay Tendulkar. The film is based on a young police inspector and his battle with corruption. The film essentially captured the angst of the common man through the experience of an honest cop. Here is a scene from *Ardh Satya*.

(Refer Slide Time: 29:07)



Kundan Shah's 1983 satirical film *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaro* deals with corruption, bureaucracy and betrayal in comic and satirical tone to down and out photographers – Vinod Chopra and Sudhir Mishra. And, here this is Kundan Shah's play on the two filmmakers – famous filmmakers, who are now famous, but not so famous during that time – during the early 80s. So, these two roles are played by Naseeruddin Shah and Ravi Baswani. They are hired by a manipulative newspaper editor to spy on a builder and his dealings. A murder is committed and leads to a roller-coaster ride. The film is remarkable for combining two genres satire and slapstick. So, other notable films of the New Wave cinema – those of you who were interested in this category and I am giving your list of the must watch films, that is, *27 down*, *Chakra*, *Aakrosh*, *Mirch Masala*, *Sparsh*, *Chashme Baddoor* and *Katha*.

(Refer Slide Time: 30:38)



Here is a bibliography of that you may use for your reading. Encyclopedia of Indian Cinema by Paul Willemen and Ashish Rajadhyaksha; and, Sangeetha Dutta's Shyam Benegal. So, with this, we come to the end of this course.

Thank you so much.