

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Indian Independent Films: Stuck in Transit

Suchita Bhhatia · Wednesday, February 19th, 2014

We live in the mall culture. We eat pastas, drink Indian Cappuccinos and carry an iPhone. We tweet, we Facebook, we Whatsapp. We talk about women's liberation, and we look for sweet virgin girls to get married to. We put censor cuts on bold and genuine films to protect our youth and culture but we don't shy away from molesting and raping women every minute.

We are in transit!

Do films reflect our culture or does the culture reflect our films? Or are they both stuck in transit?

There is one thing common between coffee shops in Mumbai and Canon 5D cameras. Both churn movies by the hour!! Here we meet Indian independent films: the 'indie' filmmakers sit for hours feeding on the staple diet of Tarantinos and Rays. They look derogatorily at Bollywood kitsch films. Sundance, Toronto, Berlinale, Cannes is their destination. Most of these makers put in their savings to shoot their films (thank you Canon 5D!) because there are only a couple of producers that understand the world cinema market and can channelize them.

But what are "indies" and who are these "indie" makers, and where are those films, and who is their audience that will lap up their low budget, no star cast film stifled with passion, perseverance and love.

"Indie" is a word that is still floundering for an identity in India. What are Indian independent films?

"Indie aka independent filmmaking is about independent thought and independent money," Manjeet Singh the director of Mumbai Cha Raja succinctly puts it.

"Indian independent cinema is a reaction and a pretty intense one to the Bollywood masala films, so, it thrives on it's non confirmation of that style," says Ajay Bahl the director of amazingly successful independent film *BA Pass*.

"The definition of independent films is very different in India vis-a-vis abroad. Here we finally need a big studio or a corporate to come in if we want a release," adds Nittin Kakkar, the director of national award-winning *Filmistan*.

2013 was the year when the Indian audience woke up to the indie scenario in the country, even though it has been going on for quite sometime now. It was a year when a handful of Indies

reached a larger audience and was lapped up: *The Lunch Box*, *Ship of Theseus*, *Miss Lovely*, *BA Pass*, got recognition in the local and the international markets. A few internationally recognized ones like *Mumbai cha Raja* and *Filmistan*, are still awaiting their release in India.

But what happens to the remaining indie films that are never seen or heard of?

The festival market rejects them and the commercial Indian market refuses to acknowledge them. It does not fit here, or there. It tries to please this and that. It tries to have a safety net over its head. It tries to titillate the audience with its intelligence and raunchiness. It is just like our culture, Indian and Italian and American and everything at the same time.

Aparna Malladi an LA-based independent filmmaker who was in India looking for funding for her film *The Anushree Experiment* was advised to take a known star if she ever wanted to make her film.

Here, even when we talk about independent films we talk about stars, we talk about studios, we talk about safety nets. Of course it has to make money but not by sacrificing its integrity as an art form.

The Pacific salmon orients itself to the Earth's magnetic field so as to safely cross the ocean and reach its destination. Indie filmmakers in India are desperately looking for that magnetic field to orient themselves to! They are desperately trying to keep afloat and find their ways.

Nila Madabh Panda the director of national award winning film *I Am Kalam* points out that the system is not in place for indie cinema. Ticket price for a Bollywood film-starring superstar Salman Khan is the same as the price of an indie film made for one-fourth the cost. Films are made and lying in cans because there are no distributors. The distribution system favors the Bollywood because India is not driven by Cinema culture but by Star culture, adds Madabh. The moment this skewed system gets in place the talent will be taken care of.

Hence bigger studios and production houses rule the roost. And Indies are pushed into the periphery and finally into oblivion.

Good stories die, good filmmakers die. Some die their own death and some are killed by the bigger ones.

So where are the answers. Who will take this Indian indie movement forward? Is there a movement, or it's just a movement to make as much money as possible without looking at the bigger picture- the future of Indian cinema as a whole!

"The market is virgin and vibrant and it will eventually open up lots of avenues for independent makers and we all will inspire each other," Nitin Kakkar says positively.

In Ben Zetlin's brilliant indie film *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, channelized by Sundance Institute, Hush Puppy says, "The whole universe depends on everything fitting together just right. If one piece busts, even the smallest piece, the entire universe will get busted."

We together, the big and the small, make this system. And Indian Cinema will get busted if the small is not nurtured and taken care of.

Top: A scene from Ajay Bahl's 'BA Pass.'

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