

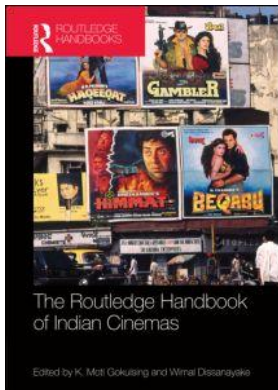
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Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



Routledge Handbook of Indian Cinemas

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The Indian New Wave

Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780203556054.ch3>

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Published online on: 09 Apr 2013

How to cite :- Ira Bhaskar. 09 Apr 2013, *The Indian New Wave from:* Routledge Handbook of Indian Cinemas Routledge

Accessed on: 10 May 2023

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780203556054.ch3>

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THE INDIAN NEW WAVE

Ira Bhaskar

At a rare screening of Mani Kaul's *Ashad ka ek Din* (1971), as the limpid, luminescent images of K.K. Mahajan's camera unfolded and flowed past on the screen, and the grave tones of Mallika's monologue communicated not only her deep pain and the emptiness of her life, but a weighing down of the self,¹ a sense of the excitement that in the 1970s had been associated with a new cinematic practice communicated itself very strongly to some in the auditorium. The occasion was a commemorative retrospective to honor Mani Kaul;² the four-hundred-seat auditorium was almost full, and there seemed a terrible irony in this reception of his work after his premature death from cancer in July 2011. This screening of *Ashad ka ek Din* forty years after it was made not only underlined its almost non-existent circulation in the period in between, but also the unavailability of most films of the 'new cinema' or the New Wave movement³ made during the 1970s–80s that have remained out of reach despite the present digital revolution. *Ashad ka ek Din* represents not only the radical, experimental edge of the Indian New Wave, but also the destiny of a number of its films that while made successfully were not released. Mani Kaul's death, the obituaries hailing him as a 'pioneer' of the 'new Indian cinema' (Gupta 2011: 10), and the commemorative retrospectives seemed to bring into sharp focus the enthusiastic investment in cinematic experimentation not only by the high priests of an avant-garde experimental cinema—emblematically represented by Kaul himself and Kumar Shahani, but also by several others of the movement.

If cinematic experimentation and new forms of film narration defined one characteristic of this cinema, the other was cinematic realism, both of form and content, evident in a number of the early films: Mrinal Sen's *Bhuvan Shome*, Basu Chatterji's *Sara Akash*, Kantilal Rathod's *Kanku*, all from 1969, Pattabhi Rama Reddy's *Samskara* (1970), Rajendra Singh Bedi's *Dastak* (1970), M.S. Sathyu's *Garm Hawa* (1973), and Avtar Kaul's *27 Down* (1973), among many others. The 'new Indian cinema' that these films inaugurated was clearly connected to a concern with aesthetics, to a seriousness of intent, and to a representation of social issues with a drive towards an understanding of reality in all its complexities, contradictions and ambiguities, necessary, it was believed, for the transformation of society. A missionary zeal was thus obvious in the work of a lot of the Indian New Wave directors who focused on the ills of Indian society: poverty; social injustice; the inherent violence of social structures evidenced in the modalities of entrenched feudal power; the oppressive stranglehold of the orthodoxies of tradition; and the brutal subjugation and exploitation of lower castes and women. As a critical

movement with a 'social conscience' (Das Gupta 1982: 16), the New Wave believed that it had a political role to play at a crucial juncture of national history.

What is remarkable about this moment of cinematic history is the tremendous diversity of forms that this new cinema generated. Launched by the investment made by the Film Finance Corporation (FFC), the movement burgeoned into what came to be seen as a wave of offbeat, artistic cinema. At the same time, it was not as if the films shared political or aesthetic ideologies or positions, marked as they were by an immense variety of concerns and styles. Yet, there were common responses and larger approaches that were evident in the work that was financed by the FFC and a few others during this period, which can be seen as constituting an aesthetic and cultural movement. These were a rejection of the values, forms, performance modes and the style of mainstream, commercial cinema that privileged entertainment values, spectacular display and melodrama; a vision of cinema as an expressive art form; an inspiration from and a sense of connectedness to a larger and 'serious international artistic enterprise' (Binford 1987: 148); and what can be termed in a general sense, a realist project—one that is motivated by the drive to know and represent the world adequately. At the same time, the realist project in this larger sense is not to be equated only with cinematic realism, for the project of addressing reality in its broadest sense did inspire varied aesthetic forms demonstrating that the impulse to engage reality could undergird different aesthetic expressions from cinematic realism to modernism. The New Wave films were extremely diverse, and ranged from realist portrayals of contemporary Indian reality, especially the reality of small town and village India to experimental and modernist work that foregrounded abstraction and stylization. Focusing on and working with space, depth, volume, color, duration and temporality were as important to some of the filmmakers, as a concern with themes like in-built oppressive structures of society, the ingrained violence of gender and caste relations, or the struggle with repressive patriarchal norms were to others.

At the same time, it was not as if representations of social reality, or auteurist cinematic experimentation had not existed before. From the 1930s there had been a concern with progressive social causes that the different film studios in Bombay (Ranjit Movietone, Bombay Talkies), Calcutta (New Theatres), Pune (Prabhat) and Madras had demonstrated. There were also several filmmakers even within the mainstream industries from the 1930s to 1950s like V. Shantaram, Guru Dutt, Raj Kapoor, Mehboob Khan and Bimal Roy, to name just a few from Bombay, whose work reflected a concern with cinematic art. Moreover, most significantly, from the 1950s there had been a parallel art cinema represented by the work of Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen and Ritwik Ghatak. In fact, it is the work and the international reputation of Satyajit Ray that was held up as an inspiration to be emulated by anyone who aspired towards 'good' cinema.⁴ However, what represented a new impetus in the late 1960s was the scale and volume of offbeat films that seemed to emerge suddenly as a new kind of cinema that had been made possible by the intervention of a government initiative in the form of the FFC. This brings one to the FFC story. Set up in 1960 on the recommendation of the S.K. Patil Film Enquiry Committee Report of 1951, the FFC was initially meant to aid the film industry, and had by 1968 funded over fifty films by established and reputed filmmakers, notably Ray who had three FFC films in the 1960s (Rajadhyaksha 2009: 233). However, by 1968 the situation was dire since, as B.K. Karanjia puts it, 'almost the entire paid up capital had been eroded,' and unable to compete with commercial filmmakers as far as the box office was concerned, 'the race was lost before it was run' (Karanjia 1988: 6).

A change in course was desperately needed, and Karanjia as the new Chairman of the FFC, acting on an earlier suggestion made by Mrs Gandhi while she was the Information and Broadcasting Minister in 1964 (Prasad 1998: 122), took certain crucial decisions:

to finance low-budget films, preferably but not necessarily in black and white ... to sponsor talented and promising newcomers from the Film Institute or outside and ... to film the works of our own eminent writers in Hindi and the national languages.⁵

(Karanjia 1988: 6)

It is this 'formula' that Karanjia believes launched 'the New Wave in Indian Cinema.' Karanjia's new policy provided finance, among others, to newcomer Mani Kaul from the Film Institute, Bengali filmmaker Mrinal Sen for his first film in Hindi, and newcomers Basu Chatterji and Kantilal Rathod. It is thus that 1969 saw the birth of the Indian New Wave with the completion of their films, *Uski Roti*, *Bhuvan Shome*, *Sara Akash* and *Kanku* respectively.

A look at the early films that were radically different, both thematically and formally, from contemporary filmmaking practices will indicate clearly the characteristics of this new cinema, and the reasons for the discourses they generated. Shot on location, with mostly unknown actors and new fresh faces, these films were inventive and formally experimental. Based upon a short story by Banaphool, Mrinal Sen's *Bhuvan Shome* is a playful satirical comedy about the humanizing of a self-righteous, officious, Westernized, colonial railway bureaucrat who encounters the reality of his postcolonial nation when he decides to take a bird-shooting holiday away from his oppressive office routine. In the process, and through his encounter with a buffalo that chases him, and the village girl Gauri, not only does Shome realize that his position and power are completely useless in the alien environment of the village, but he also becomes a different man. Sen's comic form is heightened by the use of jump-cuts, freeze frames and an extremely innovative use of animation that hilariously undermines the pomposity of Shome. Shot in Saurashtra, the film seemed to reveal completely new visions of social reality to its audiences.

Similarly, Chatterji's *Sara Akash* based on Rajendra Yadav's novella and shot on location in a middle-class neighborhood in Agra brought to the screen an everyday reality that though known was one that had been hardly represented. In a stylized opening credits sequence, as the camera tracks through the streets of the town, the film evokes not only the constricting physical contours of the spaces within which the narrative of newlyweds in a joint family is set, but also the claustrophobia that the young bride Prabha will feel in her married home. She encounters the hostility of the women towards her education, but also the awkward and virulent indifference of her young husband who is unable to deal with his feelings of having compromised his education, or understand his own sexuality. In this first film, Chatterji is extremely experimental in his camerawork, his use of lenses and his spatial imagination. The flattening of space and the distortion of facial contours in the extreme close-ups of the telephoto lens used to foreground Samar's internal self-conflict, or the shots of the narrow by-lanes of the area in which Samar and Prabha's home is located, or the sense of the middle-class neighborhood evoked in long shot vistas of the small town from the terrace of the family home were all new to the cinema of the time. Even though the thematic concerns of this film resurfaced later in Chatterji's middle-class urban dramas, the look and the form of *Sara Akash* did not reappear in what followed.

The freshness of themes, the adaptation of literary material especially from the Nai Kahani movement, the use of real locations and mostly unknown actors, the evocation of the everyday, and most significantly, an experimentation with cinematic form that is evident in *Bhuvan Shome* and *Sara Akash* is also fundamental to Kaul's *Uski Roti*. Yet while all these elements are common, the austerity of Kaul's form, the slowness of tempo, the lack of music, the sparse dialogue and non-dramatic dialogue delivery all make for a minimalism that not only seemed very different from the other two films, but also identified Kaul as the emblematic experimental avant-garde filmmaker to have emerged in 1969. Based on Mohan Rakesh's short story, *Uski*

Roti is set in rural Punjab and is about Balo's wait at a bus stop for her husband to collect his meal as he passes by. It is clear that Kaul responds to the dramatization of interior consciousness that Rakesh's modernist story attempted in the literary form; however, the cinematic rendering of Balo's interiority led Kaul to a different experiment—to explore the meaning of temporality on the one hand and that of space, both external and internal, on the other. Kaul explains his technique in *Uski Roti* where he confined the film to two lenses, a 28mm wide angle lens and a 135mm telephoto lens, 'making them represent the actual and mental life of the waiting wife in the beginning of the film.' He goes on to say:

Having faithfully established this as a norm, the lenses were gradually freed of the strict representation—they were crossing each other in the middle of the film where the distinctions were blurred—until in the end the representation was reversed, with the result that the actual return of the husband almost appears as a hallucination ... This slight edge of disbelief in the reality of an actual return of her husband gives rise to an ambiguity, almost necessary for a scene to *redeem itself of the physical covering* and reveal the conceptual meaning.

(Kaul 1974: 10)

It is clear that for Kaul the discipline of cinema was one that almost resisted the iconic relationship of the camera to the real world, a tension that for him was essential for getting at the kernel of his concept. At the same time, his cinema gave us sheer visual poetry in the images he created; for instance, the image of Balo waiting for Sucha at the bus stop conveys a deep stillness of being, of her commitment and devotion to her relationship, and yet of an *abhav* (lack) that she isn't quite aware of or knows how to address. The stillness of the image and the tempo of the film convey the experience of duration, of time as it seems to stand still.



Figure 3.1 Waiting at the bus stop, Balo in *Uski Roti*. Courtesy of the author.



Figure 3.2 Time stands still, Balo waiting in *Uski Roti*. Courtesy of the author.

This is an austere cinema that is reflective even as it is visually beautiful, and if engaged with on its own terms is enriching aesthetically, emotionally and conceptually. In this and in all the work that was to follow, Kaul continued to explore visually and aurally how cinematic discipline would enable one to plumb the depths of the inner being, strike the appropriate emotional note and sensitize one to the significances of our being in the world. All these three films were stunningly shot by K.K. Mahajan, who went on to do a lot of work with the New Wave filmmakers.

Much to the surprise of the industry both *Bhuvan Shome*, which was released in a morning show where it ran for several months, and *Sara Akash*, which was released after an initial delay, did well at the box office. *Uski Roti* had a limited morning show release but made an impact on the film society and international film festival circuits and won the Filmfare Critics Award for Best Movie the following year. The enthusiasm of that moment and the mood of the times can be seen in Mrinal Sen's description of the 'remarkable' performance of the FFC in the three years from 1968, in having financed films that were 'fresh, unconventional, dissenting, iconoclastic' and which by conventional standards would be considered 'non-marketable' (Sen 1971: 31). The excitement among the filmmakers was palpable, for suddenly the dreams of several young people seemed translatable into reality. The significance of the FFC was thus literal—in the films it made possible—but it was also more symbolic in that it generated a certain confidence about cinematic possibilities. Moreover, the critical and popular impact of the films created an excitement about a new kind of art cinema. As Bikram Singh pointed out then, 'the most heartening thing is that the "new," "parallel," "counter"—call them what you will—films are being discussed with the kind of seriousness and enthusiasm which Indian cinema has perhaps never before received' (Singh 1973: 33).⁶

That this was a moment when the exposure to international cinema through film festivals and the circulation of world film classics through the film society movement had created an audience that valued cinematic art and desired a similar intervention in the Indian cinematic scene is evident from the Manifesto of the New Cinema Movement that was written in 1968 by Mrinal Sen, the chairman, and Arun Kaul, a film society enthusiast and the chief promoter of this movement. The FFC 'low budget art film' (Nadkarni 1970) thus made possible what the manifesto of the New Cinema Movement had envisaged—an auteurist cinema that offered the filmmaker 'indispensable freedom to realise his vision untrammelled by all considerations except creative and aesthetic' (Sen and Kaul 1968: 36–37). While it is true that the filmmakers of the time were not all united by a single aesthetic, nor had they all signed this manifesto, it is also true that the vision in the manifesto of a 'movement conceived as a self-sufficient structure embracing all the three branches of film-making: production, distribution and exhibition,' was an articulation of a form of thinking that was shared by many in different parts of India. Central to the concept of the new film was the idea of 'developing a new kind of audience'—one whose 'participation and involvement' would be of the kind that 'modern art demands' (ibid.: 37).

In its charter the FFC did have a scheme for building a chain of small theaters across the country for exhibiting non-commercial films and had conceptualized an alternative distribution network. Karanjia's statements reconfirming this commitment had led to much elation among the filmmakers.⁷ The point is that this was a moment in which thinking about a new cinema, a new audience, and a new and alternative distribution and exhibition network was in the air, and filmmakers, film society activists and film buffs were deeply involved in creating these structures. Some of these ideas materialized outside of the FFC into concrete initiatives to solve problems of distribution and exhibition through the 1970s, for example the Yukt Film co-operative in Bombay, Chitralakha in Kerala and Navya in Karnataka.⁸ The FFC film thus became a node around which a robust thinking about alternative cinema practices cohered.

That the FFC initiative and experiment was inspirational in different ways is also evident in some other developments in the early 1970s that are worth mentioning here: the emergence of new cinema in other parts of the country, especially in the south; the investment into this cinema by agencies not directly a part of the commercial film industry; and the impact of the FFC film on the film industry itself. Kantilal Rathod's *Kanku* demonstrates an important aspect of the FFC moment—the funding of an alternative film movement in the other language film industries. *Kanku* paved the way for FFC funding for other Gujarati films in the years to come, most notably Ketan Mehta's *Bhavni Bhavai* (1980). Moreover, the impact of the FFC film allowed for the viability of funding for this cinema from other sources as well. Pattabhi Rama Reddy's *Samskara* (1970) and Karanth and Karnad's *Vamsha Vriksha* (1971) in Kannada, Adoor Gopalakrishnan's first film *Swayamvaram* (1972) in Malayalam, and John Abraham's *Agraharathil Kazhuthai* (1977) in Tamil are some examples of films in other languages that were funded privately by those convinced of the value of a different cinematic practice.

The FFC example also led to state subsidies for films in both Karnataka and Kerala, and the setting up of state film development corporations in Karnataka and West Bengal. This created a virtual explosion of films in different languages: for example apart from the films mentioned above, other work by Karanth, Karnad in Kannada, that of Adoor Gopalakrishnan, John Abraham and Aravindan in Malayalam, Bengali films by Buddhadev Dasgupta, Gautam Ghose among others, Manipuri cinema of Aribam Syam Sharma, Assamese and Marathi films by Jahnu Barua and Jabbar Patel, respectively, are some examples of filmmakers working in different regional languages. Some of these films were funded by government agencies like the FFC or the state funding bodies, while others were privately funded.

The most significant figure to emerge at this moment with such non-state funding for offbeat cinema is Shyam Benegal whose first two films *Ankur* (1973) and *Nishant* (1975) were financed by Blaze Advertising. Inflecting the realist project of the New Wave with a political message, both these films were set in Andhra and are critiques of decadent feudalism, foregrounding economic, gender and caste exploitation by the feudal elite. The violation and humiliation of women, the underlining of their vulnerability, the corruption of power and the inability of the state to counter the violence of feudal oppression are major issues in these two films, as is a reflection on the politics and ideology of violence itself. Benegal continued these concerns in *Manthan* (1976), which was also funded in a novel manner with five lakh farmers in Gujarat each contributing two rupees towards the making of this film.

While *Manthan* has been seen as a 'developmentalist' film (Prasad 1998) in that it supports the formation of milk co-operatives that enable farmers and milk producers to become economically independent and free of the oppressive loan structures of local moneylenders, it is trenchant in its critique of upper-caste violence, exploitativeness and hypocrisy. All three of Benegal's films are in Hindi, but a Hindi that is inflected and accented by the local language of the region in which it is set—thus Telugu in the first two films and Gujarati in *Manthan*. This was an attempt to create 'the reality effect' central to the realist form (Barthes 1995: 258). The critical and economic success of the early Benegal films indicated that the new cinema film was an economically viable entity if it reached the audiences for such cinema. While these audiences existed in the numerous film societies across the breadth of the country, audiences that had welcomed, supported and popularized the New Wave movement, the commercial intervention of Blaze allowed for the viability of audiences outside the film society and international film festival circuits as well.

The Benegal films must also be seen in the context of the New Wave's political impetus, and the Telangana locale of Benegal's *Nishant*, with its seething violence both of feudal oppression and the people's violent and reactive revolt is also the setting for K.B. Tilak's *Bhoomikosam*

(1974) and Mrinal Sen's Telugu film *Oka Oorie Katha* (1977). Telangana's literal and symbolic significance is connected to its peasant insurgencies and to its being the locus of the first Naxalite revolt in post-independence India. If *Bhoomikosam* espoused a Naxalite ideology, *Oka Oorie Katha* explores how contradictory the resistance of the oppressed can be, and how deeply implicated patriarchy is in the oppressive structures of both caste and especially gender, for the cynical rebellion of the indolent lower-caste father-son duo in the film amounts ultimately to their destruction of the daughter-in-law Nilamma. Rajadhyaksha and Willemen (1995: 404) point to the significance of Telangana that contextualized the 1970s 'ruralist political films about feudal oppression' with Benegal's *Kondura* (1977) and Gautam Ghose's *Maabhoomi* (1979) continuing the concerns of the earlier films.

The violence of Hindu society's caste structure is also addressed in two significant films of the period—B.V. Karanth's *Chomana Dudi* (1975) and Govind Nihalani's *Aakrosh* (1980). The untouchable Choma plays the drum as the only resistance possible for him, and the memorable sequence of his last passionate drumming metaphorizes both his humanity and his helplessness against structures that he has no power to change. Lahanya Bhiku of *Aakrosh*, a tribal accused falsely of raping and murdering his wife, refuses to speak in prison, using the enforced muteness of the tribal community oppressed for ages by exploitative social and political forces as his form of protest. When his father dies, leaving Lahanya's sister at the mercy of the hyenas that have killed his wife, Lahanya, who has been brought to perform the cremation rites, suddenly breaks free, and using an axe kills his crying sister in a horrifyingly brutal act that is simultaneously one of deep despair, grief and helplessness. While caste was not an issue that the popular film of the time would touch, exposing feudal and caste oppression formed the political thrust of many of the New Wave films.

Grim critiques of Brahmanism with its tyrannical and destructive notions of tradition and ritual formed another strand of the political New Wave. Inspired by Bresson's *Au Hasard Balzazar* (1966), John Abraham's *Agraharathil Kazhuthai* is a scathing satirical critique of the taboo about touch and the obsession with a regressive notion of purity that structures Brahmin social relations. While examining the question of defilement, especially around the issue of sexual relations with a lower-caste woman, Pattabhi Rama Reddy's *Samskara* (1970) uses the crisis of identity and self-introspection of the protagonist Praneshcharya to critique the moribund ritualistic practices of conservative Brahmin orthodoxy. Similarly, Girish Kasarvalli's heart-wrenching debut film *Ghattashraddha* (1977) about the destruction of the child widow Yamuna, cruelly cast out and condemned to a death-in-life fate for being seduced and becoming pregnant, is a powerful critique of the virulent destructiveness of orthodox and sanctimonious Brahmin society with its oppressive practices loaded against women. Yamuna's desperate attempts to die, the sequence of her violent and painful abortion, and the final track away from her excommunicated figure, sitting under a tree with her shaven head, abandoned by all, are haunting sequences that carry the force of the film's political and affective charge.

If critiques of oppressive Brahmin orthodoxy were important issues for a political, cinematic intervention that these films were attempting, another issue that surfaced powerfully in this cinema was a concern with the lives of the Muslim minority in the country and a confrontation with the forces of communalism. Two films from the early 1970s set the tone for these issues to be addressed in the films of the 1980s and 1990s. Rajinder Singh Bedi's debut film, *Dastak* (1970), has as its protagonists Salma and Hamid, a lower-middle-class Muslim couple who have to face humiliation on a daily basis because Salma is a trained *thumri* singer who is taken to belong to a tradition of courtesanship and hence available to all men. While *Dastak* gestures towards the cultural and social implications of Salma's Muslim identity, it keeps the focus firmly upon the difficulties of surviving honestly in a metropolis. M.S. Sathyu's *Garm Hawa* (1973), on



Figure 3.3 The outcast Yamuna in *Ghattashraddha*. Courtesy of the author.



Figure 3.4 Yamuna abandoned by all, *Ghattashraddha*. Courtesy of the author.

the other hand, confronts directly the consequences of Muslim identity in post-partition India. In the early 1970s, that *Garm Hawa* goes back to the immediate aftermath of Partition and represents the painful experiences of a Muslim family in Agra under intense pressure to leave for Pakistan is clearly indicative of an attempt to give voice to a repressed history in public discourse, and draw attention to the forces of communalism that had not ended with Partition.

Unlike *Garm Hawa*'s internalized violence, Govind Nihalani's monumental television series *Tamas*⁹ (1987–88), on the other hand, is both, in Das and Nandy's (1985: 189) words, 'an intellectual anatomy of the Partition' and, as Mazumdar (2005: 319) puts it, a 'visceral experience of terror,' and it is precisely its intervention in 'contemporary polity' (Raina 1988) that made *Tamas* such a controversial public media event. Based on Bhisham Sahni's novel and a couple of his short stories, Nihalani's *Tamas* is a gut-wrenching look at the devastating holocaustic event that changed the cartography of South Asia leaving almost two million dead and sixteen million displaced while at the same time foregrounding the terror and pain of an historical moment that defied human comprehension. It is the savage beast stalking the streets of those Partition towns that the rhetoric of *Tamas* hoped to hold up as a warning, and thus like *Garm Hawa*, it attempted similarly to comment on the increasing communalization of contemporary politics.

The Partition had thus become a metaphor for contemporary communalism, for the repeated Hindu–Muslim riots in independent India suggested that the visceral effects of Partition were never really exorcised from sociocultural memory. The Muslim Social of the New Wave,¹⁰ especially in the wake of Hindu right-wing mobilization (1980s–90s) highlighted the hostility, prejudice and ghettoization faced by Muslims. Saeed Mirza broke fresh ground in *Salim Langde Pe Mat Ro* (1989) and *Naseem* (1995) in his portrayal of working-class and middle-class Muslim families negotiating the pressures of what it means to be and live as ordinary Muslims in



Figure 3.5 The epic journey into exile: *Tamas*. Courtesy of the author.



Figure 3.6 Death in life: the debris of the Partition in *Tamas*. Courtesy of the author.

contemporary Bombay with its explosive communal situation. Both films look at the dead end facing the community, and so if the Bhiwandi riot of 1984 marks the everyday in *Salim Langde Pe Mat Ro*, in *Naseem* it is the build-up to the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 in the months preceding 6 December that imbues the life of an ordinary Muslim family with extreme tension, insecurity and finally reactive anger on the eve of the riots that follow the demolition. The gentler past of friendship and understanding between communities that Naseem's grandfather evoked through his *qissas* (stories) spoke of a world that had definitely ceased to exist. Shyam Benegal's *Mammo* (1994) also looks at the fallout of this history and the difficulties faced by Muslims who have families scattered across the two nations. The eponymous character, Mammo, radically redefines the meaning of home, rejecting national identities thrust upon individuals by history and politics, as she refuses to accept that the afterlife of Partition in the policies of the two nation states will dictate to her what her choice of home ought to be.

It is films such as these that embodied and defined the realist project of the New Wave, a project that addressed squarely the injustices of society, the realities of oppression, the social and cinematic repressions of traumatic history, and critiqued the tradition that empowered the upper castes and legitimized the violence perpetrated in their name, against caste, community and gender identities and roles. Furthermore, these are also films that articulate the realist project through cinematic realism best defined in Bazinian terms as 'lay[ing] bare the realities' (Bazin 1967: 15), which cinema does through the armature of means at its disposal to reveal reality's 'structural depth, to bring out the pre-existing relations which become constitutive of the drama' (ibid.: 27). Central to a realist vision is the inextricable connection between individuals and the environment, an emphasis that leads to the creation of social types so crucial to realism (Balzac 1965; Lukács 1972). Cinematically, the use of the tracking camera, the pan, the deep

focus, the long take and staging in depth with multi-planar compositions enables precisely this connection (Bazin 1973), as does the belief that film is only a fragment of a complex and ambiguous reality that extends beyond the frame of the image—what Bazin (1967: 37) calls ‘the continuum of reality.’ Moreover, a Lukácsian perspective also enables a perception of the realist drive as one that both ‘penetrate[s] the laws governing objective reality and ... uncover[s] the deeper, hidden mediated, not immediately perceptible network of relationships that go to make up society’ in all its contradictions (Lukács 1980: 38), and to present the most typical and essential traits in every social phenomenon. Understood in these terms, the realist films of the New Wave that I have discussed here are different from the ‘aesthetic realism’ that Madhava Prasad sees as ‘one of the mechanisms of the modern state’s hegemonic project, giving substance to the state’s claim to represent the “nation” that it encompasses’ (Prasad 1998: 61).

An Althusserian position on realism as the legitimization of the ideology of the bourgeoisie state would see realism as a propagandist, reductive project, denying it its critical edge in the exposure of the contradictions of ideology that it seeks. As opposed to Structural Marxism/Althusserianism, Lukács’s Critical Realism would provide a more effective model for approaching the cinematic realism of the New Wave’s realist project. The realist, political cinema of the New Wave that I have detailed above had a critical perspective on the role of social structures that dehumanized the oppressed, and was a cinema committed to social transformation. In fact, the documentary recording of everyday life had a political aim—that the lives of ordinary people and the experiential voices of the marginalized should be of crucial significance to any reconstructive social project and must be taken account of at the center. It is this focus that was central to the New Wave political realist films that were, I would claim, thoroughly imbued with a critical impulse¹¹ rather than that of state legitimization as the project of ‘nationalist realism’ (Prasad 1998: 62).

However, this is not to say that there weren’t films made during this time that were ‘statist’ (Prasad 1998: 25) in their orientation. A film of Shyam Benegal’s, *Hari Bhari* (2000), which focuses on issues of family planning as a means for the emancipation of women, comes to mind. Furthermore, Prasad’s point that ‘Under the FFC aegis, realism became a national political project’ (ibid.: 190) can be seen as an important perspective on the way in which first the FFC, especially during the Emergency period, and then later the National Film Development Corporation (NFDC) understood their role and intervention. It is also true that there did exist a privileging of themes around urban poverty and rural oppression for funding by the state. Moreover, not every ‘realist’ film funded by the FFC/NFDC had the same political drive, aesthetic integrity and passion of the films described above. It is important to make the point that an idea or a project in itself does not guarantee that the output will be artistically sound. At the same time, the critical drive of the realist films and the significant work that was produced during the 1970s–80s cannot be discounted, or their significance undervalued because there were films made during this time as part of the project of the FFC/NFDC that were indifferent or propagandist.

There are two other arguments about the realist aesthetic that are relevant here. Chidananda Das Gupta voices a widespread view when he makes the point that this cinema was basically ‘regional’ in character, including the Hindi films made in Bombay, differentiated from the mainstream by their heightened ‘regional characteristics in language, dress, names and manner’ (Das Gupta 1982: 16–17). While it is true that the New Wave filmmakers located their films in specific regions and attempted an ‘authentic’ look in order to communicate the ‘reality effect,’ there is an anomaly in the argument about regional creativity that Das Gupta is making. Most of the regional languages in which these films were being made had flourishing mainstream industries of their own, and the cinematic practice that the New Wave films represented was at

variance from them. In all these regions, the New Wave film came to acquire a 'Parallel film' identity, and along with the work of the art filmmakers from the 1950s like Ray, Ghatak and Sen, who were continuing to make films during this period, were seen as part of the 'parallel' or the 'Art Cinema' stream. Moreover, the regional should not be counterposed antithetically against the national. In fact, it was the New Wave films in different regional languages including Hindi that not only won National awards, but also came to be identified as India's national cinema during that period.

There is another term and argument connected to the realist aesthetic of the 1970s that needs to be mentioned here—the middle cinema. Madhava Prasad has persuasively argued that the film industry saw the FFC intervention by the state as establishing 'a parallel industry with an alternative aesthetic programme' (Prasad 1998: 123), and met the challenge through segmentation by taking over its 'aesthetic of authenticity and simplicity' (ibid.: 127) to create a middle-class cinema. Basu Chatterji is a key figure in developing this cinema, whose *Piya ka Ghar* (1971) on problems of urban living in Bombay, and *Rajnigandha* (1974), *Choti si Baat* (1976) and *Chitchor* (1975) all about the choice of a life partner, were tremendous commercial successes. Clearly, Chatterji had worked out a commercial formula for the 'realist' film. Other successful films were Hrishikesh Mukherji's *Anand* (1970), *Guddi* (1971), *Bawarchi* (1972), *Abhiman* (1973) and several others, Basu Bhattacharya's *Anubhav* (1971) and *Avishkar* (1973), and the Sai Paranjpye films such as *Katha* (1982) and *Sparsh* (1979). Prasad has identified two broad drives of this cinema of and about the middle class: an orientation towards asserting the national role of the class; and the consolidation of middle-class identity around issues that dealt with threat to the class, particularly around the susceptibility of women, postmarital tensions, the problems of urban space and the difficulty of privacy for young couples (ibid.: 162–64).

The middle cinema may have appropriated the 'realist aesthetic' from the FFC film, but the difference between films like *Piya ka Ghar* and *Katha*, and others like Bedi's *Dastak* or Saeed Mirza's *Mohan Joshi Haazir Ho!* (1983) is apparent if one compares both the motivations behind the two films and their resolutions. In the former, the presented problems and conflicts are easily resolved in private terms with a sentimental upholding of either family feelings (*Piya ka Ghar*) or the final vindication of the heroine's hand being won by the genuine suitor rather than the con-man (*Katha*). *Dastak* and *Mohan Joshi Haazir Ho* do not present any easy solutions. While the landscape and problems presented are similar in all the films mentioned—the problems of living in cramped spaces in Bombay, in the second set, the uncovering of the structures and nexus of power, capital and oppressive public opinion, and ultimately the passionate and critical drive to understand the reality that people are forced to accept—demonstrates how and why the realist political cinema of the New Wave was different from the middle cinema of the middle class. The middle cinema can thus also be seen, as its nomenclature signifies, as being in between two different formations—the New Wave cinema and the commercial cinema of the mainstream industry.

The economic success of the middle cinema that flourished in the same period foregrounded the key problems that would dog the films of the New Wave and ultimately lead to a demise of the movement: distribution and exhibition. An alternate exhibition circuit in the form of small theaters had been an integral element of the FFC vision. However, this aspect of the FFC plan was never executed properly, and hence while the loans continued to be sanctioned, the completed films often did not find their audiences. Some of the FFC films were released, sometimes through chance, and did surprisingly well (for example *Bhuvan Shome*).¹² However, most of them did not find commercial distribution, and there was no other structure for their release. This does not mean that they didn't travel; they did—on the film festival and film society circuits, and it is through these channels of exhibition that the movement built its

reputation and its public face. At the same time, while this circuit with its approving audiences won the films accolades, it did not bring returns to pay back loans or earn profits. Several writers have also pointed to the confusion in the FFC policy about whether it was giving subsidies for these films, or offering loans that demanded collateral from producers (Kak 1980: 20). Thus, without a viable distribution-exhibition structure, the loans remained unpaid, and the films unreleased. This brought the FFC in for a lot of criticism from within the government sector and the 1976 Report of the Committee on Public Undertakings urged the FFC to make sure that the films had 'a reasonable prospect of being commercially successful' (cited by Rajadhyaksha and Willemsen 1995: 151). While the argument that good films can be successful is absolutely irrefutable, the structures and processes needed to ensure that these films reached their audiences were not put in place by the government. Furthermore, there remained a gap between the profits generated from the FFC's importing of raw stock and foreign films, and the non-exhibition of their films that couldn't counter the tag of financial non-viability that came to be associated with the FFC/NFDC film. In the 1980s the NFDC also turned producer and collaborated with the state-owned television channel Doordarshan, which produced several films. However, these initiatives did not succeed in making a commercial dent, and though the telecast of the NFDC films on Doordarshan, a few years enabled viewers to see these films, they largely remained outside of the commercial distribution circuit. In the post-liberalization phase, with the opening of the airwaves, Doordarshan also found it difficult to continue to support New Wave cinema.

The metaphor of the birth and death of a 'dream' has often been used and forms the structural argument about the trajectory of New Wave cinema (Masud 1987; Saari 1989). At the same time, and despite the difficulties of exhibition that inhibited both circulation and the financial viability of these films, it is also true that a substantial body of New Wave work was a significant intervention in cinematic practices, both political and aesthetic, before globalization and liberalization radically changed cinephilia, and film production and reception. I have outlined in some detail some of the features of the political realist films of the New Wave, and would now like to return to the experimental cinema of the 1970s–90s to indicate further why Mani Kaul's death in 2011 provided an opportunity for a retrospective glance at a cinematic practice that though not as popular as the political realist one, nevertheless generated an excitement and a discourse about cinematic art.

This experimental cinema has also been called India's avant-garde cinema and more recently the term 'Prayog' has been used to describe it (Gangar 2006). Mani Kaul and Kumar Shahani are the emblematic auteurs of this cinematic practice—of a cinema that while socially contextualized is marked by a modernism of form and content, and even as it is oriented towards an exploration of cinematic ontology, it is equally invested in the explorations of inner subjectivity. While the interiority of Balo in Kaul's *Uski Roti* is attempted through a shifting use of lenses, we have a sense of the claustrophobia and restlessness of Shahani's Taran from *Maya Darpan* (1972) through a relentlessly fluid tracking camera that follows her in her movements through the dilapidated feudal *haveli* where she feels entrapped, and tracks her walks through the small town landscape where industrialization is rapidly changing the environment. *Maya Darpan* also uses color very powerfully and subjectively to evoke both Taran's awakened sexuality and her desire for freedom. Mani Kaul's *Duvidha* (1973) similarly uses color not just to bring alive the sterile landscape of Rajasthan, but also to articulate the deep desire for fulfillment that is stifled by tradition in a patriarchal society. This cinema is also one that dialogued with the classical arts and both Kaul and Shahani are deeply influenced by painting and musical traditions. The impact of visual and musical aesthetics is perceptible in their work, which negotiates the relationship between cinema and the other arts in films like *Duvidha*, *Khayal Gatha* (1988), *Dhruvad*

(1982), *Siddheshwari* (1989), *Bamboo Flute* (2000) and *Bhavantaran* (1991). With the exception of *Duvidha*, the others in this list are documentaries, and the non-fiction cinema of both Kaul and Shahani is in the form of cinematic essays on their chosen subjects. A fluid, associative, resonant form brings myths, legends, music and aesthetic expressivity together in these striking poetic films which while engaging with the different arts also distil and communicate a significantly cinematic experience.

There are others like Aravindan and Shaji Karun who belong to this tradition, and a similar aesthetic can be seen in Aravindan's film essays. *Thampu* (1978) uses the camera to capture the landscape of faces, and *Kanchana Sita* (1977) and *Estheppan* (1979) bring myth and legend into a direct communion with the natural world to create a lyrical, mythic cinema demonstrating how deeply myth structures our interiority. Aravindan's cinematographer, Shaji Karun, made his directorial debut with *Piravi* in 1988 with the visual poetry of the Aravindan tradition, and his *Vanaprastham* (1999) is a powerful cinematic piece that weaves together Kathakali, music and poetry in a layered form that is aesthetically a dialogue between cinema and these other art forms even as it is a powerful indictment of the caste system and its lacerating impact upon the artist's soul. A post-modern example that knits together folk theater, music and cinema is Ketan Mehta's debut work *Bhavni Bhavai* (1980). Other work also needs to be mentioned, but these are just a few examples of the cinematic reflection and innovation of the experimental cinema of the New Wave that has given us a body of extremely significant aesthetic work.

As is evident from the dates of the films mentioned above, some of these filmmakers, like Karun, continue to be active and are engaged in an art cinema practice that maintains its identity even in the changed film scenario of today. Others like Ketan Mehta and Govind Nihalani are part of the mainstream film industry. Glimmers of their earlier political intent may still be visible in their current work. Some like Kumar Shahani and Saeed Mirza have not made a film for over a decade. The New Wave also had its own technicians and alternative stars, several of whom are significant actors and stars of mainstream industries¹³ today. The NFDC still finances films, although the intensity and the spread of their impact compared with the earlier period is much diminished. Moreover, the film industry has changed; the impact of global cinema on new cinephiliac filmmakers has led to the emergence of new formations and practices—different from the cinema that we have been discussing. At the same time, even at the end of a significant historical period, it is important to note that some influences persist. The political concerns of the New Wave can be seen in Madhur Bhandarkar's first film *Chandni Bar* (2001) and Nishikant Kamat's Marathi film *Dombivali Fast* (2005), while in other Marathi cinema of today the impulses of the New Wave moment are discernible. That a legacy of the experimental cinema continues even today is evident in the work of Amit Dutta (*Nainsukh*, 2010, and *Aadmi Ki Aurat Aur Anya Kahaniyan*, 2009), Paresh Kamdar (*Khargosh*, 2009), and Gurvinder Singh's debut film *Anhey Ghorhey Da Daan* (2011) that just recently won the National Award for Best Direction. According to the press release, the award citation states that the film is awarded:

For its haunting portrayal of the lives of people in a village as they battle with the reality of large-scale industrial development. Gurvinder Singh deploys an inventive storytelling form where sound, space and body operate distinctly to frame the experience of a fragile existence. Each face portrayed in the film carries the signs of persistent trauma. This is an aesthetic tour de force that confidently and successfully reinvents the contours of Indian experimental cinema.

This citation seems to echo in its language the significance of the experimental traditions within the New Wave, clearly demonstrating that there is an inheritance here to cherish. Lack of

distribution and exhibition, and hence an inability to reach its own audiences and a consequent financial non-viability, may have destroyed the New Wave movement by the mid-1990s, but it has nonetheless left an important legacy of cinematic innovation and experimentation. Perhaps there is a genealogy here for the new, edgy experimental cinema of today.

Notes

- 1 The visual and aural stylization of Mani Kaul's *Ashad ka ek Din*, while working with Mohan Rakesh's Sanskritized Hindi dramatic text, creates an affective field of intense inner struggle that renders an experience of cinematic interiority radically different from the theatrical experience.
- 2 At the India Habitat Centre, New Delhi, in September 2011.
- 3 I have entitled this chapter 'The Indian New Wave' because the phrase conveys quite forcefully the sudden upsurge and spread of new cinematic forms in the different language film industries of the country in the 1970s–80s. The terms 'Parallel' and 'Art cinema' predate the New Wave, and 'new cinema' does not convey appropriately the strong impact of the Film Finance Corporation intervention on film practices in different regions.
- 4 While a number of accounts see the New Wave films in the tradition of Ray's realism (Das Gupta 1982), the Ray influence is only one strand, and the political realist films of the movement were markedly different.
- 5 The New Wave was intimately connected to new experiments in the literary field, e.g. the Nai Kahani movement in Hindi literature and new theater movements in Maharashtra and Karnataka.
- 6 Not all reactions were as enthusiastic. Satyajit Ray was outrightly critical of the 'New Wave' and questioned the validity of the term to describe the FFC films. However, Bikram Singh rose to defend the movement, and particularly the experimental cinema. See the Ray–Singh debate in *Filmfare*, January–February 1971–72.
- 7 'Regarding exhibition, I am told that the Film Finance Corporation is planning to build a chain of art theatres throughout the country. This is fantastic!' (Sen 1971: 31).
- 8 Author's interview with Mani Kaul and M.S. Sathyu in October 1978.
- 9 Later released as a film on video.
- 10 See Bhaskar and Allen 2009: 91–106.
- 11 Interestingly, Bibekananda Ray's book on the New Wave is *Conscience of the Race: India's Offbeat Cinema* (2005).
- 12 Mrinal Sen narrated to the author how Mr Barjatya of Rajashri Films paid him Rs 5,000 for the permanent rights for *Bhuvan Shome*, and released the film in a morning show in his own theater, where it ran for a year.
- 13 Shabana Azmi, Naseeruddin Shah, Om Puri, Kulbhushan Kharbanda and Amrish Puri are just some names, among others.

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