
Indian cinema's future at Oscars

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ABSTRACT

Cinema is the reflection of our society. It acts as a mirror by reflecting the reality of our societies. Just like any other professional field, cinema is also bestowed with the recognition for who or what is the best among all. This comes in various formats including the pan world accepted and celebrated Academy Awards or Oscars. As per 2018 report by Statista, over 5,823 films were produced by leading film markets including India and China. From 1948 till 2019, Italy has topped the chart by winning 11 best International Feature Film, followed by France with 9 wins, while Mexico and South Korea became the newest member with Roma in 2018 and Parasite in 2019 respectively.

Indian cinema is the world's largest film industry in terms of film production, with an annual output of 1,813 feature films as of 2018, and Bollywood is its largest film producer, with 364 Hindi films produced annually as of 2017.

KEYWORDS: *Oscars, Indian cinema at world level, Parallel Cinema, Bollywood, Film Federation on India*

INTRODUCTION

The Oscars was first held in 1929, and is also the oldest of the four major annual American entertainment awards. The Awards has faced backlash for lack of diversity which is based on the statistics since 1929.

To honour the foreign language films, the Special Achievement/Honorary Award was introduced in 1947. These awards, however, were not handed out on a regular basis (no award was given in 1953), and were not competitive since there were no nominees but simply one winning film per year. In 1956, the Best Foreign Language Film category, now known as Best International Feature Film, was introduced replacing the Achievement category. It is given to a feature-length motion picture produced outside the United States with a predominantly non-English dialogue track. Unlike other Academy Awards, the International Feature Film award is not presented to a specific individual (although it is accepted on-stage by its director), but is considered an award for the submitting country as a whole.

India has sent its entries since 1957, a year after the category was introduced. And is decided by the Film Federation of India by appointing a committee to choose one film among the released as the country's official entry to Oscars. As of 2020, only 3 Indian films- Mother India (1957), Salaam Bombay! (1988) and Lagaan (2001) have been nominated for the award.

Every few years, India sends one entry which comes into controversies, primarily on the fact that the less deserving one was chosen.

In this paper, we shall be discussing the criteria's on which the entries are selected. Are the selections made justified? Or is it unfair to other much deserving contenders.

Keywords: *India, film, Bollywood, Oscars, Parallel film*

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The Academy Awards or Oscars are not the pinnacle of cinematic excellence. It has its flaws. In this paper we shall try and answer why the Indian Film jury is willing to send the 'hyped' Bollywood contenders while it's willing to sacrifice the content quality of a film entry. And to try and understand why in spite of the numerous international acclaim that is bestowed upon the Parallel cinema, it fails to garner the praise at its home country.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology that i have chosen for my research and analyses is Qualitative methodology. While the major analysis is based on Qualitative elements of words, feelings and emotions but are also supported by minor quantitative elements of data and numerical Quantification. This paper is supported with only secondary data collected from different credible sources. Sources are of various databases, like Google Scholar, Google, Wikipedia and several media house.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE-

Some of the prominent previous work will be analysed in this present study are:

BANERJEE, A (2011): A Case for Economic Incentives to Promote "Parallel" Cinema in India, SSRN Publication

Arpan Banerjee in his paper talks about the importance of financial backing to the critically acclaimed "Parallel" cinema of India. He talks about the Indian cinema or specifically Bollywood's reach to non-Indian audience over the world. He talks about how Indian films fall short of achieving international honour. No Indian film has won the Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film or the Palme d'Or, arguably the two most coveted laurels for non-English language filmmakers.

A study estimates that at least half of Bollywood films are shot in abroad locations of Britain, Switzerland and New Zealand. This is done so as to attract the Indian migrants in west or popularly known NRIs. As they are a primary target audience for many filmmakers.

While "Parallel" school of Indian cinema is characterized by "high artistic content", a "social realist aesthetic" and an adherence to the "naturalist style of acting."

In spite of the international acclaim, the Parallel cinema have always faced a lack of financial backing. Satyajit Ray's PatherPanchali failed to find a private financier and was eventually given a modest grant by his state Chief Minister. In recent times, the widely praised Udaan failed to get a producer for almost 6 years.

To make the matters worse, the FFI has controversially nominated Bollywood films at the expense of worthy parallel films, for the Best Foreign Language Film category at the Oscars.

The author talks about the possibilities of promoting the parallel cinema not just at the home front but also at international levels. All this can be done if it gains backing from major private studios and exhibitors. While the Indian Government can also provide financial support including in the form of certain economic incentives exclusively to parallel film producers and exhibitors.

Tiwari, Sudha (2018) From New Cinema to New Indie Cinema: The story of NFDC and Film Bazaar. In A.Devasundaram (Eds), Indian Cinema beyond Bollywood, Routledge Publications

The author in her paper talks about the evolution of New Indian Indie cinema from New Indian cinema. The paper talks about the idea of New Cinema by discussing three key documents which shaped the movement. The article discusses the role of Film Finance Corporation/ National Film Development Corporation in financing and facilitating the cinematic events. The 1991 economic reforms posed a crisis for the NFDC and New cinema. NFDC later reinvented itself as a facilitator in 2007 by launching the Film Bazaar Project.

The Film Bazaar has since become a go to place for the new breed of Indian Indie filmmakers. The New/Indie cinema has come a full circle with Mani Kaul's *Uski Roti* (1970) to Ritesh Batra's *The Lunchbox* (2013). While the latter was a box office hit, the former hardly got any theatrical release.

The first document was Satyajit Ray's complaint about the Indian films in a seminal article. He argued that the Indian filmmakers' obsession with melodrama put an end to any further experimentation with the most important function of cinema i.e. Movement.

The second was the Report of the Film Enquiry Committee (1951). It suggested means to develop the industry as "an effective instrument for promotion of national culture, education and healthy entertainment." It blamed the government for ignoring its 'nation-building role' and allowing it to fall into the hands of 'unqualified, ill equipped individuals'; an industry which actually required 'skilful and trained direction men with vision and ideas'.

In the third document, 'Manifesto of New Cinema Movement' was written by filmmakers ArunKaul and Mrinal Sen. They blamed the 'established film industry' for 'conditioning the tastes of the majority of film goers' by 'dishing out crudest vehicles of their notions of mass entertainment'.

The vision of a New Cinema from the beginning was antithetical to the established film industry i.e. the Bombay commercial film industry.

PAPER FINDINGS

In this paper, we shall discussing as to why India in over its 52 years of submission has failed to secure a nomination for at least a 4th time. In a country which is the largest producer of movies annually, it is a shame knowing the quality content of the movies. Out of which a majority of it has failed to make a mark at an international level.

One of the special criteria for foreign language movies is that the country-selected film must be first released in the country of origin no earlier than October 1(year ex 2019), and no later than November 1 (following year ex 2020), and be first publicly exhibited for at least seven

consecutive days in a commercial motion picture theatre for the profit of the producer and exhibitor. Hence this has resulted in what is called the ‘Oscar Season’. Primarily applied to the Hollywood, it refers to the time period in which Hollywood studios release or promote the films they consider to most likely to be critically acclaimed, hoping to win at the Oscars. Another term which has emerged is the ‘Oscar Bait’. It refers movies that appear to have been produced for the sole purpose of earning nominations for Academy Awards. They are usually released in advance of the Oscar season.

India is a land of diversity. It is not just a land of Hindi films, but also of Telugu, Tamil, Kannada, Punjabi, Bengali and several other regional films.

The first ever film submitted by India, *Mother India* (1957) is the closest Indian has come to winning an Oscar. That is if you don’t count the British crime drama *Slumdog Millionaire*, the adaptation of *Q&A* by Indian author Vikas Swarup or the 1982 British-Indian co-produced *Gandhi*.

Of the 52 entries so far, only 20 are in languages other than Hindi. The first south Indian film to be chosen was the Tamil film *DeivaMagan* in 1969. Other Tamil films which were selected are *Nayakan* (1987), *Anjali* (1990), *ThevarMagan* (1992), *Kuruthipunal* (1995), *Indian* (1996), *Jeans* (1998), *HeyRam* (2000) and *Visaranai* (2016). The only Telugu film which has been chosen is *SwatiMutyam* (1986). The Malayalam industry, which routinely makes critically acclaimed films, has also not had much luck with just two films being chosen – *Guru* (1997) and *AdaminteMakanAbu* (2011). No Kannada film has ever been chosen. The 3 nominated films- *Mother India*, *Salaam Bombay!* And *Lagaan* are all Hindi.

When BBC put out a list of the 100 best foreign language films of all time, culled from a poll of 200 critics from 43 countries, Satyajit Ray’s *PatherPanchali* was the only film from India to make the list. And that was released in 1955.

Over the past decade or two, the FFI appointed selection jury ends up sending an entry which does not do justice to the Indian cinema representation at the international level. India sent its 2019 entry for the Best Foreign Language in the form of Bollywood’s *Gully Boy*. Helmed by Zoya Akhtar, the film had a strong financial backing in the form of its producer and distributor, Excel entertainment and Zee Studios International respectively.

While the team of *Gully Boy* got their “apnathimeayega”, the rest of the film fraternity cross the languages and public criticized the selection. Why? Because the 2019 saw several regional movies which were much more deserving of India’s entry.

2019 saw some of the more worthy films in the form of *Article 15* (Hindi), *Hellaro* (Rajasthan), *Super Deluxe* (Tamil), *Andhadhun* (Hindi), *OththaSeruppu Size 7* (Tamil), And the Oskar goes to (Malayalam) and *Dear Comrade* (Telugu).

Oththa Seruppu Size 7 actor-writer-director – producer R Parthiepan career best reviews for the playing a middle-aged security guard, who has been interrogated as a murder suspect by the police. Considering it as a rare attempt in Indian cinema, Parthiepan thought the movie would be nominated for Oscars but instead *Gully Boy* was selected. During a recent interview with a popular web portal, Parthiepan said that *OththaSeruppu Size 7* deserved an Oscar Award for its uniqueness. And when *Gully Boy* didn’t make the list, people were not surprised.

The Quint's Aditya Magal appreciated it but noticed several similarities, calling it "an engineered, Indianized version of 8-mile."

Questions were raised as to why the Zoya Akhtar movie was selected in spite of being similar to 2002 Eminem starrer 8-Mile.

In an exclusive chat with National Herald, Aparna Sen who headed the jury for the selection of the Oscar entry says, "*Gully Boy* got the most number of votes. Because of its overall artistic merit as well as its popular appeal, it was felt by the jury to be the fittest film to represent India at the Oscars, which is essentially a popular award."

When I asked her why the more deserving Article15 or Hellaro was not sent to the Oscars, Aparna responded, "Hellaro was not on our viewing list. Article15 did come up to our final shortlist. But *Gully Boy* got more votes. In any case, none of our films was of the caliber of, say, Pedro Almodovar's *Pain&Glory*. Almodovar is a master!"

No one can deny the uniqueness and calibre of Almodovar's film making. Indeed he is a master. However, the mind-set that no matter what we (India) sends, it will never be enough is a regressive one. Not something one should have especially the head of the selection Jury.

India makes content rich, true to the roots, realistic and hard hitting movies. It just gets lost in the glitz and glamor of Bollywood, or gets ignored due to the lack of financial backing.

Over the years, the FFI has faced backlash for sending undeserving or odd choices to Oscars. Including 1998's *Jeans*, 2005's *Paheli*, and 2012's *Barfi*.

Considered a milestone in Indian cinema now, *Satya* was the break out movie of 1998. Even now, *Satya* is considered as the best Ram Gopal Varma film and is also the film that acted as Manoj Bajpayee's vehicle to fame. Instead what was selected was S.Shankar's *Jeans* about identical twins living in Los Angeles. It was of that time the most expensive film made in Indian cinema. Not a criterion for an Oscars honestly speaking.

Amol Palekar's 2005 *Paheli* is based on a Rajasthani folk lore about a ghost who falls in love with a married women and disguises as her husband. The movie was a jury favourite, and it reflected the Indian culture and roots.

The other films considered for the nomination were *Mangal Pandey*, *Veer-Zaara*, *Iqbal*, *Parineeta*, *Page 3*, *Black*, *HazaaronKhwaisheinAisi*, *Sachein*(Tamil), *Anniyan*(Telugu), *Uttarayan*(Marathi), *Achuvante Anna*(Malayalam), *Graham* (Telugu) and *Kadal*(Tamil).

Notably, *Swades* and *Black* were close contenders for the selection.

The 2012 saw *Barfi* as its official entry to Oscars. The movie revolved around the titular character *Barfi*, a hearing and speech impaired man and his relationship with 2 women. The movie selection was criticised for 2 aspects.

One that it had several of its scenes copied frame by frame from Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton films of the silent era. And, second that the 2012 also saw the release of Anurag Kashyap's *Gangs of Wasseypur-Part 1*, the word of mouth acclaimed *Kahaani* and the brilliant *Paan Singh Tomar*.

Notably, *Gangs of Wasseypur* two part crime film ranked 59th in The Guardian's The 100 Best Films of the 21st Century.

This year, the international film festivals and awards saw the strongest and raved South Korean dark comedy “Parasite”. ‘Parasite’ was unanimously chosen by the jury at the Cannes Film Festival as the Best Film, and holds a 100% approval rating at film review website Rotten Tomatoes.

The movie went on to become the first foreign language film to win Best Picture.

The Academy Awards never present a simple race, and what makes it complicated is that the winners are not chosen by a jury, but through an election by thousands of Academy members, most of whose identities are a secret.

So why that India cannot make good enough movies worthy of Oscars? Or maybe we do have worthy films but not enough financial support.

Finance is the biggest player when films are sent to Oscars. Why? To create visibility. Something that Indian films sadly lack. Not by choice but by fate.

Many Indian filmmakers who enter the race, however, send their film to Los Angeles and stay away from the world of publicity and campaigning, hoping the inherent merit of their work would win them the prize. While this is a time-tested formula at the National Film Awards, and Oscars seem to work differently

“Visibility is very important, but visibility is also very expensive,” says Rima Das, whose Assamese film ‘Village Rockstars’ was the 2018 entry.

To create visibility for a film, is to throw lavish parties, screenings and good food and drinks.

But promoting your film is a slippery slope. The Academy’s 35-page strictly rules out a lot of your options. The academy has set of rules and regulations which are to be followed to “campaign” for one’s film. These includes set guidelines for Screenings, Mail and Email, Website, Screeners, Music, Screenplays, Third party distributors, Telephone lobbying, Receptions, Parties and other non-screening events and lastly, cannot use the “Academy” office in print and telephone.

2013’s Gujarati entry The Good Road director Gyan Correa shares that your first job once you movie is sent, is to get them (jury members) to see your movie, and second job is to make your they are in there right frame of mind when they see it. He further adds that one has to pay for advertisements, but there is a catch. You cannot advertise your campaign for the film.

Hence, well established agencies in Los Angeles which specialise to get the word out without any repercussion are roped in.

2011’s Malayalam entry AdamenteMakan Abu director Salim Ahamed shared that one cannot do anything there without at least 3 Cr. Ironically, the film was made of a shoe string budget of 1Cr.

Time is an important factor. In India, a film starts work at the Oscars after the Film Federation of India has selected it as the official submission.

Many other potential entries don’t wait for their country to choose them. In turn, they make sure their country chooses them. And that can be only done if these films perform well at big film festivals like Cannes, Berlin or Venice. The festival glory acts as an Oscar campaign that happens in advance because many Academy members attend these festivals.

The formula is a success as it can be seen in the form of Parasite, Roma or Shoplifters. . The Mexican entry ‘Roma’ was the winner of ‘Best Film’ at Venice, which eventually won the Oscar, while the Japanese entry ‘Shoplifters’ was the winner of ‘Best Film’ at Cannes. Similarly, Parasite won at BAFTA and Cannes. They were very much aware that they are going to be nominated.

M S Sathyu, 89, is the oldest living filmmaker to have his film sent to the Oscars. His 1974 release was the official entry to Oscars. However, due to its theme the film was refused a certification by the censor for 11 months. The selection was not done by Indian Jury.

His film premiered at Paris, and then was selected for Cannes and from then onwards went to Oscars.

The one thing common between the 3 nominated films apart from the fact that they were coincidentally Hindi, they also portrayed a dominating theme which works at international levels, especially Oscars. That is poverty. A bigger coincidence would be the theme was also present at 2008’s Best Picture winner Slumdog Millionaire.

CONCLUSION

While a film winning at Oscars is surely a feat, it doesn’t mean that the rest weren’t cut out. Oscars surely celebrates the best of filmmaking, but it also discourages small budget, regional movies of India particularly.

Hence, it can be very easily understood why Indian Film jury is willing to send the ‘hyped’ Bollywood contenders while it’s willing to sacrifice the content quality of a film entry. Why Gully Boy made the cut. It checked several of the “required” boxes. Financial backing? Check. Portrayal of a struggling India? Check. Premiered at an International Film Festival? Check.

But should a film be selected only because it “checks” the underlying requirements of Oscars? The Indian jury should select the deserving films irrespective of its popularity among the public, and should in turn provide much needed financial backing to small scale films which actually portray the true India in all senses.

It is truly saddening to see that in spite of the numerous international acclaim that is bestowed upon the Parallel cinema, it fails to garner the praise at its home country.

One of the very major reasons as to why a Bollywood masala movie works wonders at the national level and why parallel cinema fails to capture market. The Indian audience prefers to see masala as compared to the gritty hard hitting realities of the society. It is truly said that cinema is an escape from a cruel world.

Since parallel cinema largely focuses on the struggle, poverty and discrimination theme, people prefer to watch a movie with less or no cerebral use.

Bollywood actress Late NargisDutt memorably criticised Satyajit Ray for showing ‘embarrassing’ visuals of rural poverty in one of the greatest films ever made-PatherPanchali.

We as a cinema loving country need to boast and uplift regional, small scale parallel films which would make an everlasting mark in the nation, and maybe eventually the world. Once

the public will open up to this side of Indian cinema, it shall further encourage producers and exhibitors to back the film and even support upcoming projects. While the Indian Government can also provide financial support including in the form of certain economic incentives exclusively to parallel film producers and exhibitors.

So what if the film loses out on the nomination, at least we as a nation would know that the best was sent out to the world to represent India.

We might not have an Almodovar, but we surely had a Ray.

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