

# Cinema and Literature in India: *Hum Sath Sath Hai*

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## Abstract

Feature films across the world have had an intimate engagement with literature almost from its beginning, India is no exception, starting from mythological, then historical, then social with considerable overlapping. This paper has given a chronological sequence of the trends in Indian cinema till today.

**Keywords:** Indian Cinema, Literature

## Introduction

Indian cinema turned 100 this year. India's first indigenous full length feature film Dadasaheb Phalke's Raja Harishchandra premiered on 21 April and was commercially released on 3 May 1913. Though another feature film titled Pundalik on a Marathi saint was released a year earlier, Raja Harishchandra enjoys the distinction of being the first wholly Indian venture in sync with the patriotic sentiment of its times, vis-a-vis Pundalik, which was an Indo-British joint production.

Feature films across the world have had an intimate engagement with literature almost from its beginning. India is no exception. From the beginning it has largely been based on well known stories- initially mythological, then historical and then social- with considerable overlapping. That cinema is a different art form with its own grammar, idiom and narrative style and it can hold the interest of the audience even without a good 'story line'. Story line emerged later in Indian cinema. However, India cinema (feature films, to be more specific) has largely been dependant on good literature. Good literature has provided a solid foundation and/ or a strong impetus to the cinematic experience.

Raja Harishchandra was based on the story of Ayodhya's pious king who gave away all his belongings, left his family. It started a

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trend of making films based on mythological stories. In a way it followed the age old theatrical tradition of India. It is interesting to note that this trend was across languages. The first Marathi movie (a silent one) Shree Pundalik (1912) and the first Marathi talkie film, Ayodhyecha Raja (1932), the first Bengali movie, a silent one Billwamangal (1919), the first Telugu Talkie, Bhakta Prahalada (1931), the first Tamil talkie Kalidas (1931), the first Odia film 'Seeta Vivaha (1936) were all based on mythological stories. In the first two decades of Indian cinema among the biggest hits were films like Lanka Dahan (1917) and Kalia Mardan (1919), which were based on mythological stories.

It was followed by another trend- again drawn from the theatrical tradition, of making films based on historical figures or events. The first talkie in India, Alam Ara (1931) started this trend. A number of films on mythological and historical themes, characters and events were made in the first four decades.

Then came the trend of making films on social subjects. Film makers looked at contemporary literature and took well known/ aesthetically pleasing/appealing stories. The first Bengali talkie Dena Paona (1931) was based on the story of Rabindranath Tagore. The film explored the ills of the dowry system as well as touching on the problems of female oppression in 19th century Bengal. Ashok Kumar-Deveka Rani starrer Achhut Kanya (1935), which dealt with the social position of Dalit girls, became a bit hit.

Novels, plays and short stories of noted litterateurs were made into films. Satyajit Ray made Pather Panchali, based on Bibhuti Bhushan Bandopadhyay's novel, Apu trilogy based on Shankar's novels and Shatranj ke Khiladi, based on Premchand's story of Oudh's fall. Several other film makers across the country started making films based on good fiction. Dev Anand made Guide, based on R.K. Narayan's novel. Shyam Benegal converted Ruskin Bond's novell A Flight of Pigeons into Junoon. Thakazhy Shivashankar Pillai's Malayalam classic on the lives of fishermen and the sea, Chemmeen was made into a classic film. 1970s saw emergence of what was called 'parallel cinema' or 'new wave cinema'. Film makers like Shyam Benegal, MS Sathyu, Mrinal Sen made a mark. Most of them took good stories for their films. Cinema and good literature came very close.

This trend continued strongly till late 1980s. After that there was a marked decline in the number of films made on well known fiction. It was this time that mainstream Hindi cinema dumped romance for action. Family drama gave way to action flicks. The growth of television, especially tele serials could be one of the reasons for this trend. Or, it might have just been a coincidence which added up. These tele-serials made the middle class sit at home. It practically lured the middle class, which patronised this kind of cinema- for family viewing from visiting movie halls.

When feature films began to lose its patrons, it searched for new patrons. In its frantic search it veered away from good literature and pleasing aesthetics. It wanted to 'entertain' the audience at any which way. Sensuality, violence and razzmatazz were preferred over 'good story'. There was a frantic attempt to please and attract the proverbial 'front benchers'. It is from this time that the relation between good literature and mainstream cinema in India began to become cold, but not without several honourable exceptions.

Things however are changing in recent times for the better. The new millennia saw the film industry across the country steadily getting corporatized and the theatres getting multiplexed. The changing pattern of distribution and revenue collection of cinema are also helping film makers to make films based on good literature. Films made on good literature are gaining acceptability and box office success in Marathi, Bengali, Tamil, Malayalam and other regional languages, besides Hindi and English. The recent hit Hindi film Kai Po Che is based on Chetan Bhagat's novel The 3 mistakes of My Life. Mira Nair's film The Reluctant Fundamentalist is based on the novel by the same name written by Pakistani writer Mohsin Hamid. The novel, published in 2007 was short listed for the Booker Prize.

There are more in the offing. Another Bhagat novel being made into a film is 2 States: The Story of my Marriage. The Immortals of Meluha, the first of the Shiva trilogy of Amish Tripathi is being made into a film by Karan Johar. Ashwin Sanghi's Chanakya's Chant is being made into a film by Ashutosh Gowariker. Vishal Bhardwaj and Ekta Kapoor are jointly producing Ek Thi Daayan, which is based on a short story by Mukul Sharma. The list is long.

There have been several questions about the nature of interface between literature and cinema. The questions often raised are: a. since a film is a director's medium can the directors take liberty with the story on which the film is based; and b. If the director can take liberty- what should be the quantum? The questions remain unresolved till date, and probably will remain so. What remains without any iota of doubt or dispute is our love for story. Indian culture has had a very intimate relationship with stories. Almost all our performing art has had synergic relation with storytelling. Cinema is a comparatively new art form, which draws from all other performing and plastic art form, one that can be called crystallized art. It is emerging and growing as a separate art form with its own idiom and grammar. However, at the end of the day any art form needs to connect with its audience. Indian audience, at least majority of them, needs a story to enjoy any art form. Cinema in India could very well draw from the rich repository of stories that Indian literature has. It could also use the rich and varied story telling tradition that we have.