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“Popart”: the ‘Global’ Avatar of Bollywood

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Abstract

Since its inception, the concept of “popart” – the interaction of popular cinema and art cinema – has been heralded as one of the most important contributions to Indian film scholarship. Drawing upon insights from Dev Benegal’s *English, August*, which is supposedly the first and the best example of “popart” film, I shall try to track down the genesis of ‘popart’ cinema and show how and why “popart” has become India’s countershot to world cinema. The first part of the article addresses the rise of Indian cinema through the process of imitation of its western counterpart either in terms of themes borrowed from Western mainstream cinema or cinematic techniques imitated from the “auteurs” of New Wave cinema. The second part of the article argues how a new art form popularly known as “popart” could become an Indian success story.

[**Keywords:** popular cinema; Dev Benegal; *English, August*; New Wave cinema; mainstream cinema]

I.

Bollywood, a commonly used metaphor for Bombay cinema, in the past few decades is marked by a trend that has revolutionized the production of Indian cinema and the global outlook on it. I shall refer to the trend as “popart” in that it *chutnifies* (a term used by Salman Rushdie in his novel *Midnight’s Children*, which means to mix to make it more flavorsome) elements from both the “popular” and “art” schools of film-making. Simultaneously, through its inclusion of both Indian and Western cinematic practices, “popart” becomes the global face of Indian cinema. Though the “popart” cinema has become a buzzword in Bollywood with the success of movies such as *Hyderabad Blues* (1998), *Split Wide Open* (1999), *Monsoon Wedding* (2001), *Mr. and Mrs. Iyer* (2002), *Bride and Prejudice* (2004), *15 Park Avenue* (2005), *Being Cyrus* (2006), and *Breakaway* (2011) but verily, the credit goes to the movie, *English, August* (1994) by Dev Benegal that supposedly stated the trend. Thus, the article attempts to analyze *English, August*, and a new cinematic aura adopted by the Indian director Dev Benegal and through this analysis, I try to underline the thematic of the evolving new Indian cinema “popart” and what led to its rise.

Before the arrival of ‘popart,’ the face of Bollywood cinema was Manichean, which means Bollywood was caught up in the dilemma of either being popular or art. ‘Popart’ cinema from its inception stage carries an objective of overcoming the dilemma of binaries as it plans to make Bollywood – both popular and art. This

secret politics of desire on the part of 'popart' cinema can be associated with its urge to break out of the mold of stereotypical mainstream Bollywood cinema, which aligns with the colonial definition of the Orient: "Colonialism replaced the normal ethnocentric stereotype of the inscrutable Oriental by the pathological stereotype of the strange, primal but predictable Oriental -- religious but superstitious, clever but devious, chaotically violent but effeminately coward" (Nandy 1989: 72). Simultaneously, it also ruptures its tie with art cinema, which was restricted to the cinema of roots. Thus, 'popart' cinema with its Saidean discourse of 'enlightened postnationalism' competently, revamps the image of the Orient, and poses itself both – as a rightful cinematic heir to 'empire writes back' literary narratives and as an alternative 'of a more generous and pluralistic vision of the world' (Said 277).

Dev Benegal (1960-), one of the earliest practitioners of the art of 'popart' belongs to what can be called as the second-generation of "art" film-makers in India, a generation in which he has played a pioneering role. He seems to have bridged the gap between what used to be designated as the "mainstream" and "art" sections of Indian cinema. Benegal's youth has probably helped him to make the crossover, given that "art" cinema has slowly but surely lost currency among audiences now.

Benegal's first feature *English, August* was an instant hit as it catered to the fantasies of Generation X and cultural critics with a *chutnification* of commercial cinema with art cinema. A humorous and oblique study of bureaucracy and the Indian Generation X, *English, August* won the Silver Grand Prix and the Gilberto Martinez Solares prize for the Best First Film at the Festival des 3 continents, Nantes and the Special Jury Award at the Torino International Film Festival. *English, August* became the first Indian independent film to be acquired by Twentieth Century Fox and became a theatrical success in the country. A brief history of Indian cinema is necessary before we can assess Benegal's contribution and what led to the rise of "popart" out of mainstream and art cinema.

The Lumière brothers' film *Arrival of a Train at a Ciotat Station* was shown in Bombay on July 7, 1896, just six months after it was projected on a screen in France. In 1901, a Marathi photographer from Bombay Sakharam Bhatvadekar made his own newsreel, *The Return of Wrangler Paranjpye to India*, echoing national sentiments, kick-starting an entire industry. *Raja Harishchandra* (1913), the first full-length feature, by Dadasaheb Phalke, marks the official birth of the industry. Early Indian cinema had its origins in Urdu-Parsi theatre, which apart from ready-to-use narratives supplied Bollywood with the British proscenium arch. The stage relations set up in the proscenium arch were different from those of open staging, which had existed in "pre-colonial and early colonial India" (Kapur 86). Another most important influence on Bollywood was that of Hollywood musicals, which in turn were influenced by "late nineteenth-century operatic and symphonic music, and Wagner was the crest of that influence" (Bordwell 33). Thus, like Hollywood music, Bollywood music is narrational. Furthermore, all Bollywood

films like the Hollywood musicals can advertise themselves as: All Talking, All Singing, All Dancing. Like Hollywood, the purpose of Bollywood is to entertain and often this urge to entertain is reflected in a redemptive ending. Thus, utopian ending is another thread that connects Hollywood and Bollywood and it also offers the image of cinema as 'something better' where one would like to escape into:

Two of the taken-for-granted descriptions of entertainment, as 'escape' and as 'wish-fulfillment', point to its central thrust, namely, utopianism. (Dyer 20)

This alternative space provides respite to a modern man who feels disillusioned and fragmented in his everyday life due to reasons such as urbanization of society. This alternative space is not restricted to any class or caste. It remains open to social outcasts such as gangsters who not only find an outlet in Bollywood but also an industry, where they can freely invest their black money.

However, the average Indian film adheres in some measure to the tenets outlined by Bharata in his classic treatise on theater, the *Natyashastra* (second century B.C.). In this book, which is often called as the fifth *Veda*, Bharata lays down his *Rasa* theory, which states that dramatic action should enfold song and dance, conflict, and a happy or redemptive ending. The mainstream or *masala* (formulaic) film exemplifies these four qualities of dramatic action, song-dance sequences, conflict of good and evil and finally, the happy ending with the victory of the good. These *masala* films cheerfully toss in several genres—romantic tragedy, family melodrama, comedy, action, adventure—according to the permutation and combination of these four qualities. It won't be wrong to say that the pining of the masses belonging to the lower strata of the society for an escapist entertainment finds its voice in the mainstream cinema of Bollywood (Nandy 1998: 10).

The latter half of the 1970s marked the inception of "New Indian Wave," or what is now popularly known as the art cinema. Directors like Satyajit Ray (1921-1992), Ritwik Ghatak (1925-1976), and Mrinal Sen (1923-) refused to follow the aesthetic yardsticks of commercial and mainstream cinema of the 1960s and 1970s. Dissatisfied with the fantastical or melodramatic plots of mainstream cinema, with their superficial psychological portrayal of characters, and idealization of post-Independence India, these directors carved realistic plots with in-depth psychological portrayal of characters, and which also took an anti-establishment stance towards the social and political systems of society. In addition, these films also engaged explicitly with sexuality, in contrast to the implied scenes in commercial cinema.

One can argue that this dissatisfaction with mythological plots and a dialogue with realistic plots were: first, the result of the formation of the modern Indian self; second, they heralded the influence of Marxism on Indian directors.

With independence in 1947, modernity seeps into Indian democracy along with its various aspects:

the rise of a capitalist industrial economy, the growth of modern state institutions and resultant transformations in the nature of social power, the emergence of democracy, the decline of the community and the rise of strong individualistic social conduct, the decline of religion and the secularization of ethics. (Kaviraj 2010: 15)

These aspects subsumed under the umbrella term of modernity led to the formation of modern Indian self, which decided to have a dialogue with realistic narratives rather than mythological.

Secondly, like Frankfurt school theoreticians such as Adorno and Horkheimer, Indian filmmakers realized that how cinema has been integrated into capitalistic 'structures of social domination' (Adorno 229), and in order to fight it they participated in realistic narratives that can undercut structures of domination.

Unlike popular cinema, art cinema was almost always concerned with the plight of the common man. In this cinema, the heroes are not super-humans, inspired from ancient scriptures like the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* but ordinary men and women with extraordinary ambition acting under the pressures of ordinary living. These heroes no longer have to represent stereotypical icons of society borrowed from ancient scriptures like the "evil step mother" of Ram, Kakeyi or the "tormented wife" (Sita or Draupadi). The form of these films is usually neo-realistic in conjunction with their European counterpart, "French New Wave," though there is a great variety in the films of different Indian directors like Girish Karnad, and Adoor Gopalakrishnan.

II.

New Canons and Anti-Canons

In the earlier part of the article, I outlined how Bollywood is categorized into two kinds of cinema. One is called mainstream that privileges four rules based on Bharata's *Natyashastra*, and the other is art cinema, a politically generated cinema. Now, I would like to focus on the reasons that led to the emergence of the third art form "popart," a fusion of the mainstream cinema and the art cinema, in Bollywood.

Mainstream cinema is often thought of as establishing patriarchal order through the instrument of the male gaze. The conditions of screening (the darkened room) and the narrative conventions of mainstream cinema essentially make the film viewer a voyeur. Phil Powrie and Keith Reader outline the basic narrative conventions of the mainstream cinema: first, continuity editing is used as a means of effacing the methods of production, and second, actors do not generally, while speaking, directly address the camera thus making the cinema a

store house of escapist fantasy where a spectator becomes a fugitive running away from his day to day social problem (Powrie 27).

In opposition to the escapist idiom is an art cinema that started as a reaction to bourgeois aesthetics that favors escapism to actual engagement with real issues. But though it started as a cinema for the masses, by and by, art cinema has become so technical and eclectic that the people for whom it was created decided to avoid it because of its techno-elitist jargonized quality.

Benegal's cinematic dialogue with Indianness of English along with Englishness of India, with narratives of belonging, and with the compacted heterogeneity of urban-industrial India, established in his early cinema which comprises of short documentary films such as *Anantarupam* (1987), and *Field of Shadows* (1993), seems to bridge the gap between popular cinema and art cinema. Moreover, it also provides us with Benegal's rationale for adapting Upamanyu Chatterjee's novel.

On the one hand, through the rejection of continuous shots, Benegal debunks the escapism associated with the mainstream cinema – he let the characters communicate directly with the camera, thus breaking the illusion of seamless "realism" as in the last scene of *English, August*, where the characters summarize their viewpoints on Agastya, the male protagonist in the movie. On the other hand, his use of melodramatic scenes and the incorporation of sexual fantasy through masturbation scenes, he is also taking a dig at the art cinema that has become obsolete because of its serious realistic objectivity.

If on the one hand Benegal negates the demerits of commercial cinema and art cinema, then on the other he remakes the merits associated with them. For instance, Benegal understands the gravity of the national metaphor of "unity in diversity", and tries to manifest it in the polyphony of various languages and different dialects – English, Hindi, and Telugu. Equally important are his "artistic" story-telling skills, a trait usually found in the art cinema: the capacity to create credible characters (human or otherwise, like Dadru, the frog) and cultures, skilful scene-setting, mastery of pace and timing, and power of imagination.

Now to vindicate the global perspective of "popart," I would like to enlist its hallmarks:

a) **Family Viewership or the Box Office:** Family viewership is a façade created by Indian directors participating in adaptation to hide the politics of commercial nature of the project. So the moot idea behind any mainstream film is not to embrace family ideals but to ensure the commercial success at the box office through the propaganda of family viewership. *English August* embraces the same aspect of commercial cinema but with a difference. This difference is visible as *English August* does not promote family values even at the superficial level. Benegal seems to cash the cult classic status of the novel, thus promoting individualistic and anti-puritan values in contrast to family ideals. Knowing the

complex nature of the novel *English, August* in terms of anti-social chapters discussing masturbation and breasts of Malti, Benegal intelligently shifts side and decides to woo the audience belonging to elite class with artistic bent rather than hoi polloi that uses cinema as a medium to escape the mundane realities of life. Thus the film does not appeal to the popular and puritanical taste of the middle class with their hidden sexuality or what Sudhir and Katharina Kakkar call as “dark ages of sexuality,” characterized by a lack of:

erotic grace which frees sexual activity from the imperatives of biology, uniting the partners in sensual delight and metaphysical openness. (121)

The evidence to this shift is steeped in the experimental nature of Benegal’s cinema. The arrival of talkies in India during the 1930s was received with much enthusiasm. However, the enthusiasm soon took the form of anxiety, as the mainstream cinema catered to the cultural tastes of the subalterns. To maintain the cultural divide between the high culture and the low culture, and ghettoised cultural practices, cinema became experimental. Thus, elite culture is often represented in Bollywood by cinema, “which includes avant-garde and experimental films” (Dwyer 8). Thus, this shift is a result of commercially driven motives on the part of Benegal.

b) **Global Language:** However, there is general agreement that English can overcome diverse linguistic differences in India and abroad alike, and combine diverse cultural influences. In fact, in the face of Hindi nationalism, which has become a bone of contention dividing the nation into North and South India, the rise of ‘popart’ should be interpreted as a significant development bridging the linguistic gap between the two halves. Alok Rai, one of the early critics to register this historical development observes:

The matter of Hindi has been agitating the public life of the country, in several different ways, for the past hundred years at least. And one may well wish that now, poised on the cusp of the twenty-first century, this particular file could be closed. After all, it is universally agreed that the emerging lingua mundo is English. And all classes of people in all parts of the country are desperate to learn English, as the rash of canonizations manifest in the names of mofussil primary schools, the Saint This and the Saint That, demonstrates with such pathetic clarity. (2)

Simultaneously, Benegal’s *English August* because of an explicit display of sexuality is specially characterized by its innate ability to woo the elite class and the world audience so obviously it has to embrace the medium of their communication, which is English.

Alternately, the rise of English in ‘popart’ cinema can also be read as the emergence of a much needed ‘hyphen’ combining the popular and the art cinema. Besides combining these two cinematic trends, it also functions as a realm where one can locate the alphabets to subvert the phallic discourse of male desire. The

use of a 'hyphen' between the two compounds of the word proper represents the hymen, as we contemplate the metaphoric value of that membranous fold of tissue occluding the vagina external orifice. With the help of hyphen-hymen:

Women treat the order of (male) domination in introducing chaotic syntactic structure, speaking in non-habitual ways, learning the alphabet of their bodies. (Panja 95)

Hence, Benegal's cinema initiates a new tradition of Indian English in Indian cinema resulting in movies like *Bollywood Hollywood* (2002), and *The Namesake* (2006) and thus raising Indian cinema to a global status.

c) **Diasporic Audience:** The use of English automatically promoted the popularity of *English August* among the diasporic audiences. In his classic introduction to the diasporic imaginary, Vijay Mishra argues that:

diasporas refer to people who do not feel comfortable with their non-hyphenated identities as indicated on their passport. Diasporas are people who would want to explore the meaning of the hyphen, but perhaps not press the hyphen too far for fear that this would lead to massive communal schizophrenia. They are precariously lodged within an episteme of real or imagined displacements, self-imposed sense of exile; they are haunted by spectres, by ghosts arising from within that encourage irredentist or separatist movements. (1)

Though rooted in the soil of imagined home communities, diasporas lack linguistic versatility. These diasporic audiences look for themes in English language that remind them both of their Indian roots and the disenchantment caused by the Western surroundings. By showing the dislocation of the male protagonist Agastya and the clash of Indian values and Western ideals through the metaphor of Madna (a representative of India villages), Benegal is able to create the themes which sell amidst diasporic communities.

The feeling of disillusionment among diasporic audience in regard to the country of origin and culture is well established in these narratives of 'melancholia.' In mourning, as described by Freud in contradistinction to melancholia, one finds:

that the inhibition and loss of interest are fully accounted for by the work of mourning in which the ego is absorbed. In melancholia, the unknown loss will result in a similar internal work and will therefore be responsible for the melancholic inhibition. The difference is that the inhibition of the melancholic seems puzzling to us because we cannot see what it is that is absorbing him so entirely....In mourning it is the world which become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself. (269)

The 'popart' cinema articulates the state of dislocation of diasporic audience. Unlike the narratives of mourning, where the object of pain is visible, the object of

pain becomes invisible in melancholia. Thus in contrast to the early forms of Bollywood, which were either mourning for mythological entertainment or nativism, the sensibility of this “new” cinema is divided between conventional Indian ideals and Western mores leading to the invisibility of the object of pain. For instance in *English August*, Agastya’s disenchanted state throughout the movie is the result of untraceability of the object of pain. Benegal presents a large spectrum of objects of pain for the reader to choose from in *English August* without any final consensus. Some of these objects, which presumably emptied the “ego” of Agastya, are Madna, mosquitoes, IAS, food, heat, lack of women.

Figuratively, Agastya’s journey from the city to the village is symbolic of a diasporic audience journey from his new found home to his ‘origin-al’ home.

d) **Pastiche:** Furthermore, unlike Govind Nihalani or Mrinal Sen, who believed in instructing the audience through the use of satire, Benegal uses the concept of pastiche in a postmodern sense. Well-known academic Fredric Jameson defines pastiche in a postmodern sense as “blank parody” (Jameson 21), especially with reference to the postmodern parodic practices of self-reflexivity and intertextuality. By this is meant that rather than being a jocular but still respectful imitation of another style, pastiche in the postmodern era has become a “dead language,” without any political or historical content, and so has also become unable to satirize in any effective way. Where pastiche used to be a humorous literary style, it has, in postmodernism, become “devoid of laughter” (22).

First, pastiche, as used by Benegal in *English August*, gives him the freedom to not preach to or instruct the audience. Second, Benegal uses pastiche as an experimental cinematic device whereby he can pay homage to another filmmaker’s style and use of cinematography, including camera angles, lighting, and *mise-en-scène*: *English August*’s ending, for instance, seems to be a pastiche of Stanley Donen’s *Blame it on Rio* (1984) and the discontinuous shots strategy adopted by Benegal resembles the style of Godard. The village, Madna itself is a cleverly-designed pastiche of R. K. Narayan’s *Malgudi*. Some of the features of Benegal’s cinema have their counterpart in the “New Wave”, though one should not confuse Benegal’s cinema with the “New Wave”, which has its basis in the socialist reformation of the society. Though, Benegal’s cinema of pastiche is a reaction against the cinema of the 70s, which is an Indian version of the “New Wave” French cinema and which highlights “didacticism and programmatic” (Benegal 110). The term “New Wave” was coined by the French journalist Françoise Giroud. The five “core” directors in the French “New Wave” are Claude Chabrol, François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Éric Rohmer and Jacques Rivette. The source of inspiration for all the five core members is the founder of the French art magazine *Cahiers du cinema*, André Bazin who is:

a passionate advocate of ‘realism, *mise-en-scène*, and deep focus (which he saw in opposition to montage) (Powrie 21).

e) **Narrative Intransitivity:** The cardinal reason, which lists Dev Benegal as one of the most famous experimental directors is his passion for narrative intransitivity as prevalent among the directors of "New Wave" cinema.

Narrative transitivity, which is embraced by the mainstream cinema, follows a casual chain of events: a) Exposition, b) Peripety, c) Climax, and d) Denouement. The purpose behind this fixed pattern is the straightforwardness, which keeps the plot of the film intact. Benegal challenges this continuity. His purpose, throughout *English, August* is to break the fetters of continuity and linearity, which are religiously followed by the mainstream cinema and the art cinema. He splits the narrative open by:

finding the right cinematic equivalence. What came to mind were the early broadcasts of Doordarshan where every (interesting) program would be interrupted at critical junctures with a title card saying 'Rukavat ke liye khed,' (apologies for the interruption). Since for me the narrative was rock solid I thought the aesthetic of interruption seemed to be the right cinematic equivalence to Upamanyu's writing; a fragmentary, hallucinatory journey in the mind of a young reluctant civil servant (Benegal 109-110).

Unlike, the "New Wave" directors who sided with narrative intransitivity as a form of social protest against the cinema of quality, Benegal only used narrative intransitivity as a cinematic device to catch the disenchanting nature of the male protagonist.

The Parallel Cinema in India: An Obituary

Furthermore, Dev Benegal shuns the stereotypical art and popular cinema and *chutnifies* them in the new avatar of "popart". This decision to blend is a very significant one in the present context where the success of the movie at the box is not the end but the beginning of innumerable television screenings by various satellite channels. Ziya Salam discussing the television screening aspect of cinema writes:

At a time when major box office hits like *Rang De Basanti*, *Lage Raho Munna Bhai*, *Krrish*, *Dhoom-2*, *Phir Hera Pheri*, and *Don* have been lapped up for television screenings at whopping sums going up to Rs 15 crore, no channel is ready to push the envelope for serious cinema. Result? Parallel cinema is dying a second death (Salam 1).

Having lost out in the box office popularity stakes, worthies like Shyam Benegal, Mrinal Sen, Goutam Ghose, Kalpana Lajmi and others are being given the cold shoulder by satellite channels. Almost all the movie channels including Set Max, Zee Cinema, B4U and Filmy show four films a day, but on a safe average only about six parallel cinema films a month. In the face of different star festivals like Amitabh Bachchan's 'Navrasa' at Zee Cinema in April-May and Set Max had 'Ab Tak Bachchan.' There are no festivals on Mrinal Sen or Shyam Benegal films. At this juncture, what do you think an intelligent director to do? Benegal's decision to

incorporate both the mainstream and art is the decision guided by the need of the hour.

No wonder Kalpana Lajmi, who has directed films like *Ek Pal* and *Darmiyaan*, rues:

The channels only want films of the last five years. I am known to the new generation by some of my weaker films. Even I cannot see my favorite films like *Ek Pal* on television anymore. The classics are lost (ibid).

These decisions on the part of the satellite channels on one hand show Benegal's decision to fuse both the aspects as intelligent and on the other hand, they clearly show how "popart" has become India's success story and how it has become a commodity, which is especially designed to be exported.

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