

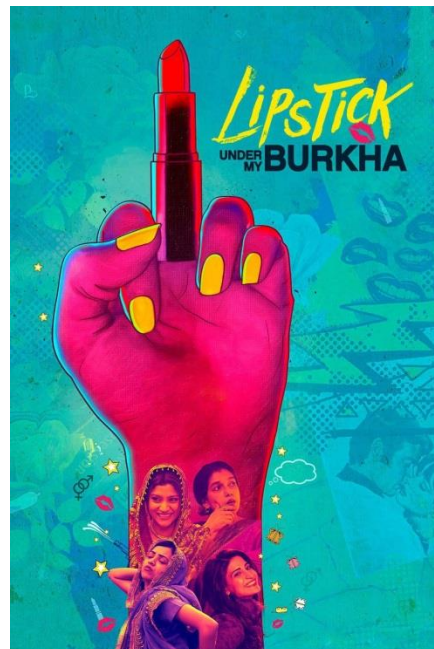
INTRODUCING NEW INDEPENDENT INDIAN FILMS: THE FUTURE TORCHBEARERS OF INDIAN CINEMA

CINEMA
FOR ALL

By Ashvin Devasundaram

A vibrant wave of new independent films is transforming the canvas of Indian cinema. So far, Bollywood's towering presence has cast its pre-eminent shadow over the diversity of Indian cinemas. With hard-hitting, experimental, socially-conscious, politically-disputatious and internationally-acclaimed storylines, India's new Indies have burgeoned as a bona fide cinema form distinct from Bollywood.

This new breed of Indie films reveals multi-dimensional sides of India you don't get to see in Bollywood. The Indies' diversity is emphasised by their engagement with multiple 'state of the nation' stories. They dive headlong into a cornucopia of often controversial current affairs – topical themes and issues Bollywood wouldn't touch with a bargepole. The Indies package these pressing concerns into entertaining, engaging and quirky storylines. The new Indies are glocal – global in their universal visual aesthetic but firmly rooted in local Indian thematic content. This renders them a reinvigorating antidote to Bollywood's predictable push-button glitz and glamour.



With their accessible global cinema grammar combining entertainment and information, the new Indies appeal to both the heart and mind. They capture India's tempestuous see-sawing between tradition and modernity, spiritualism and materialism. The Indies are a wonderfully idiosyncratic synthesis of the Cinemas of India. They are a motley mix of Satyajit Ray's early arthouse films, Middle and Parallel Cinema movements of the 1970s and 80s, and 1990s urban Hinglish films, with bits of Bollywood blended in.

The Indies throw into this hybrid melting pot a pan-global assortment of filmmaking influences, from Jean-Luc Godard, Majid Majidi and Wong Kar-Wai to Ken Loach and Alfred Hitchcock. A coruscating example is *The Lunchbox* - a charmingly offbeat epistolary romance set in modern Mumbai. The film won hearts and minds the world over, triumphed at the box-office, and was nominated for a BAFTA award in 2015. Another seminal Indie is the hilarious political satire - *Peepli Live*, with its raucous send-up of the Indian government's 'turn a blind-eye' policy towards the nation's pandemic of farmer suicides. The film was a smash hit and India's entry to the foreign language category of the Oscars in 2010. Indian Indies include director Anand Gandhi's philosophical tour de force, *Ship of Theseus*; a monumental watershed in contemporary Indian cinema. The Critics Circle UK, declared *Ship of Theseus* 'one of 15 all time life-changing films' alongside canonical masterpieces of Hollywood and World Cinema, such as *The 400 Blows*, *The Battle of Algiers*, *Annie Hall* and *Raging Bull*. All these accolades and accomplishments would have previously been considered inconceivable for small-budget Indian indies. Another distinct dimension of Indies is their showcasing of strong female roles, both behind and in front of the camera. Films such as *Parched*, *Angry Indian Goddesses* and *Lipstick Under My Burkha* which was banned by censorship authorities, celebrate themes of female empowerment from patriarchal structures. Indies present valuable insights into LGBTQ

issues, as epitomised by *Aligarh*, a powerfully poignant portrayal of a gay Indian university professor's true-life experience of oppression and social ostracism.

The Indies' self-critical lens is epitomised by Chaitanya Tamhane's globally celebrated *Court* - a trenchant yet subtle indictment of India's corrupt judicial system. The new Indies have burgeoned in popularity and are now a mainstay of modern Indian cinema programming on the international film festival circuit. Indie films are the centrepiece of public events such as the London Asian Film Festival (LAFF), Edinburgh Asian Film Festival (EAFF) and BFI India on Film. However, multiplexes in Britain still largely favour Bollywood blockbusters - mainstream British audiences tend to miss out on a treasure trove of pathbreaking new Indian Indie cinema.

A panacea to this problem of diminished visibility and Indie accessibility in mainstream cinema spaces would be for programmers to champion the Indies amongst local communities, cinema clubs, universities and film appreciation societies. The Indies' exhilarating cocktail of compelling, uplifting and thought-provoking stories guarantees cross-cultural appeal. Bringing the future torchbearers of Indian Cinema to new British audiences would add a dash of diversity to the Bollywood masala. The Cinema For All film catalogue is a first port of call for contemporary Indian cinema. It offers a discerning selection of Indies such as *Court* and *Aligarh* to help audiences set sail on an Indie-viewing odyssey.

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