

Research Proposal

The 'Family Drama' in Indian Cinema:
Societal Reasons for the Genre's Popularity

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Abstract

Producers in Indian film industries often ask mainstream writers and directors to introduce aspects of the 'family drama' genre into their movies, in order to increase appeal and profit. So, it is clear that Indian audiences are eagerly responding to such familial themes. But there has been no research on the reasons for audiences' fascination with the genre. In the process of writing and directing my own 'family drama' meta-film in India, I will explore the unique social and religious conditions that have led to this genre's popularity in Indian cinema. I will also monitor in-theater reactions and record audience feedback to my film – this will shed further light on the impact of certain societal conditions on audiences' opinion of the 'family drama' genre.

Narrative

Introduction:

The 'family drama' is a genre of cinema that focuses on realistic conflicts within ordinary families, usually relating to common intergenerational tensions (conservatism versus progressivism, tradition versus development, et cetera). It is not an extensively researched genre of film anywhere in the world, but it has always been a core component of Indian cinema in particular. Since India's independence in 1947, 'family films' have been popular with audiences all over the country, from *Pather Panchali* (dir. Satyajit Ray, 1955), the first post-colonial 'family drama' in North India, to *Saivam* (dir. A.L. Vijay, 2014), a South Indian film about a family debating the ethics of a religious tradition. The conventions and messages of the genre have morphed over the years, but the genre itself has endured with great success (Dwyer and Pinney 2003, 309).

Background/Related Work:

In an oft-referenced article, Lakshmi Srinivas explores the feedback loop between Indian audiences and cinema – how one influences and changes the other (Srinivas 2002, 156). Themes and ideas that appeal to large portions of the Indian filmgoing populace are recycled and reused over and over again (Srinivas, 157). In a notable example of this feedback loop, elements of the 'family drama' genre are added to the plots of mainstream Indian blockbusters in order to make them more appealing to family audiences. Producers have figured out that more audiences will watch and enjoy mainstream films if there is a family-related plot thread in them (Dwyer and Pinney, 310). For instance, a family subplot was added to the script of the college comedy 3

Idiots (dir. Rajkumar Hirani, 2009), and the film went on to gross over eight times its budget in the box office (Landreth 2010).

The most prolific India-specific research on the popularity of the 'family drama' genre is a 2005 article by Monika Mehta. In the article, Mehta explains how the Indian government invested in popular 'family films' circa 1990 – these were mainstream movies with relatable plots designed to appeal to family audiences of all ages (Mehta 2005, 135). The article posits that the government's investment and support was in order to reaffirm India's moral foundations, because these family films represented Indian traditions positively (Mehta, 136). *Hum Aapke Hain Koun..!* (transl. *Who Am I To You?*) (dir. Sooraj Barjatya, 1994) is a prime example of this kind of government-supported tradition-affirming family film. A crucial scene in the movie involves the main characters realizing the importance of family and tradition.

However, Mehta's article does not explore *why* Indian audiences flocked to see these family films in droves. In an era when many movies included elements designed to appeal to all demographics, the 'family drama' was consistently the most popular film in theaters (Dwyer and Pinney, 309-310). Mehta's explanation for the government's support of these movies (that they reinforced Indian traditions) does not apply to the audiences, because audiences also flocked to watch family films that were critical of tradition. For instance, a film titled *The Namesake* (dir. Mira Nair, 2006) – about an Indian-origin family adjusting to life in the United States – was released to critical and commercial success. It was directed by Mira Nair, who herself was of Indian origin and living in the United States. *The Namesake* exemplifies the new trend of profitable 'family drama' films that are critical of some aspects of Indian tradition and culture, while ultimately embracing an Indian identity.

Motivation and Research Question:

The above articles and movies made me wonder why family films have endured in Indian cinema for so long (regardless of the messages these films espouse). How and why have Indian audiences participated in keeping the genre alive? Why are audiences so interested in these themes of familial conflict? Therefore, my main research question can be condensed as follows:

What are the unique conditions in Indian society that have led to the popularity of the 'family drama' genre in Indian cinema?

I am motivated by the belief that the answer to this question will shed light on important tensions within Indian society, such as the philosophical conflicts between more conservative older generations and the more progressive younger generation. I believe these latent tensions are the reason why mainstream audiences are eager to watch 'family drama' movies.

Methods and Expected Results:

I have come up with an idea for my own 'family drama' film (entitled *Bharata*) set in India. I plan to write and direct this project in the coming year, as both a creative endeavor as well as a research-oriented one. Here is a brief synopsis of *Bharata*:

A meek Indian high-schooler named Bharata is enamored with American culture, especially Hollywood films. He feels suffocated by the expectations placed on him by his fundamentalist family – his relatives want him to study Engineering like all of his peers, get married soon, and settle down in India. Bharata instead makes the decision to attend an American university and pursue a Filmmaking major. However, when he announces this intention, he inadvertently causes a rift in his family, between those who support his dreams and those who do not.

In the film's story, the character of Bharata grew up watching American media, reading about the "silly" beliefs of Hinduism, and thinking that Indian traditions were outdated and embarrassing. The movie's plot will thus explore issues such as the role of Western media in Indian teens' lives, the trend of atheism in younger generations, the phenomenon of 'cultural cringe' (youngsters' embarrassment about their heritage and culture), and so on. Not only are these issues related to the plot of *Bharata*, they are important topics to discuss in India today.

In the process of writing and directing *Bharata*, I will learn more about the issues I have mentioned above. The film will reflect on the way these issues have led to the 'family drama' genre's popularity, using the concept of 'metacinema'. Metacinema is a mode of filmmaking in which a film inherently *references its own existence* as a piece of art (Ames 1997, 15). Meta-films often reflect on the genre or style that they are a part of. For example, the film *Birdman* (dir. Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2014) is a comedic drama at its core, but it also parodies the strange career of its own star (Michael Keaton), and in doing so, reflects on the tension between art films and blockbusters. Similarly, *Bharata* will be a standard 'family drama' on one level, but on a deeper level, it will be a commentary *about the reasons for the popularity of the genre itself*. As the protagonist is an aspiring filmmaker, he obsessively records everything happening around him. Eventually, at the end of the movie, he uses all this footage to make a 'family drama' documentary about his own tumultuous life. The film will therefore comment on the link between the 'family drama' and certain societal conditions and attitudes in India.

Thus, by the end of the research project, I will have the final cut of a 'family drama' feature film, shot entirely in India and dealing with meta-themes about the genre itself. Thus, the film will be an exploration of my research question.

Furthermore, *Bharata*'s audience reception will shed light on my research question. To gauge audience response for the film, I will conduct screenings of *Bharata* in six different theaters all over India. During the screenings, I will monitor audience reaction and participation – Indian viewers usually “shout out comments to the screen, talk to characters, give them advice and take sides” (Srinivas, 170). I will also create a feedback form for audiences to fill out after the screenings. Specifically, I will ask test audiences to comment on the way the film addresses Indian societal issues. Since my question focuses on the relationship between Indian audiences and the ‘family drama’ genre, their reactions to my meta-film will tell us a lot about the hidden tensions causing the genre’s popularity.

Conclusion:

In this proposal, I have explained the popularity of the ‘family drama’ genre in Indian cinema. The reasons for this popularity are still unclear, and have not been sufficiently explored in prior research. I believe there are certain societal tensions at the heart of the matter. I plan to write and direct my own work of ‘family drama’ metacinema to explore the question of exactly which uniquely Indian conditions have led to the genre’s popularity. The reception of my film in test screenings in six different Indian theaters will give us further insight into how Indian audiences feel about these societal issues.

References

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DVD.

Timeline

→ **January 18th, 2019**

- Finish writing screenplay.
- Begin casting.
- Begin shot list.
- Lock down crew. Begin process of getting Visas and plane tickets.

→ **February 15th, 2019**

- Finish shot list. Revise with Director of Photography.
- Finish casting.
- Get quotes for equipment and locations.

→ **March 15th, 2019**

- Lock down equipment and locations.
- Find back-up actors, in case main actors become unavailable.
- Secure insurance.
- Do a read-through of the script with cast.

→ **June 19th, 2019**

- Heads of production arrive in India.
- Finalize locations, run rehearsals, revise shot list.

→ **June 21st, 2019**

- All actors and crew arrive in India.
- Rest of crew arrives.

→ **July 1st, 2019**

- Start principal photography.

→ **August 5th, 2019**

- End principal photography.

→ **October 17th, 2019**

- Finalized Assembly Cut submitted to Sound team.
- Post-Production Sound begins working on Foley/ADR.
- Work begins on score and getting rights for any songs.

→ **December 5th, 2019**

- Fine Cut completed.
- Begin arranging screenings (for April 2020) in 6 select theaters.

→ **February 15th, 2020**

- Complete color correction.
- Finalize screening times and locations for April 2020.

→ **March 28th, 2020**

- Complete text and titling.

→ **April 2020**

- Screen Final Cut in select theaters in India. Record reactions and feedback.

Budget

Category Description	Total
Producer's Unit	2,040
Director	300
Cast	6,725
Total Above-the-Line	9,065
Production Staff	1,920
Set Dressing	2,650
Wardrobe	400
Make-up & Hairdressing	3,875
Lighting	4,310
Camera	8,750
Production Sound	2,630
Transportation	10,900
Location	10,719
Total Below-the-Line Production	46,154
Visual Effects	450
Editing	2,000
Music	720
Post-Production Sound	500
Total Below-the-Line Post-Production	3,670
Publicity	2,550
Insurance	15,000
Total Below-the-Line Other	17,550

Total Budget: \$76,439

Budget Requested (for Camera Equipment): \$8,750