



# Marathi Cinema in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: From Entertainment to Infotainment

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## Abstract:

*Cinema or motion picture is far ahead than other mediums of mass communication in popularity across the world. It is a visual medium that tells stories. Created in the late 19th century, cinema is the world's most recent art form. At the same time it is also world's most complex, collaborative and expensive artistic expression. The visual nature of a film gives it a universal power of communication. Today cinema has the status of an "industry". Since a substantial amount of people are the consumers of its products, cinema has a high commercial value. This paper intends to understand how cinema, primarily a medium of entertainment has entered the terrain of infotainment. For the said purpose Marathi cinema particularly has been studied. The focus here is on the ethnomethods that Marathi cinema has used to combine entertainment with information.*

**Key Words:** Cinema, Infotainment, Film Audience, Formula

## Introduction:

Cinema is a visual medium with a narrative format that is it tells stories and creates an experience by combining music, art, direction, photography, sound and editing. There are diverse perspectives on cinema and they present cinema as an art, a science, a technology or a medium of entertainment. It is well known that cinema has been evolving since the time of its beginning and has changed over the years. It has been influenced by some important events in the history of mankind, be it wars, revolutions, social movements, urbanization, globalization and so on. Compared to other art forms it is new but highly adaptive.

Indian filmmakers indigenized the technique of cinema which was originally western. It largely came to be used as a medium to represent Indian culture. The advent of sound in cinema further facilitated incorporation of Indian culture in cinema in the form of music, poetry, dance etc. The credit to make India's first full length film, 'Raja Harishchandra' (1913) goes to Dadasaheb Phalke. 'Alam Ara' was India's first talking film made by Ardeshir Irani in 1931. The history of Marathi films began with the making of the first talking film in Marathi, 'Ayodhecha Raja' in 1932 directed by V. Shantaram. Major production houses like Maharashtra Film Company and Prabhat Film Company produced many memorable films between 1932 and 1960. In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Marathi Film Industry showed signs of downfall due to the emergence of digital technology and internet, rise of cable TV, multiplexes and change in film production, distribution and exhibition system. However a new wave came into Marathi film industry with the release of "Shwaas". Since then Marathi cinema has shown remarkable transformation particularly in its role as a medium of entertainment. It is thus imperative to know how this shift has occurred and the new directions that Marathi cinema has taken thereafter. In this reference the present study intends to fulfill the following objectives.

### **Objectives:**

1. To study the factors responsible for the evolution of Marathi cinema as a medium of entertainment.
2. To explore the ways in which contemporary Marathi filmmakers have combined entertainment with information.
3. To know the reasons for a shift- from entertainment to infotainment in new Marathi cinema.

### **Methodology:**

This study is based on secondary sources of data. An extensive review of literature has been carried out by the researcher available in the area of Indian cinema, regional film industry and Marathi cinema in particular.

### **Content and Discussion:**

Cinema as a popular mass medium is growing rapidly and today we see that there is a consistent rise in the number of countries producing films, the number of films produced by these countries annually, the number of filmmakers and the number of film viewers. Audience is a significant but still an invisible aspect in the process of filmmaking. Film audience of a particular region directly or indirectly determines to a great extent the kind of cinema that will be made there and also its success or failure. Audience is often viewed as a passive agent and as having no control over the film making process. Their taste in cinema is taken for granted and accordingly films are made that are mostly based on the formula of 'action-romance-comedy'. If this was true and if audience preferences in cinema were fixed or predictable, there would not have been an audience for independent cinema in America and Parallel cinema in India. But there is an audience for such cinema though both Hollywood and Bollywood are producing largely 'formula' films. But still we cannot ignore some

universal trends in film viewership - though art, parallel or independent cinema has emerged and appreciated by audience, the viewership for 'formula' films has not declined. Thus it can be said that cinema is still primarily a medium of entertainment. As Benegal says since the time of its evolution, cinema has been a medium of entertainment (2000).

In the 1970's, audience in India was drawn towards parallel cinema but diverted back to commercial cinema in a few years. This trend in film watching can be explained with the help of two factors- firstly, we are socialized or conditioned to view cinema as a medium of entertainment only. Hence we fail to understand any other function that it could serve. And secondly, unlike most of the other countries Indian film audience is heterogeneous in terms of language, religion, caste, culture, economic conditions, education and so on. Hence there is a huge diversity with regard to an understanding of and expectations from this medium. One regional language film industry alone cannot cater to all of the needs and demands of the audience. However Bollywood has made this possible. It uses one universal formula that appeals to all the viewers irrespective of their differences. It is for this reason that Bollywood is called 'Indian Cinema' though we have many regional language film industries in India.

Marathi film industry is one of the biggest and oldest regional film industries in India and has evolved alongside the mainstream Hindi cinema. It has developed with the pioneering work of Dadasaheb Phalke V. Shantaram, Master Vinayak, Bhalji Pendharkar and Acharya Atre. Mumbai, Pune and Kolhapur have been the centers of Marathi film production. The state formation in 1960 as well as regional political parties which took up linguistic issues gave Marathi film industry a regional identity. In 1970's the large migrated industrial working class constituted a major proportion of Marathi film audience. They had strong ties with rural areas and found in Marathi films a rural-urban continuum to identify with. They looked up to cinema not only for entertainment but also as a means to rekindle their connections with the rural culture. As a result there was an increasing integration of rural folk art forms especially Tamasha and Lavani into cinema. Comedy genre too proliferated in the period soon after this.

In order to survive in the middle of growing competition from Bollywood many filmmakers preferred to make films on these genres only. However the portrayal of rural folk art forms in these films was barely authentic and was more inspired by Bollywood 'formula'. The focus was more on entertainment than on depiction of regional art in its original form. Also no light was thrown on the real life conditions of Tamasha artists. An important question to address here is whether cinema can do anything other than to entertain. According to some thinkers cinema not only serves as a medium of entertainment but can also inform and educate. Jindal A. for example stresses the need for scientific research on films (1960). This medium has a tremendous impact over the masses. Hence in order to assess the potential of films in introducing new ideas or changing the existing ideas of the viewers, a scientific research need to be undertaken by the government, he maintains. Jindal observes that films are often analyzed very critically and in a biased manner. Little attention is given to the fact that films have influenced social institutions like marriage, family, religion and education. Thus the findings of the sociological researches on films can be utilized to formulate social welfare policies and can also help regulate film industry. In this way, films can become a constructive force in nation building. Films can serve as great educational medium to inform the rural population about health and hygiene, literacy,

rural youth and child welfare and so on according to Jindal. Shyam Benegal too suggests that all types of communication necessarily possess some hidden messages. These hidden messages can function to persuade the others though in a very subtle or latent manner (2000).

With the emergence of information society, Marathi cinema too has shown signs of transformation due to globalization, economic reforms, internet and rise of multiplexes. The contemporary Marathi cinema has a new batch of filmmakers, such as Paresh Mokashi, Nagraj Manjule, Sachin Kundalkar, Sumitra Bhave, Sunil Sukhtankar, Ravi Jadhav, Nishikant Kamat, Chaitanya Tamhane and so on. Some of their noteworthy films are 'Shwaas', 'Dahavi F', 'Fandry', 'Dombivali Fast', 'Vihir', 'Nude', 'Killa', 'Natrang' etc. Some of these films won national and international awards as well as critical acclaim. These films have revived Marathi film industry by developing a new vision of looking at films. They have changed the image of Marathi cinema as being escapist and focusing on entertainment only.

An interesting feature of the contemporary Marathi films has been they do not detach themselves from entertainment and yet make audiences think. These filmmakers have experimented with issues that were neglected earlier such as farmer's suicide, problems of students, fundamentalism, and mental health. The Bollywood inspired formula of 'song dance romance comedy' is no longer the only focus of Marathi films. The themes of these films are chosen from everyday life and the issues are concerning to everyone. Contemporary society is full of dichotomous values, weakened social capital, economic insecurities, and loneliness and so on. Filmmakers are using films as medium to portray the fears, helplessness and alienation that one experiences in real emerging out of the social milieu.

A new wave of cinema was started in Marathi film industry with the release of Sandip Mane's "Shwaas". It changed the perspective of both filmmakers and the audience. It did not contain song, dance, or any other element of formula film. 50 years after "Shyamchi Aai", "Shwaas" grabbed the national award and was even nominated for Oscars. It was India's official entry to the 2004 Oscars and was ranked 6th in the Academy Award for Best Foreign Film. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century we can see that filmmakers have used film as a space to express their ideas. Films like Shwaas (2004), Dombivali Fast (2005), Valu (2008), Gabhricha Paus (2009), Jogwa (2009) and many others represent new wave cinema that won not only awards at national level but also critical acclaim at the international level. Also the rise of streaming platforms has made Marathi cinema more accessible to global audiences.

What is more evident in today's commercial Marathi cinema is a trend towards infotainment. Infotainment refers to any content that combines information and entertainment. Marathi films combine information and entertainment that is they educate the viewers on matters that need attention while keeping them engaged. Every director has developed a unique style to combine the two in most effective manner- by incorporating folk performing arts, folk music, dance, prominent literary works, humour, romance and so on.

We can see that an inclination towards infotainment is conspicuously present in 21<sup>st</sup> century Marathi cinema. In films like 'Hampi', and 'Ventilator' the regional history and culture is presented beautifully. They capture the architecture of the various locations. By filming most of the scenes in the open they cover monuments, roads, houses, local residents, local markets, sculptures, ancient temples, water bodies, forts,



heritage buildings etc. Also through the extensive use of regional language or dialect, folk music, classical music, local art and crafts the viewers are informed about the cultural history of the region. Films like Hampi also promote tourism industry. Another example is that of the film 'Zimma' which revolves around seven women from different age groups and socio-cultural backgrounds who come together on a vacation to London. It narrates the story of these women while informing regional audience about the tourist places abroad. As too observed by Ganti T. that film songs function as virtual tours as they are shot in exotic locations and abroad facilitating tourism industry.

Some other films like 'Poshter Boyz' and 'Bucket List' inform audience about family planning, health practices and medical advancements. They deal with issues like vasectomy and organ donation. They present the societal attitudes with regard to these issues and also inform those viewers who may be ignorant about them. The medium of cinema is used to present sensitive facts that are rarely discussed openly in the public space. Films like Astu raise awareness about Alzheimer's disease and its impact on families. Kaasav talks about mental health issues. Biographical dramas like 'Balgandharva', 'Dr. Prakash Baba Amte', 'Natsamrat' and 'Mee Sindhutai Sapkal' tell audience about the life, struggles and contribution of those about whom the audience may be unaware. Film like 'Katyar Kaljat Ghusali' is a musical drama that explores the world of classical music.

Some other films like 'Killa', and 'Fandry', capture the rural landscape through the outdoor scenes. They give viewers a glimpse into the fields, seashores, monsoon rains, lush greenery, ponds etc. The viewers are familiarised with the ecosystem and biodiversity of a particular region. The filmmakers have also tried to introduce the regional language and culture to the audience. Also in some films the characters are shown as speaking in local dialects. The cultural history of a particular place is presented by selecting real locations instead of sets. The central theme of some films is food and they acquaint audience about the traditional Maharashtrian cuisine. Some examples are 'Vitti Dandu', 'Muramba' and 'Gulabjaam'.

The above films highlight the filmmaker's desire to venture into the domain of infotainment. This can be reasoned with the help of following factors:

- Cinema and society are closely connected and cannot be separated.
- As society changed cinema too has changed particularly due to economic reforms and globalization.
- Advanced technology has enabled the filmmakers to utilise the full potential of the medium.
- Contemporary filmmakers are more informed of global trends in cinema and do not hesitate experimenting with new subjects.
- The audience's tastes and preferences in cinema too are changing due to exposure to global cultures.
- With greater scope for creativity and innovation in information society, there is a realization among filmmakers that films can serve to meet ends other than entertainment.

Thus we see that Globalization has influenced Marathi cinema to a great extent. It is emerging as a tool of informing the viewers while at the same time entertaining them. New possibilities in filmmaking are being explored by the filmmakers which helps Marathi cinema to grow further.

## Conclusion:

The above discussion has enabled the researcher to arrive at following conclusions-

- Marathi cinema emerged particularly as a medium of entertainment under the influence of mainstream Hindi Bollywood cinema. Commercial success has been the most important driving force in the production of entertainment oriented films.
- The beginning of globalization and subsequent social, economic, cultural and technological changes provided an impetus to a change in the direction of Marathi cinema.
- The Marathi films made in the 21<sup>st</sup> century demonstrate how Marathi cinema is evolving and emerging as a powerful tool to inform and educate audience about social facts in a way that is enjoyable to the audience.
- Cinema has been the most powerful medium of mass communication that appeals the most due to its audio-visual nature. The popularity of cinema can now be used to create awareness on societal concerns by combining it with entertainment so that it can initiate open discussion and facilitate 'communicative action' as Jurgen Habermas calls it.
- The potential of cinema as an art, a technology or a medium of entertainment can be fully realised only when all its possible functions are explored. In this regard Marathi cinema is certainly broadening its horizons.

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