

## Challenges in Independent Filmmaking

*Teen Muhurat: A case study*



There is always an ongoing debate between mainstream cinema and parallel cinema. But I believe, as the mainstream and parallel coexist in a system, they benefit from each other. At any given point of time, a filmmaker is free to choose the side that suits him or her.

### **Choosing my side:**

Coming from Architecture background, I was exposed to world cinema very late in my life. But on the other hand, I was fortunate to grow up watching the rich Bengali films of Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak, Mrinal Sen, Rituparno Ghosh and many more. I always dreamt of becoming a filmmaker, but never realised it would become a reality one day. The journey towards it wasn't easy though. To pursue filmmaking, I quit my job as an architect that paid me well. I joined the Film and Television Institute of India in Pune for my Post Graduation. It is in FTII, the world of cinema opened up in front of me. There used to be screenings

every evening, of films from different countries. It was a big unlearning and relearning experience for me. The theory and practical classes and workshops by experts changed the way I looked at cinema. In the institute days, the restriction in the number of shooting shifts, the film stock, the budget and resources shaped our mind differently while conceiving and executing the films. And it taught us how to work within limitations and to optimize the use of resources. Even while working as an Architect, I believed in methods that cause minimum disruption to the ecosystem and minimal wastage of resources. That practice helped me in my film school shoots to come up with alternate methods in order to get the desired result. I believe, this creative process liberated me and my fellow learners from conservative ideas of filmmaking. And maybe that was the first sign of becoming an independent filmmaker.

Usually, in every sector, there would be an in-

dustry way and an alternate way. The industry way is usually subscribed by many as it caters to a large group of people. A film industry, run by big studio system is just like any other industry. It is a mass production system. It tends to function with a set of rules, like a dogma. There are factors that influence the production like statistical reports, popularity of the actors, the ratio between the budget and the box office figures, footfall and reactions of target demographic group etc. Hence, it is not easy for an industry to change its norm quickly as it may affect the flow of production. But for effective functioning of any system, the rules must be periodically revised. This revision happens through disruption. The parallel cinema or the alternate of industry cinema is not dependent on studio systems or market demands. It doesn't follow strict rules. Any film that is produced outside the major film studio system or that is produced and distributed by individuals or independent entertainment companies is known as an 'Independent film'.



### **Making my first film:**

After completing the film school, I shifted to Mumbai in 2014. The world suddenly seemed very competitive, very fast. In the meantime, I also got married. The film world was functioning in tune with the mainstream industry. There was a need to prove in order to survive in the big noise. We took the beaten path of working as freelance technicians in advertising and films. Very soon, I realized that the system preferred quantity over quality. Every

shoot had a protocol and a template and everything started looking the same. The lack of creative freedom at work made us start our own production house. Even though we had more freedom and better budgets than before, the films were ultimately being made for the commercial sector. We were working a lot but eventually were becoming the same people we once didn't want to become. It was then, an offer to direct a short film came our way. A writer friend wanted a fiction script to be executed. There was no budget and we only had a few hours to prepare as the actor was leaving the next morning. The shoot was like an adventure and the feeling was great when we completed it. It rang a bell in me that it was this feeling I was missing after the film school.

In early 2017, while working on a project, an incident made me realise how challenging it is for women who work in a male-dominated society. I wanted to protest against the incident and the only way to express my thoughts was to write about it. What started as a diary entry became a dialogue between a fictional boss and his personal secretary. In a couple of hours, it became a script. The force was so strong that I wanted to make a short film out of it as soon as possible. We used our savings and a friend contributed to the shoot budget. Some friends agreed to act. We also got the friend's place as the location. In a two-days schedule, we finished the shoot. In the following weeks, the Post- Production was complete. Once I had the finished film in hand, I felt an urge to tell more stories of similar nature and compile them as an anthology film. In the following months, I wrote two more stories connected to each other. By the end of 2017, we finished shooting the other two films. By this time, we had exhausted our savings. To finish the Post-Production, we had to work again. Almost a year passed and by the end of 2018, we completed the film and named it *Teen Muhurat*, a feature-length anthology film of three stories.



### **Now, what to do with the film?**

The film was ready and I didn't know what should be the next step. The only feeling was that people should see this film. We consulted a few people. They suggested many ways, few even misguided and discouraged to go ahead as we didn't have a strong economic backing. It was then I remembered about a Documentary film I made in 2014 which was selected to a Film Festival. The experience of screening at a festival was memorable. I decided to send *Teen Muhurat* to Film festivals but didn't know which ones to send to. Eventually, by trial and error, we figured out the process. I realized most of the festivals demand a submission fee and we actually couldn't afford it for most of them. We submitted to those festivals that accepted free entries. One after the other, the film started getting selected to Film festivals in India and abroad. The screenings and the interactions at different festivals were enlightening. We are thankful to ourselves for not losing hope when we faced discouragement.

ments. The experience of Film festivals taught me that every film will find its audience however small the number is.

Independent filmmakers play the role of a revisionist, a reformist or a revolutionary. They either alter the existing industry principles or become the antithesis of the mainstream. They disrupt the system either through the content or form of the subjects they deal with or through their process or through technological innovations. These disruptions, slowly, over a period of time contribute to the new set of rules that eventually becomes the new norm for the mainstream. For example, when sound was introduced in Cinema, the already existing system in Silent Cinema was skeptical about it. It eventually became the norm and the Silent era in Cinema ended. Skeptics reacted the same way when Cinema went from Black and White to Color, from Mono to Stereo to Surround, from Film to Digital etc. This resistance from the system is its inertia to change. The resistance could be because of economic reasons, ideological reasons or skepticism. More than the lack of money and infrastructure, the biggest challenge faced by an independent filmmaker is this lack of support and confidence from the system. When an independent filmmaker sets out to make a film, the system can list a thousand things that could possibly go wrong but not one solution to make it right.

### **Now what about the other side?**

I was always curious about how it would be to release the film in theatres along with the regular big-budget commercial films? Do I have any audience out there? I decided to explore the possibilities in early 2020. Once again, I faced resistance. People with years of experience in the field said it is not possible. The reasons were many. Some said there is no point in releasing a 70-minute Arthouse festival film in theatres which has no big stars in it and that

too without any promotions. Other reasons were technical like ‘theatres can’t play 25 frames per second’, ‘stereo films won’t be accepted’ and ‘having an intermission for a 70-minute



film would be a matter of concern’. We decided to take it one step at a time. First step was to get a Censor Certificate with the help of our Co-Producer. Then was the negotiation to get screening slots. Contrary to the general perception, the multiplex chain was quite supportive to release the film. We still don’t have a distributor. I, the director of the film was directly talking with the exhibitor. We mutually agreed on an exclusive limited release in three main cities of India; Mumbai, Kolkata and Delhi. One cinema per city and one primetime show a day. And in Mumbai and Kolkata, we were given the gold class screens with ticket prices on the higher side.



### **How do we tell people to come and watch the film in theatres?**

It is very important to get people’s attention and to get them to buy tickets. The process

of promotion is crucial for any film, big or small. It demands a certain budget which again we didn’t have. But fortunately, unlike before, independent filmmakers now have the

platform of Social media where they can advertise for free. We tried to make the best use of platforms like Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. It did reach some people and critics who wrote reviews in e-magazines and blogs. The entire promotional activity happened without spending a single penny simply because we couldn’t afford it.

We started working on *Teen Muhurat* in early 2017. The world around us changed a lot since then. For independent films, the verdict is more than how much money it makes. It is also about who the film touches and what the filmmaker learns from it. A small crew of 15 to 20 people made this film, a reality. Independent films are personal, maybe imperfect and flawed but truly original. Alejandro Iñárritu once said “The first film should not be perfect. That’s the poetry, it’s human, there’s something clumsy there — that’s exactly what I like”. It is thrilling for a director standing next to the counter to see the first stranger buy tickets from the box office. After the show, I stood near the exit to ask what they felt about the film. They started explaining to me what they liked in it and engaged in a discussion about the hidden meanings that they discovered while watching the film. The whole experience of *Teen Muhurat* broke multiple myths in me about making and releasing an independent film in India.

## **Breaking the Myth:**

I realised, the myths about filmmaking, film festivals, film business, release and distribution are created by those who continue to abide by a set of rules for a long time. Their inertia or inability to change becomes a resistance towards accepting anything new. I realised, we faced resistance at different stages because we were attempting something that goes against the grain. In future, one or two films like this might release in similar fashion. But to see more independent films release commercially in theatres, there should be a cultural change. Bringing a change is a long

and continuous process and it is very important for independent filmmakers and people in business to engage in a culture of conversation to see this change happen. Today's mainstream was at one point a disruptor to its predecessor. Independent cinema must exist to question the orthodoxy and to call for reform. The relationship between the filmmaker and the audience is a symbiotic one. It is very important to create the audience for the kind of film that we want to make and not to believe in what they say the audience want. The only way to achieve it is to keep doing what we believe in.

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