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Multiplex Exhibition and the New Marathi Cinema[1]

In April 2015, the government of Maharashtra made it mandatory for multiplex operators and owners to screen Marathi films in the prime-time slot. The order rapidly spilled into the public domain where the Marathi film industry supported this new policy, while the Hindi film industry, concentrated in Mumbai, criticised the renewed protectionism of the state government. In the resultant war of words on social media, political parties like the Shiv Sena, which also controls the Marathi Cine-Workers Union, quickly moved to claim a political point, rekindling the issue of 'Marathi pride'. Later the state government eased the mandatory screening principle for multiplexes. This incident points to the contestations in the realm of film exhibition, where the multiplex and its economics have assumed a centrality not just for the Hindi film industry but most significantly for the emergent new Marathi cinema.

The multiplex phenomenon in India has inaugurated discussions of urbanism and globalised public culture, with film exhibition assuming a social significance. Adrian Athique and Douglas Hill underscore the primacy of the multiplex in the rapid expansion of a 'leisure economy' in India, 'indicative of a wider shift towards a Western-inspired commercial society with massive

investments being made in consumer advertising and the building of thousands of shopping malls nationwide.'[2] The significance of the multiplex economy lies not only in the expansion of film viewing, it is now about consuming a 'particular sensorial experience.'[3] Film practice—the cumulative processes of filmmaking, distribution, and consumption—too has aligned to the emergence of the multiplex economy. Indexing this transformation is the aesthetic of the Hindi film, which has gradually incorporated regionalist representations, and popularised a newer form of narrative engagement termed as the 'multiplex film.'[4]

The promising studies of multiplex exhibition vis-à-vis mainstream cinemas, however, are yet to generate a cogent analysis probing the significance of this phenomenon to the re-emergence of several regional cinemas of India. This paper examines the progressing scenario of the new wave of Marathi cinema towards theorising that the cultural economy of the multiplex has prompted a consumerist shift of Marathi film culture. This trajectory, visible after *Shwaas* in 2003, presents a reorientation of the Marathi film industry, reformulating the aesthetic, structural, and ideological aspects of a regional cinema. A critical deliberation of film exhibition leads to an ideological unravelling of a film culture being shaped through the conflicts and social processes instigated by multiplex cinemas.

Before the Multiplex

Histories of Indian cinema explored through the realm of film exhibition, marking the cultural flows, slippages, and publics in the context of a national cinema, have elaborated on various aspects including that of: audience separation and publics in cinema houses[5]; specific sites of film exhibition[6]; urbanism and public consumption[7]; as well as the intersection of modernity, technology and the social experience of film viewing in the period of early cinema.[8] The emergent multiplex phenomenon has been studied in the context of urbanism and social geography significantly by Adrian Athique and Douglas Hill.[9] Intervening in the remapping of Indian film history from the perspective of film circulation, Ravi Vasudevan observes the tendency of a protectionist policy regime imposing a 'regional' distinctiveness on film practices, just after Independence, in various geographies of India. However, he points out that 'even within the formal constraints of territorial polities, there were a variety of possibilities for cultural flow beyond the territorial state.'[10] It is within these deliberations that my analysis of contemporary

Marathi cinema aims to chart the scenario before the multiplex, and the social interactions, contestations, and public culture of the new Marathi film that multiplex cinema has initiated.

Film exhibition before the arrival of the multiplex was more than a denominating entity. Its space in the larger expansion of cities reflected social structuring and public culture. The cinema house was emblematic of modernity, manifesting a distinctive identity, as both a locale, as well as a signifier of social and technological progress. The Project Cinema-City website has creatively explored the case of Bombay (now Mumbai), and provides an expansive picture of how the emergence of cinema houses with the growth of the city presents a material dimension to the cinema.[11] Also, as noted by Paroma Sadhana, 'the cinema theatres have been more than a projection room for films – they are simultaneously the city's heritage and its spatial landmarks; the citizens' sense of belonging and a cultural conglomerate.'[12] This materiality posits that exhibition sites are not simply passive conduits for public congregation but have an active interconnection: first as dominant sites of projecting films, and second as symbols of the social presence of cinema. The underlying reality of a cinema house is the public culture that it engenders, thus signifying a social instrumentality to the kind of films it screens. In Mumbai, the Bharatmata Cinema has a historical link to Marathi cinema and the urban working classes.[13] Similarly, a number of cinema houses are anchored in the middle-class experiences of public entertainment in cities.[14] Film exhibition sites are persistent spaces that construct notions of popular cinema from the perspective of its social life. In other words, the prevalence of a specific cinema in specific geographies has deeper societal linkages than that explained by textual analysis of films.

Stephen Hughes has elaborated on the primacy of considering film exhibition 'as a kind of performance – a unique interaction of people and projected media at a specific place and occasion.'[15] Identifying the lack of critical engagement with the exhibition of cinema in India, Hughes has argued that cinema as an institution works in a dynamic of its social circulation. Indian film studies, which primarily rests on textual interpretation and analysis, must account for the circulation and exhibition of films apart from considering them as objects whose cultural play is encapsulated in the text. 'One must be attentive to how films are constantly rearticulated through the specific historical situations of public exhibition and reciprocally constructed through a complex social interchange with audiences.'[16]

In the case of the Marathi cinema, its social processes—comprising

public circulation, patron-audiences, and textual aspects—have been crucial determinants of its historical trajectory. This section elaborates on the rural turn of Marathi cinema in the 1970s and 1980s leading to the crisis of this film industry in the 1990s. This is the period where the Marathi film industry sustained a rural and small-town market, negotiated the rise of the Hindi film, and saw the emergence of the television sector.

Deriving from information in trade journals, magazines, journalistic reports, and archival sources I first discuss the kind of films dominating this period. These sources are anecdotal at best but present significant pointers to social aspects of Marathi cinema.[17] Considering the scenario of film circulation in Maharashtra, it is observed that *mofussil* spectacles dominated this period.

The Mofussil Spectacles

Single and twin theatres were the prevalent sites of film screenings in a number of important towns in the state. However, a majority of these would show Hindi films along with B-grade cinema. In most towns, only two or three of the available theatres would screen Marathi films in select shows, like the matinee or morning timings.[18] A very interesting pattern that emerges out of the box-office collection data is the cyclic nature of Marathi film exhibition. Distributors would release films at only one location, like Sholapur or Ahmednagar, and then the film, depending on its initial box-office collections, would be showcased in other cities like Pune, Akola, Nagpur, etc. The intent was to economise expenditure on marketing and exhibition and at the same time ensure periodic box-office returns.

On the other hand, films were screened by a number of touring talkies that went into the interiors of Western Maharashtra, Vidarbha, and Marathwada. These touring cinemas became a prime attraction for rural audiences. B. V. Dharap explains how villagers would ensure screenings at various festival occasions by collecting money in the villages. He further specifies the popularity of touring cinemas in Maharashtra, and mentions that the cost of acquiring 16 mm rights of Marathi films had increased almost 30–40% in the 1980s. 'This has been due to the expanding popularity of Marathi films in the rural circuits that screen films on 16mm projectors (my translation).'[19] The preferred site of the touring talkies was the rural *jatras*, which ensured a mass audience and economic returns for exhibitors.

The presence of Marathi films[20] in the programme raises important questions. First, did the rural/small town circuit circulate any specific kinds of Marathi films? Second, can this be the determinant of Marathi films

incorporating the rural in their textual strategies? Third, does this point to a differentiation of audiences and thus public culture of Maharashtra?

The 1970s have a historical significance for Marathi cinema. The *tamasha* film—reintroduced by Anant Mane as a *tamasha*-social in 1959 with *Sangtye Aika*—was recast into a sexually inflected caricaturist comedy by Dada Kondke, famously popularised by his first film *Songadya* (dir. Govind Kulkarni, 1971). Throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, Kondke's films were to be definitive of the mass populist address that revolved around three coordinates: the sexualised female figure of the *tamasha* heroine, Kondke's caricatures which centered on his style of articulating double-meaning lines, and the song-dance sequences that incorporated the rural through lyrics and visualisation. With a flimsy plotline, narratives centre on the antics of the innocent, clumsy hero played by Kondke. The female *tamasha* performer, often played by Usha Chavan, complements Kondke's apparent innocence. The assemblage of comic theatrical scenarios successively presented but interspersed with the *lavani/tamasha* sequence produced a spectacle of rusticity that recreated, through the cinema, a social pleasure similar to the performances of a live *tamasha*.[21] The overwhelming popularity of Kondke and his films, however, was due more to their circulation in the village circuit as an attraction in the rural *jatra*s and other ceremonial spaces.[22] At the same time, the urban mill workers and Marathi-speaking lower middle-class made a legend out of Dada Kondke.[23] The popular circulation of Konde's films and cinematic persona accentuates the idea of a spectacle he successfully fabricated. The figure of the sexually objectified female *tamasha* dancer engendered a risqué visuality reframing its performative function observed in rural Maharashtra. This visualised a prevailing folk form on the screen, underpinning the populist address of Kondke's films. Kondke's blundering heroics extended by spoken innuendoes projected a spectacle of the rustic Marathi world effectively confining the respectable cinema to urban circulation.[24]

Marathi cinema of the 1970s and 1980s can be termed *mofussil* spectacles, where narrative content resonated with an address to small town/rural audiences. Incorporating real, outdoor locations, Kondke's films reference the small town or village visually and aurally. The stereotyping of the rural through gestural aspects and inter-relationships of characters intensifies this, as does the distinctly rustic idiom of dialogues articulated with appropriate nuances. By an assemblage of several available performing and folk forms, Kondke reimagined the cinema's significance in the social spaces beyond those of the big cities like Bombay and Pune. Apart from the

emphasis on *mofussil* narratives, these films popularised revelry of the non-serious kind. These spectacles were thus influential in reframing the rural, where the Marathi cinema's narrative depictions reinforced the vernacular connection with audiences. At the same time, these films, when screened in the cities, became an attraction for migrants making up the lower-middle classes.[25] This instanced a dispersed, previously subdued, sub-culture where the screen persona of Kondke became the projected figure of celebrating lowbrow humor and sexuality.

Films like *Ekta Jiv Sadashiv* (dir. Govind Kulkarni, 1972), *Ram Ram Gangaram* (dir. Dada Kondke, 1977), and *Pandu Hawaldar* (dir. Dada Kondke, 1975), present a deliberate distinction of the city and village spaces, generating a *mofussil*-like atmosphere for the audiences to revel in. *Ekta Jiv* narrates the relocation of a village youth to the city where his real parents live. His struggles to accommodate himself to city life then become the focus of the narrative. Despite the comedy arising out of the situational clashes of rural and urban, the film incorporated recognisable experiences of migrant workers in cities and small towns. *Pandu Hawaldar* is a parody of the 1970s Hindi films like *Zanjeer* (1973), which famously featured the 'angry young man' trope. In Kondke's version, however, there is an inversion of the premise of the angry young man as a representative of the lower-middle classes caught between an inept bureaucracy and criminal violence. Pandu occupies the minor ranks of the police force where his simplicity and honesty draws the anger of the underworld. The underworld sends Paru (Usha Chavan) to seduce and implicate Pandu, but she ends up falling in love with him and becomes instrumental in arresting the goons. *Pandu Hawaldar* is set in 1970s Bombay with direct visual references to criminal activities like smuggling of gold watches by sea routes. To complete the parody of the middle classes, the *hawaldars* evoke a Marathi inflected Hindi while interacting with various traders and criminals. With at least two distinct references to the then contemporary Hindi hit films of Amitabh Bachchan, *Pandu Hawaldar's* urban setting is a recreation of the world of lower middle-class Marathi workers directed at the captive audience of 'angry young man' Hindi cinema. The film, rather than inverting the seriousness of the angry young man narrative, however, revels in refashioning familiar scenarios to elicit a comic in-between-ness of the migrant Marathi-speaking populace in a metropolis like Bombay.

The *mofussil* spectacles assimilated the collective communitarian pleasures that are an intrinsic aspect of folk performances in Maharashtra. They also inaugurated a comic genre of the Marathi film which enabled

an inter-exchange of rural lucidity, *tamasha* dance, music and poetry, and sexualised colloquial language, where the spectacles were uninhibited by religious or feudal morality. The collective aspect of public pleasures that echoed through the post-viewing experiences or replaying audio versions of the songs in festival settings extended Kondke's screen acts into everyday life. These films thus assumed iconicity, aggregating textual and social interactivity of popular Marathi cinema.

The *mofussil* spectacles were the dominant trend in the exhibition circuits of Marathi films in the late 1970s and 1980s. However, mirroring the tendencies of Hindi cinema, the Marathi film industry too produced a realist art cinema and a version of middle-class comedy. *Sinhasan* (dir. Jabbar Patel, 1979), *Akriet* (dir. Amol Palekar, 1981), and *Umbartha* (dir. Jabbar Patel, 1982) best illustrate the realist cinema.[26] The Kondke spectacles were complemented by a comic genre of films, centred on actors like Ashok Saraf and Laxmikant Berde. These films coupled a middle-class social morality with situational and gestural comic performances. *Navri Mile Navryala* (dir. Sachin Pilgaonkar, 1984), *Dhoom Dhadaka* (dir. Mahesh Kothare, 1985), and other films of this type, straddled a middle path of combining the rural and the urban in its narratives, shadowing the middle-class Hindi cinema of Basu Chatterjee and Hrishikesh Mukherjee.[27]

A major historical consideration that follows from the dominance of the *mofussil* spectacles is the absences indicative of the social consumption of Marathi films in the 1980s. As I discuss below, these absences are marked by two developments: first, is the scenario of missing spectators, and second is the valorisation of realist cinema by middle-class audiences.

The Missing Spectators

One of the striking aspects of the exhibition scenario in the 1980s was the decline of urban audiences in cinema halls affecting seat occupancies and box office collections of Marathi films.[28] In such a scenario, the popularity of the *mofussil* spectacles that were predominantly exhibited in rural circuits ensured the survival of the Marathi film industry. Another factor that sustained the Marathi cinema was the entertainment tax refund scheme of the government of Maharashtra.[29] However, industry professionals voiced a common complaint about the absent audience in cinema halls that screened Marathi films.

A combination of factors is cited for the decline in the number of audiences. The introduction of the colour television, rapidly expanding

videocassette circulation, and the dominance of Hindi cinema at local cinema houses are some of the most significant ones. Anil Zhankar has observed: 'In the 1980s, the number of audience in cinema houses reduced drastically. The arrival of colour television was the primary reason for this.' (my translation).[30] Similarly, Sudhir Nandgaonkar has stressed that: 'The Marathi audience has literally deserted the Marathi films in the age of cable and satellite revolution.'[31] While the first two also affected the decline in numbers of Hindi cinema audiences, the latter points to a spectating choice of audiences as well as the expanding dominance of the Bombay cinema in

Circle Vikas

cities and small towns. In addition, the number of cinema houses screening Marathi films was very few. Only certain cinema houses like Alaka in Pune, Bharatmata in Mumbai, Vikas in Nashik, and Prabhat in Sholapur screened Marathi films in the 1980s with some consistency.

The case of the missing spectators indicates the transition of social consumption of cinema and visual entertainment in general, as other forms like Marathi theatre too encountered absence of audiences.[32] The shift towards national television of the Marathi audiences from 1982–1990 is significant. The daily interactivity with familiar Marathi actors, directors, writers and musicians in the chief cast of various television programs underscored this transition of the middle-class audiences from the theatre and cinema to the home environment and national television.[33] A more significant cause, however, for the dwindling number of audiences is visible in the changes of and around the sites of film exhibition. In the post-Emergency period, there was an expansion of urban infrastructure. New housing schemes rose

in the suburban areas of Bombay, Pune, Nashik, and Nagpur, prompting a migratory effect. The middle classes moved out of the congested lanes that

Damodar Nashik

surrounded most cinema halls. A floating population of migrant workers and low-income labourers consequently occupied these neighbourhoods. A howling-whistling public then outnumbered the middle-class spectator, alienating the family audience and the conservative intellectual. Madhu Jain remarks on the changes of film viewing in the 1980s: 'Much of the gentile class had retreated to the comfort of television and video. Left in the cinema halls were the children of the mean streets.'[34] Ravi Vasudevan too correlates the changes in public spaces, especially around the cinema halls, to the trends of film exhibition. Elaborating on this he quotes Kirit Desai, the owner of Moti Cinema in Delhi: 'Better-off residents had shifted elsewhere, and the old city cinemas were no longer attracting families and women audiences, always considered crucial to the cinema's social legitimacy.'[35]

In the 1980s, the National Film Development Corporation eased restrictions for the import of foreign films. Effectively, for the lower sections of the urban audience, watching a foreign (often Hollywood) film having some amount of nudity became more desirable than the *tamasha* or Kondke film. Moreover, this was the period where the cinema house itself began losing its significance as an inextricable aspect of Marathi public culture. As narrated by Anil Zhankar in an interview with me: 'With the access to services like hiring of a video cassette recorder, and video cassettes, lower middle class audiences would watch several films together in a neighborhood site of a *chawl* or common spaces of apartment complexes.'[36] Thus, the nature of a heterogeneous public spectating experience shifted to one of a largely

homogenous familial one. Such practices of film viewing also reflected the necessity of avoiding cinema houses, which were uncomfortable and offered a feeling of insecurity for female audiences.

To sum up, the missing spectators seemed to fuel the dominance of the Hindi film in the exhibition sector. In addition, it is likely that the aspirational desire for a more secure film viewing experience was manifested in the retreat to the home screens of television. Significantly, it marks a troubled period of Marathi cinema, where the state renewed its protectionist intervention to bring a turnaround in the industry by instituting entertainment tax waiver for screening Marathi films. More importantly, the absent audiences underscore the primacy of the middle-class spectator as the patron consumer of culture in urban Maharashtra.

Middle-Class Public Culture

The urban middle-class audience has been the primary consumer of Marathi cultural production, which includes, apart from the cinema, the print culture of Maharashtra and Marathi theatre. The consequence of this audience for Marathi cinema in the 1980s and 1990s is primarily the arrival of realist films of the Indian new wave. Perhaps due to the 'passive revolution'[37] prompted by films like *Ankur* and *Manthan*, Marathi films sought to emphasise the realist aesthetic, distinguishing themselves from the *mofussil* spectacles.[38] The exhibition configurations of this realist cinema in Pune, where films like *Umbartha* and *Akreit* got the maximum box-office returns, support such a distinction.[39] The case of *Umbartha* highlights this. The only theatre where *Umbartha* was screened in October 1982 was Prabhat Cinema in Pune—a cinema house entrenched in the social imagination of middle-class Marathi public culture. The film had a very profitable run of four weeks, with sold out shows for the first three weeks.[40] The middle classes who had by the 1980s assumed significance as the nouveau bourgeoisie seem to have responded to the nature of this realist cinema that reflected and critiqued aspects of modern Marathi civil society.[41] Such patronage suggests a differential public culture that seemed to distinguish between the realist cinema—as 'good' cinema—and the *mofussil* spectacles, which were deemed vacuous and a threat to social morality.

Middle-class public culture became even more pertinent with the expansion of national and local television, especially in the cities. Specifically, for the realist cinema the expansion of Doordarshan programming emerged as an alternate mode of viewing.[42] As noted by M. Rahman: '[T]he films of

many of the well-known directors from alternative cinema have been shown first not in cinema theatres but on the national network of Doordarshan.'[43] Pradip Krishnen pertinently observes that the broadcast of parallel cinema on national television facilitated the emergence of a new middle-class public culture:

> The Parallel Cinemawallahs had found their audience. A captive audience, admittedly, unable to switch to another channel, but a vast, unprecedented audience nonetheless. It is probably not a coincidence that somewhere around this time, in the mid-l980s, the Parallel Cinema attained celebrity status in India.[44]

When the Indian new wave appeared to be losing its relevance in the late 1980s, state-run television brought much of this cinema to the middle-class public. In the case of Marathi realist films, majorly financed by the NFDC or the state government, this circulation sustained a discretely urban public culture of middle-class home entertainment.

Such a public culture signifies a social peculiarity of film consumption in Maharashtra. It indicates the self-referential address of Marathi film culture, instancing the critical discourses of 'cinema and its publics' that alludes to the distinct inter-relationship between films and its audiences forged by the commonality of language. It follows that a middle-class public encourages a cinematic regime that does not destabilise or disrupt the normative culture of a socially secure cinema. While realist cinema sought to redefine the aesthetic tendencies of specific film practices in India, it never posed any real threat to the populist consumption of mainstream films. It is thus not an accident that Marathi realist films were primary circulated in spaces dominated by middle-class audiences. In the public realm, these films were received as exemplary instances of an accomplished cinematic engagement with aspects of Marathi society.

The reception of Marathi cinema before the arrival of the multiplex thus went through two rapid stages. The first was the populist consumption of the rural comedies and *tamasha* films characterised by Dada Kondke. The second was the discomfort about this type of cinema felt by middle-class audiences who had unmistakably migrated to Hindi cinema first and to television later. Both eventualities were predicated in the sphere of film consumption and thus decisive for the textual tendencies of this cinema. By the end of the 1990s, public exhibition of Marathi films was pushed to a marginal space in some select cinema houses. As described by Syed Firdaus Ashraf:

> In Bombay, the capital of Maharashtra, only two theatres, Kohinoor and Bharat Mata, screen Marathi films; in neighbouring Thane only Prabhat screens these flicks. Even in Pune, the capital of the Marathas, just one theatre out of 32 in the city regularly screens Marathi films. All the other theatres screen Marathi films at irregular intervals, especially since the number of films being made have reduced.[45]

When the multiplex appeared in 1997, it did not bring about a sudden change of situation. As we shall see, the multiplex first displaced and then relocated the Marathi film audience within a renewed framework of consumerism and leisure. I further argue that it was this reframing of the exhibition context that characterised the emergence of the new Marathi film.

Multiplex Economics

Maharashtra got its first multiplex in the year '1997 when Samrat Cinema at Goregaon… was upgraded to Cinemax with two screens with its seating capacity reduced from 1500 at the single screen to 698 for both screens together.'[46] In the next five years, the cities of Nashik (Cinemax, Adlabs) and Pune (Inox, Cinemax) too developed the mall-multiplex, transforming the neighbourhoods in which they came up. This inaugurated a new regime of the cultural economy of leisure, where consumerist frenzy supplanted the public spectating notion of 'going to the cinema'. Aparna Sharma has elaborated on two aspects of this. First, she illustrates the working of the multiplex with its multiplicity of screens providing a variety menu for audiences. Second, Sharma argues that due to the availability of multiple screens a large body of non-mainstream films received public screenings:

> The increasingly curious mix of parallel, regional and art cinema along with the mainstream, both domestic and foreign, is what distinguishes most multiplexes in India, such that the Indian multiplex has come to position itself, not so much by identifying with particular kinds of films, as by being a theatre for accessing the 'latest' from a wide spread of cinematic fare – mainstream or fringe – in comfortable, colourful and inviting surroundings.[47]

Multiplex economics has another dimension of spatiality that makes the site a captivating symbol of contemporary leisure and entertainment. This combined with the phenomenal investments in building or remodelling cinema houses has inaugurated a new phase of film exhibition as an integrated business activity.[48]

Multiplex cinemas signify the ongoing urbanisation of the small town cultural world. An aspirational urban public that seems to have adopted the mall-multiplex phenomenon as a reinforcement of a globalised lifestyle is its symptom. As pointed out by Athique and Hill, the 'new economy' has been influential in authenticating the multiplex leisure experience:

> It is no accident, then, that the multiplex cinema has taken off in India at precisely a point when the increasing influence of the 'new economy', where income is generated through global services such as IT or insurance or retail spending, and the steadily rising affluence of those who work in such sectors has given further impetus to economic policies specially favouring new middle-class lifestyles.[49]

For the film exhibition sector, the multiplex has changed older models in favour of corporatised business practices, signalling a transformation of how cinema is consumed in the public domain. Thus, the older system of buying tickets after standing in long queues is now replaced by new media enabled smartphone apps. The eateries that used to sell cheap snacks outside the cinema halls are now shut, while audiences are persuaded to purchase popcorn, soft drinks, etc. inside the cinema hall. Fundamentally, the multiplex has come to substantiate capitalist investment in the cinema as a business sector, enabling its rapid constructions in the context of urbanisation of India's small towns and cities.

In terms of programming, multiplex cinemas have gradually moved from screening Hollywood films to Hindi films and finally to a mixed bag of English, Hindi, and regional language films. Aparna Sharma has presented a preliminary survey of the kind of films screened at the multiplex outside the North-Indian territories:

> As one moves away from the Hindi heartland, the film menu tilts correspondingly in favour of native languages and no longer reads bilingually (i.e. comprising only Hindi and English films). Neither is it always trilingual, say in cities like Mumbai and Delhi, or regions such as South India. Here films in the immediate native language get complemented with those from other regions, in differing dialects.[50]

Distribution in digital formats and subtitling of films has been proven to break down the earlier barriers of language-specific geographies of film exhibition. This has led to the conspicuous presence of Marathi films in targeted multiplexes in Hyderabad, Bengaluru, Surat, or Indore. The ease of circulating digital prints along with subtitles has been instrumental in exploiting audience segments outside the traditional circuits of Marathi

film exhibition. Typically, such screenings are over a single weekend and incorporated into the multiplex located in a neighbourhood with a concentration of Marathi-speaking people. Consequentially revenues for film distributors and exhibitors, especially of regional cinemas, have increased. Multiplex economics has thus generated a surplus space that regional cinemas can occupy.

The continuance of such occupancy, however, would depend on a number of factors, including the aesthetic and thematic tendencies of the films, audiences repeatedly coming to the multiplexes and purchasing tickets to watch them, and the economic access to the screening spaces. Since the Marathi and similar film industries are primarily derived from the linguistic-territorial notion of the 'regional', their re-emergence presents an intriguing scenario where critical consideration of exhibition sites confirms a vernacular version of globalisation. It is in this context that the multiplex has emerged as the mainstay of the new Marathi film. With almost every film now screened in multiplexes across Maharashtra and other regions, the earlier localised mass entertainment purpose of film exhibition has assumed both a financial and social significance.

New Marathi Films

The contemporary new wave of Marathi cinema began with the critical and international success of *Shwaas* (2003). *Shwaas* was co-produced by a group of eight people, including the lead actor Arun Nalawade. As recounted by one of the producers, Vishvanath Nayak:

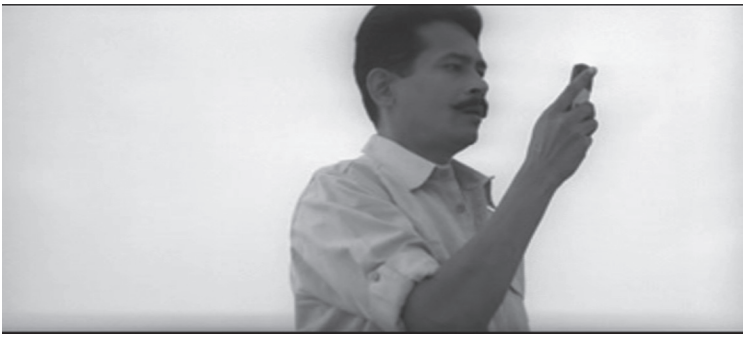
> The total investment in the film was approximately Rs. 50 lakhs and it was shot in 30 days in locations in Sindhudurg, Konkan, Pune and at the KEM Hospital in Mumbai. It took us one and half years to complete the post-production and release the film. But the film was an instant success and people of all linguistic groups flocked to see it after it won many awards.'[51]

The narrative of *Shwaas* develops the crisis of a grandfather, Vichare, when he learns that his grandson, Parshuram (Parshya), has retinoblastoma and, once operated on, would lose sight forever. Woven through this crisis are existential questions concerning life, vision—as represented by Parshya's euphoric life in his picturesque Konkan village—and blindness, which is foreseen by the wise grandfather. The narrative employs flashbacks to shift the perspective from the progression of events in the city of Pune (where Vichare has brought Parshya for medical treatment), to his reminiscences of Parshya's

life in the village. These are perspectivised through Vichare's distraught state and progressively assume a poetic quality that is seemingly devoid of any narrative functionality. The film won the President's medal and was India's official entry for the annual academy awards in 2004.[52] The success of *Shwaas* vindicated independent production, well-planned distribution strategy, wider and prominent circulation in urban circuits, and the contemporary content of its narratives associated with Pune. Since 2004, these aspects have accorded the moniker 'new' to contemporary Marathi film practice.

The new Marathi film has a number of distinguishing characteristics. Its industrial aspects indicate changes in the mode of production evident in the contemporaneous flow of filmmaking, corporatised distribution, and multiplex-centred exhibition. Textually, films are discernible by the reframing of the rural in a narrativised critical-realism and a prevenient temporality of narratives.

Shwaas seems to have derived its aesthetic tendencies from the realism of Indian new wave cinema with long duration shots, gesturally controlled but detailed dramatic sequences, and a narrative experimenting with flashbacks. The emphasis on restraining the narrative and making it progress through realistic events and situations seems to eventually influence the shift away from the theatrical, scenario-driven storytelling of Marathi cinema. Later films like *Savarkhed Ek Gaon* (dir. Rajiv Patil, 2004), *Valu* (dir. Umesh Vinayak Kulkarni, 2008), or *Deool* (dir. Umesh Vinayak Kulkarni, 2009) present a similar approach in their narrative processes. *Valu* relocates the sparseness and conceit of reflexive Iranian films like *The Wind Will Carry Us* and *Through the Olive Trees* into the vernacular landscape of a village in western Maharashtra. The film is about a forest officer deputed to capture the village bull (*valu*) that has gone wild. His younger brother, an aspiring documentary filmmaker,



Valu

accompanies him. The narrative then unfolds as the villagers present themselves for the documentary shoot. Once the presence of this film-within-a-film is established, the narrative expands to depict village life in a semi-comic, satiric perspective. After some attempts the bull is apprehended and sedated, and the forest officer emerges as the hero of a trivial incident concerning the taming of a domestic animal. The presence of the state's official in the village is the point of intervention as the film narrativises the comic differences between villagers taking as its starting point the adventures of the vagrant bull.

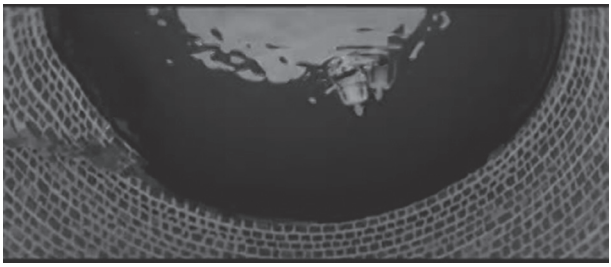
A similar emphasis on narrativisation is observed in *Deool*. Here the narrative centres on the transformation of a village called Mangrul from a sleepy, dusty, undistinguished space into a temple-town of some significance. The narrative is an allegory about the politics of transformation in the context of capitalism that is staging a redirection of lifestyle and society in cities and small towns across India.

While *Shwaas*'s production attempted to explore the realist mode, the filmmaking process of works like *Valu*, *Deool, Shala, Jogwa* etc. is derived from the industrial mode of production that circumscribes much of narrative filmmaking. Their budgets were higher, most of the actors were trained performers, the musical and dance sequences were exclusively produced for the film, and their visual aesthetics reflect a more contemporary approach to cinematography. I will return to these characteristics when considering their significance for multiplex audiences. However, for now, it is essential to emphasise that the adoption of the industrial mode also reflects the filmmakers' perspicacity towards film practice. The new generation of filmmakers seems to oscillate between the older theatrical storytelling tendency and the more contemporary aspects of art-cinema aesthetics. Moreover, they are acutely aware of the evolving trends of film distribution and exhibition.[53]

Valu

The critical-realist tendency of this cinema is observed in the narrativisation of social themes that frames the rural as a landscape, rather than just as a setting for narratives.[54] As proposed by Martin Lefebvre, the manner in which the landscape is perspectivised by narrative cinema gives it an autonomy not limited to being just a setting for the plot.[55] In *Shwaas*, such a perspectivisation is observed as the narrative shifts from events in the city, where we see Vichare taking Parshya for various check-ups and consultations with the doctor, to the grandfather's reminiscences. This is composed as a series of montage sequences of the coastal village. These sequences effectively replace a melodrama of excess (which characterised older Marathi films), and at the same time underscores the centrality of the landscape for the young Parshya.

Deool and *Valu* evoke the landscape as embodying village life, as something from which the people are not dissociated. This textual strategy of imagining through the landscape seems to emphasise the significance of the regional in its heterogeneous 'cultural differences'[56] rather than as a homogenous 'rural' stereotyped by aspects of gestures and spoken dialect. The era of *mofussil* spectacles had contained the Marathi film within typecasts of *tamasha*-comedy-ruralist representations. This was further confirmed, as elaborated above, in its primarily rural circuits of exhibition. The new Marathi film exhibits a deeper engagement with Maharashtra's societal differences, enabling a multiplicity of expressions and genres, diversity of content and, most significantly, a reframing of the rural through a narrative process of realist aesthetics. The return of audiences to watch this cinema in the multiplex



Vihir

is thus predicated on projecting a ruralist narrative in a critical framework, where the films project the inherent social differences evident in the Marathi social sphere.

Vihir (dir. Umesh Vinayak Kulkarni, 2009) exemplifies this reframed engagement with the Marathi rural landscape. The film is a subjective

exploration from the perspective of two adolescent boys in which the vestigial feudalism of a Marathi Brahmin family is laid bare through a ruminative, critical-realistic depiction of a marriage in the summer holidays. Drawing from the Marathi author G. A. Kulkarni's erudite allegories, *Vihir* presents an open-ended narrative where several questions are posed through two journeys. The first of these is the impressionistic, individuated restlessness of Nachiket, who has just appeared for the Secondary School Certificate (SSC) board exams and lives in Pandharpur. His father is an alcoholic and is depicted as a social failure. The film begins with Nachiket narrating his story to his younger cousin Sameer, who stays in Pune. This exchange of letters reveals the inquisitive outlook of Nachiket. The marriage of the youngest aunt brings the family together at their maternal grandfather's village in the interiors of Maharashtra. Here the two begin to make sense of the disconnect between three generations of the family. Their maternal uncle is a nonconformist, almost a failed rebel, who has taken to classical music and alcohol. His wife has just had a baby, and her world is thus confined to the ancestral *wada* (house). The old grandfather has farms in the village and is one of the last of the landed gentry whose Brahmanical way of life has a deterministic effect on the family. The grandfather's delusional sister represents a glorified past that has been swept away in the processes of social changes. Nachiket's ruminations mark the boys' interaction with the landscape, and impart a metaphorical significance to the newly constructed *vihir* (well) on the farm. Sameer is an expert swimmer who intends to compete in the city, while Nachiket needs the help of floating sticks tied to his back, a symbolic reference to his dysfunctional family and absent father. The two start enjoying their daily swimming sessions in the deep well. Sameer is called back to the city to participate in the swimming selection trials, and as he leaves the perspective of the film changes. Sameer returns to a grieving ancestral house, where the grandfather declares that Nachiket has drowned in the well. The marriage takes place as planned but the world of Sameer changes for good. Unable to make sense of the family's mundane reactions to Nachiket's death, Sameer runs away from home on a journey to a world that has hardly been explored by Marathi cinema. Sameer's rite of passage is reminiscent of Kiarostami's *Where Is My Friend's House?* as well as Mani Kaul's *Arrival*. The first association is especially evident in the visual situating of Sameer's wanderings in the rural landscape of western Maharasthra. It is referenced in the narrative when he meets an old shepherd who directs him back to a journey homeward. The symbolic presence of the old man is instrumental in the Kiarostami film where

the young Ahmed meets an elderly cleric in the streets of Poshteh as night falls and the scene assumes a sinister atmosphere. A sequence of this journey depicts Sameer arriving at a stone quarry. As a reversal of *Arrival*, where items of public consumption, including labour, are represented arriving in the city of Bombay, Sameer's presence at the quarry suggests the harshness of a life outside the known frames of urban existence. This quest attempts to answer a poignant question posed by Nachiket: how can one be an inseparable part of this world without being physically absent from it?

The film seems to emphasise that landscape, nature, and human elements in their uncomplicated, rudimentary aspects already make such living a reality, and what one needs is the perception to look beyond the precepts of social, familial, or religious systems. The minimalist style of the narrative assumes a metaphorical significance through several motifs, especially that of

Killa

water confined in a round vessel or the swimming pool, and thus emphasises the reflective depth of the water in the *vihir*. Such motifs are montaged to a specific spatial context representing the subjective thought processes of Sameer. They generate a doubling effect of detaching the viewer from the progression of narrative events, and of projecting a symbolic value off the specific sites, activities, and landscape of the narrative. A marked effect of this aesthetic is to evoke a critical-realist perspective for the audience, where it is confronted with philosophical questions arising out of the social life that the two boys cannot escape from. Such an aesthetic treatment thus stands out as a defining tendency of not just *Vihir* but a series of new Marathi films.

Another significant aspect of the new Marathi film is its reciprocity with contemporaneous cultural contexts. These are evoked in a prevenient time—a temporality that has just passed by, and thus can be recalled through appropriate references. *Shwaas* established this strategy of locating narratives

in the ongoing transformations of cities. This is visible in the sequence where Vichare takes out Parshya for a ride in the city and the first place that they visit is the glitzy mall. *Deool*, as an allegorical critique of the capitalist tendencies entrenched in small towns and villages, parodies a number of aspects of contemporary life. The traditional *tamasha* in the film is shown as a live performance, to whose rapid rhythms the temple-building activity is montaged and reaches a frenzy. By the time this performance is over, Mangrul has been transformed, allegorically, through the reinvention of an age-old deity into a temple town flush with money. The prevalence of cellphones among the village youth assumes a centrality when it is used to send out mass messages for donations to build this temple. Such a temporal placement of narratives borders on a nostalgic recall to a time that has passed but is still recognisable. It suggests a conflicting play where previous experiences of everydayness are being replaced by a more fragmented kind of urban leisure.

The recent *Killa* (dir. Avinash Arun, 2014) illustrates such a rupturing of the Marathi quotidian life that had been defined since the 1960s by the urban middle classes. The film centres on the small town experience of eleven-year-old Chinmay, who has been displaced from Pune to Guhagar (a coastal town in western Maharastra) following the transfer of his mother, a government employee, and the recent death of his father. An aspect of Chinmay's past life, which is caricatured and thus shown to be irrelevant to the context of Guhagar, is his being a smart city-bred kid. In the new school of Guhagar, the teacher introduces Chinmay as an intelligent achiever who has won the state government scholarship. This is an achievement that most Marathi parents perceive as demonstrative of intellectual abilities and as an indicator of social stature. *Killa*, however, displaces these notions when Chinmay befriends the most notorious group of boys in the class. This brief friendship reconstructs an experience that is reminiscent of a not-so-distant past, where the vitiations of the contemporary are yet to surface.

The new Marathi cinema's projections of social life in a prevenient temporality are a reframing of a past that has been preserved in time. Such a strategy recalls Gilles Deleuze's elaboration of 'recollection-image' and the 'perception of the past' from the vantage point of the present: 'the present itself exists only as an infinitely contracted past.'[57] Thus the idea of a narrative temporality that is decidedly set and evolves in a 'past time' is a representational technique to perceive the contemporaneous by recourse to the 'sheets of past'[58] still apprehensible in the present. The reminiscence that this prevenient temporality evokes is to address the past, packaged in

the contemporary, primarily signified by spatial setting of narratives. Such a textual tendency thus suggests an intervention in the perceptive regimes of the contemporary urban Marathi society that now finds itself in a time warped through the new economies of leisure and entertainment.

Multiplex and the New Marathi Cinema

The above discussion was intended to situate the condition of Marathi cinema before the arrival of the multiplex as well as to specify some conspicuous tendencies of the new Marathi films. Contemporary Marathi cinema has unveiled a propensity for a new film culture related to the expansion of the mall-multiplex social experience. It is important therefore to consider how this film practice has intersected with multiplex economics to emerge as the site of a reformulated regional film industry.

The prominence of the new Marathi cinema in the last decade presents two scenarios. Firstly, since the 2000s there has been a perceptible evolution out of the cycle of filmmaking targeted at profiteering off subsidies and grants schemes. The exigencies of this approach are reflected in the dispersed mode of production of the *mofussil* spectacles. It was dispersed as it relied heavily on informal financing, actors and technicians were employed as the need arose, and its locales were variously Bombay, Kolhapur, or Pune. It overlooked investments in exhibition, as distributors would book cinema houses that were most affordable at any given time, screening films in a cyclic manner. Moreover, a number of the *mofussil* spectacles were produced solely for the rural touring exhibition circuits. As far as technical practices were concerned, this dispersed mode of production is most recognisable in the low production values of Marathi cinema till the 1970s and 1980s. The filmmaker Mahesh Kothare has rightly identified the problem: 'The Marathi film industry in the 1970s was not doing very well. Movies were made mostly for the rural population and were not that technically sound. This scheme [of reimbursement] helped the industry thrive.'[59]

Marathi cinema after 2004, however, has transcended the constraints of producing films with limited technical inputs and finances. The new Marathi films have inaugurated a technical evolution from the earlier era of *mofussil* spectacles. There is a striking improvement in cinematographic, sound, and postproduction aspects of the films. What specifically marks this film practice is the multiplex exhibition-centric mode of production. There is thus an inverse compulsion for the new Marathi cinema to align with the expectations of filmmaking that corresponds with the sensorial aspects of glitzy multiplexes.

The second scenario concerns the commercial success of the new Marathi films at the box-office.[60] Despite the competing exhibition economics of the Hindi cinema at the multiplex, the new Marathi films have had profitable box-office returns. Distributors leverage income off multiplexes in the cities, ensuring consistent returns on their investments. This has also led to distributors turning producers, or investing money into projects anticipating good ticket sales.[61] This system has ensured availability of capital to fund film projects. Consequently, renewed demand has increased annual production numbers from about five films in 1997[62] to about 80 films in 2007.

The more pertinent questions, however, arise from the periodic calls by Marathi filmmakers and critics to Marathi audiences to support their cinema.[63] Furthermore, considering that the Marathi film industry has adapted to the multiplex economic model, what social contestations has this engendered or intensified?

One of the major concerns expressed by filmmakers, actors, and critics of the Marathi film industry has been the apathy of Marathi audiences towards its cinematic output. The acclaimed music director Sudhir Phadke as well as the then Chief Minister of Maharashtra Vilasrao Deshmukh had expressed that the responsibility of helping the Marathi film industry rests in the hands of its audience; at least once a month Marathi audiences must buy a ticket to watch Marathi films.[64] This state of apathy gradually changed after the success of *Shwaas*. With multiplexes opening in the major cities of Pune and Nashik in western Maharashtra, audiences were presented with a better and more palatable space for leisure and entertainment. In a short span of time, the multiplex and the mall had become a space where young college-going students spent leisure time. The middle classes found the environs of the multiplex refreshing and relaxing without the hustle and public scrutiny of the single screen theatres. More important was the rapid pace at which the combined integrated leisure experience of the mall-multiplex assumed importance in the social life of these cities. Films like *Bal Gandharva*, *Natrang,* and *Mi Shivajiraje Bhosale Boltoy* had profitable runs at both single screen cinema houses and the available multiplexes.[65] Notwithstanding a small period of about five weeks, when no Hindi film was released in 2009,[66] the revenues of Marathi cinema have increased in the last decade.

In the realm of public culture, therefore, two factors seem to mark the augmented circulation of Marathi cinema. The first is the contiguity of disposable incomes with the opportunities to experience global products and leisure at attractive locales. The second is the reframing of the new

Marathi film as a social experience through the matrix of the multiplex. The reflection of aspiration in an attendant leisure experience is made possible at a regional and local level. The Marathi film attracts the aspirational crowd with contemporaneous narratives rendered in a visually appealing form. This, however, has not diminished calls for audiences to support the Marathi film industry in much larger numbers. Even after a decade of the turnaround in this industry, the contestation with Hindi cinema is an unavoidable reality.

The term 'leisure experience' has been used to describe the societal function of the multiplex in India. It points to the integral aspect of visiting a mall, dining, playing games, shopping, and watching a film. As much as this defines the functional experience of the multiplex, the concept of 'leisure' is derived from the products and services being offered and consumed in this site.[67] The ideological dimension of the multiplex cinema points to the growing dominance of this 'leisure experience' becoming the pattern of public entertainment. At a local level, the projection of 'leisure' through the lustre of the multiplex has triggered newer social dynamics of identifying with this site, suggesting a performance of satisfying the social expectations of the mall-multiplex resulting in the decency effect.

The decency effect is prompted by what Phil Hubbard has proposed as a phenomenological interaction of people in and with the physical space of the mall-multiplex, thus 'embodying' a social act with a behavioural instrumentality.[68] Compulsions of normative behaviour are not new for the public experience of Indian cinema. The desire for norms or ordainments of decency in cinema houses has been theorised as the 'formation of a public' against the general threat to the manner in which films are watched.[69] In the regime of the multiplex, adherence to the conventions of decency must be understood as both a sign of a lifestyle and demarcation of social activity as 'normative' public conduct. Leisure experience thus institutes an ideological dimension, visible in the politics of segregation, where decency defines the boundaries of the formation of a new class of aspirational public. An aspect of such cultural politics has been highlighted by Athique and Hill as the expanding gap between the affluent and the affected.[70] This also posits a spatial distancing between single screen theatres and the multiplexes. The former now occupies crowded neighbourhoods, while the latter is located in more upscale suburban areas where the middle classes now reside.

Segregation is also discerned in the manner in which the multiplex is projected as a site primarily for an urban populace. As observed by Aparna Sharma: '[The multiplex] has remained an urban, largely middle and upper

middle class leisure pursuit, with its highly priced tickets excluding the masses crowded in the lower regions of the income graph.'[71] This not only differentiates between 'urban' and 'rural' visitors to the multiplex; it also advances a distinction of consumerist tastes. There seems to be little in the multiplex site to attract 'rural' demographics other than a sense of it being an attraction that can be visited once a year. Consequently, the multiplex leisure experience is dominated by the 'urban' and markedly driven by consumerism. For rural geographies the multiplex, and the new Marathi cinema's relevance, has not transcended the inherent differences of social hierarchies. The new Marathi cinema's sphere of circulation is thus predominantly urban, leaving out rural demographics as audience as well as consumer.

Another pertinent ideological dimension of segregation is reflected in the historical contestation of exhibition economics of Marathi cinema. By the 1980s Marathi cinema had been pushed to a marginal existence in the most important and economically lucrative market of Mumbai. B. V. Dharap has given a succinct account of this. He says that for the Marathi film distributor, Mumbai is the costliest market as the cost of hiring a cinema house is very high and one would lose out on earnings (my translation).[72] In the 2000s, when multiplex cinemas appeared, this scenario seems to have continued. While revenues from exhibiting Marathi films in multiplexes increased, film producers and distributors pointed out that multiplexes did not give prominence to these films, slotting them at inconvenient timings. In the words of Umesh Kulkarni: 'If a movie is meant for working middle class, how can you expect them to come for a 10 am show?'[73] By 2009, when multiplex exhibition had become an established practice, the Marathi Film Corporation, as well as a number of producers and distributors, demanded that multiplex owners give prominent screening space, timings, and advertising sites for Marathi films.[74] This contestation assumed a political significance with the state government's order that multiplexes must screen Marathi films at prime time.[75] Although this suggests that Marathi films still occupy a marginal presence in the multiplex circuit, the deeper conflict is with the dominance of Hindi cinema in circuits populated by Marathi-speaking audiences. Furthering Bollywood's consumerist cinema as a saleable commodity, the multiplex institution has reframed the contestation of Hindi versus local/regional films in the terrain of film exhibition. This in turn has intensified the significance of the multiplex site. The state's intervention to support Marathi film exhibition thus endorses the model of consumerism that multiplex cinemas have instituted.

In terms of geographies of film circulation, there is a distinct ideological aspect to segregation. This is profoundly reflected in the prevalent practice of the Marathi cinema addressing middle-class audiences of certain dominant sub-regions of Maharashtra. The current generation of middle-class Marathi audiences has its historical roots in the growing cultural dominance of this group in the 1950s and 1960s. This was a consequence of the migration of previously landed classes to cities like Mumbai.[76] Even before Independence, the primary patrons of Marathi cinema and other cultural forms were concentrated in the cities of Mumbai, Pune, Kolhapur, and Nashik. For Marathi cinema, therefore, this geography, where Marathi films are maximally viewed, is significant as a market territory. As such, the regional content of Marathi films is predicated on social aspects characterised by the middle classes populating these urban centres. Even in the scenario of an expanded terrain of multiplex cinemas in cities like Akola, Nagpur, and Aurangabad, there has been little to represent sub-regional diversities that has had a successful multiplex run.[77] Thus, the multiplex has enabled aggregation of audiences by privileging a specific class of Marathi society as the chief patron of the new Marathi cinema. [78]

The transformed dynamics of Marathi public culture is a reformulation of the linguistic-territorial notion of regional film practice that has been noted by Ravi Vasudevan as the territorial limitation imposed by statist policies.[79] With the endorsement of a consumerist exhibition system, the state's historical legacy of financial support for projects affirming cultural identity is now reframed as state-support for an 'aesthetic' projection of regional-ness. This is apparent in the reduced dependence of film producers on the grants and subsidies schemes of the Maharashtra government. In addition, the increase in grants from 15 to 40 lakhs is more a response to the expanded circulation of Marathi films than support for an extant system of filmmaking.[80] Moreover, the incident of 'prime-time' obligation informs the state's eagerness to mobilise the contemporary sites of leisure as a display of solidarity with Marathi-speaking audiences and thus *their* cultural productions. Multiplex economics, on the other hand, is a capitalist invasion into local culture, reframing its publics as well as products. Its interpenetration into regional markets has displaced the linguistic specificity of cinema houses and introduced a newer set of contestations marked by the politics of audience exclusivity. It has thus initiated the redundancy of a policy framework that was derived from concepts of 'cultural specificity' and 'regional territorialism' as determiners of sub-national film cultures. The most significant aspect that

the new Marathi cinema signifies is the manner in which a historical juncture is being defined as a social narrative of 'coming into its own', an assertion of regional authenticity in the middle-class public realm.

Conclusion

In drawing attention to the primacy of multiplex cinema for the new Marathi film, my intention here has been to locate its emergence in the changes in exhibition sites, thus positing a reconfiguration of the social processes of this film industry. My argument in this paper has been that the new Marathi film became prominent through the complex and evolving cultural processes of multiplex exhibition. The leisure economy of the mall-multiplex combine is a prominent instance of the capitalist mode of enjoying cultural products. For the new Marathi cinema, this is marked by the middle classes frequenting the multiplex site, thus inscribing its centrality in their everyday social experiences. The screening of Marathi films, specifically in multiplexes, is addressed to this new aspirational class and is reflected in the renewal of economic activity of the Marathi film industry.

Considering that the new phase of urbanisation has a consumerist core, its spiralling effect is perceived in the public sphere. The critical-realist aesthetic and ruralist narratives of the new Marathi films suggest that this film practice has emerged in the waves of this spiraling effect. It has thus shown tendencies of being influenced by a variety of globally circulating art house films, most directly the Iranian post-new wave cinema. However, such instances of influence have to be approached via the conditions that have been instrumental in effecting it. Thus, the moment of globalisation—evident in the expansion of satellite and cable television, the services industries that have conditioned the aspirational public, and spread of Internet services—predates the emergence of the new wave of Marathi cinema. The new Marathi cinema manifests the politics of a linguistically restricted film culture, which has been renewed by coupling with the consumerist turn of film exhibition in India. Its contingency with the multiplex is thus more a contestation of becoming a desirable object for middle-class consumption than a radical reformulation of its historical tendencies.

Finally, it needs to be emphasised that while the new Marathi film has reclaimed public attention in the urban sphere, in the rural circuits the television has replaced the touring talkies, which has in turn brought ruralist narratives closer to a larger audience in the villages of Maharashtra. This has increased the significance of the television sector, where dedicated channels

for Marathi cinema have assumed centrality in the rural household. Thus, the consumption of the new Marathi film has extended into smaller social spheres, bringing about a decisive turnaround of a regional film industry.

Notes

1 **Acknowledgement:** The *Writing Histories of Indian Cinema, Chapter 2* Conference, organized by the Department of Films Studies, Jadavpur University, provided the first space to explore some of the themes developed in this paper. I deeply acknowledge the opportunity given by the department to evolve ideas for this paper. I wish to thank the following people for their timely help with information, materials and critical feedback: Tanmayee Deo, Anil Zhankar, Niraj Bhandwale, NFAI, Pune; Amruta Pradhan, Lalit Patil, and Saurabh Khawale.

2 Adrian Athique and Douglas Hill, *The Multiplex in India : A Cultural Economy of Urban Leisure* (New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 2.

3 Ibid., p. 7.

4 Gita Vishwanath, 'The Multiplex: Crowd, Audience and the Genre Film', *Economic and Political Weekly* 42.32 (2007).

5 S. V. Srinivas, 'Is There a Public in the Cinema Hall?', *Framework: The Journal of Cinema & Media* 23 (2000) and L. Srinivas, 'The Active Audience: Spectatorship, Social Relations and the Experience of Cinema in India', *Media, Culture & Society* 24.2 (2002).

6 Stephen Hughes, 'When Film Came to Madras', *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies*, 1 (2010).

7 Ravi Vasudevan, 'Cinema in Urban Space', *Seminar, New Delhi*, May (2003) and Madhushree Dutta, 'Popular Cinema and Public Culture in Bombay', *Seminar* 657 (2014).

8 K. Bhaumik, 'Cinematograph to Cinema: Bombay 1896-1928', *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies* 2 (2011).

9 Athique and Hill, *The Multiplex in India*.

10 Ravi Vasudevan, 'Geographies of the Cinematic Public: Notes on Regional, National and Global Histories of Indian Cinema', *Journal of the Moving Image* 9 (2010), p. 95.

11 'Project Cinema City', http://projectcinemacity.com.
12 Paroma Sadhana, ed. 'Introduction', *Cinema Theatres in Bombay / Mumbai: A Dossier* (Mumbai: Majlis & UDRI Publication, 2014).
13 Anurag Mazumdar, Avadhoot Khanolkar, Arpita Chakraborty, Amol Ranjan, Shweta Radhakrishnan, *Bharatmata Ki Jai* (Mumbai: SMCS, TISS, 2012).
14 Alaka Talkies in Pune is one such site. It still screens Marathi films. Circle Cinema in Nashik closed down in 2003. Its iconic presence at one of the busiest places in Nashik was significant, as it was the only cinema house in Nashik which screened English language as well as Marathi and Hindi films.
15 Stephen Hughes, 'Pride of Place', *Seminar* 525 (2003), p. 1.
16 Ibid.
17 Some works that present insights into the history of Marathi cinema are: Pramod Kale, 'Ideas, Ideals and the Market: A Study of Marathi Films', *Economic and Political Weekly* 14.35 (1979); Sanchit Narwekar, *Marathi Cinema: In Retrospect* (Maharashtra Film, Stage & Cultural Development Corp., 1995); Bapu Watve, *Ek Hoti Prabhatnagri* (Pune: Anant V Damle, Prabhatnagar, 2001); Issak Mujawar, *Gatha Marathi Cinemachi* (Pune: Prateek Prakashan, 2012).
18 Box-office collection details available in *Film Information*, a weekly trade magazine that gives a substantive insight into the circuits, locations and theatres where Marathi films were screened.
19 B. V. Dharap, 'How Would the Market of Marathi Films Expand?', *Chitrasharada* 1982 (Maharashtra Film Corporation).
20 'Famine Sucks Life out of Maharashtra's Touring Talkies', *The Financial Express*, 30 April 2013.
21 Marathi cinema depicts the folk performance of *tamasha*, incorporating its various forms. One common element that defines these representations is the filmic display of a live performance situated within a narrative moment. Marathi films that centred on such a strategy of representation can be broadly termed as forming the genre of the *tamasha* film.
22 'Touring Talkies Owners in Rural Maharashtra Demand Right to Live', UNI, http://news.webindia123.com/news/articles/India/20071212/846557.html.
23 Isaq Mujawar, *Gatha Marathi Cinemachi*, pp. 177-80, 183-196. Kondke emerged out of the working class culture of Mumbai,

which consisted of mill workers and other labourers living in closely packed *chawls*. His first encounter with acting came through opportunities like playing a role in festival celebrations. See www.indiancine.ma/SOF.

24 The classical period of Marathi cinema, which had emerged in the studio era with Prabhat, and continued until the end of 1960s, is marked by a dominance of literary figures working in the film industry. Figures like G. D. Madgulkar instituted a scenario-driven narrative form that was derived from the naturalist and realist fiction of the late 19th and early 20th century. Marathi films of this period are thus characteristically melodramatic and present socially secure narratives underscoring a moral worldview. See Kale, 'Ideas, Ideals and the Market: A Study of Marathi Films.'

25 Meena R. Menon, 'The Mills That Made Bombay', *The Indian Express*, 8 September 2013.

26 *Saamna* (dir. Jabbar Patel, 1975) inaugurated the new wave of Marathi cinema of the 1970s and 1980s. However, the Film Finance Corporation (FFC) had financed *Shantata Court Chalu Ahe* (Silence, the Court is in Session) directed by Satyadev Dubey in 1969. This was an adaptation of Vijay Tendulkar's celebrated play by the same title. The significant aspect of Marathi films produced in the realist framework is the work of experimental theatre artists, including Patel and Amol Palekar.

27 M. Madhava Prasad, *Ideology of the Hindi Film a Historical Construction* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998). Prasad has elaborated on the middle-class cinema as a genre, which extends the realist aesthetics to the urban domain.

28 Between 1980 and 1990, box office information indicates that Hindi cinema had overtaken screening spaces. The emergent video halls seemed to complicate the scenario as the lower middle-class public found it affordable and easy to watch films there instead of the cinema house.

29 Pratibha N, 'Maharashtra', in *Indian Cinema 83/84* (New Delhi: NFDC, Directorate of Film Festivals, 1983).

30 Anil Zhankar, 'Picture Palaces', *Parivartnacha Watsaru. Special Diwali Issue* (2012), p. 41.

31 Sudhir Nandgaonkar, 'Marathi Cinema: Yesterday and Today', *Yojana* 39.10 (1995), p. 104.

32 Salil Tripathi, 'Comeback Act: Full Houses and a New Vibrancy', *India Today*, 15 December 1990.

33 Ibid. Also see Sai Paranjpe, 'Ados Pados', *Lokrang, Loksatta*, 5 October 2014.

34 Madhu Jain, 'Cinema: Triumph, Trauma and Tears', *India Today*, 15 January 1990.

35 Vasudevan, 'Cinema in Urban Space'.

36 Anil Zhankar, personal interview, 19 November 2015.

37 Prasad, *Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction*. See the chapter 'The Developmental Aesthetic'.

38 The Indian new wave is primarily characterised by the evolution of a deeper aesthetic engagement with Indian social contexts, thus differentiating it from the popular, mainstream cinemas. See Aruna Vasudev, *The New Indian Cinema* (New Delhi: Macmillan India, 1986).

39 An indication of the focused exhibition of the realist films is observed from trade journals. In 1982, *Godhalat Gondhal*, a family comedy, and *Mosambi Narangi,* a rural *tamasha* film starring Usha Chavan, had highly profitable runs at Kalyan, Sholapur, Ahmednagar, and Nagpur. While *Umbartha* was screened exclusively in Pune, in other cities populist mythological films like *Laxmichi Paule, Satichi Punyayi* were being screened by cinema houses. See *Film Information*, 1982. A demarcation of audiences is thus visible, one which was drawn to the rural social or melodramas, and the other which actively supported the realism of the new wave films.

40 See 'Box Office Collection', *Film Information.* X.3 (1982).

41 See Susie Tharu, 'Third World Women's Cinema: Notes on Narrative, Reflections on Opacity', *Economic and Political Weekly* 21.20 (17 May 1986) pp. 864-6, for a feminist analysis of *Umbartha*.

42 Scholars have argued that the primary reason for the decline of the Indian new wave was the lack of commercial distribution. However, broadcast of films on the state run TV channel Doordarshan made this cinema apropos to middle-class audiences in the 1980s and 1990s. It can be argued that the circulation of the Indian new wave films was renewed with another form of state support when Doordarshan assumed primacy as an exhibitor of this cinema. See Georgekutty, 'A Legimitimisation Crisis?', *Deep Focus* 1.2 (1988) and Pradip Krishnen, 'Knocking at the Doors of Public Culture: India's Parallel Cinema', *Public Culture* 4.1 (1991).

43 M. Rahman, 'Rising Costs, Bored Viewers, Tv and Video Threaten to Wipe out Serious Cinema for Good', *India Today* (31 January 1987).
44 Krishnen, 'Knocking at the Doors of Public Culture: India's Parallel Cinema', p. 40.
45 Sayed Firdaus Ashraf, 'State Gives Marathi Films a Leg Up', 14 May 1997, http://in.rediff.com/movies/may/14mara.htm.
46 Dutta, 'Popular Cinema and Public Culture in Bombay'.
47 Aparna Sharma, 'India's Experience with the Multiplex', *Seminar* 525, (2003).
48 See Adrian Athique, 'Leisure Capital in the New Economy: The Rapid Rise of the Multiplex in India', *Contemporary South Asia* 17.2 (2009) and Vishwanath, 'The Multiplex: Crowd, Audience and the Genre Film'.
49 Adrian Athique and Douglas Hill, 'Multiplex Cinemas and Urban Redevelopment', *Media International Australia* 124 (2007), p. 114.
50 Sharma, 'India's Experience with the Multiplex'.
51 Vimla Patil, 'Shwaas Aims for an Oscar', *The Sunday Tribune, Specturm*, 14 November 2004.
52 Since *Shwaas* in 2004, two Marathi films have been selected as India's entry for the annual Academy Awards: *Harishchandrachi Factory* (2010) and *Court* (2015).
53 See Rajesh Mehar, 'Fresh Shwaas of Air', *The Hindu*, 18 March 2005, for an interview with Sandeep Sawant, the director of *Shwaas*. Sawant, has highlighted the need to ensure wide distribution of Marathi films. He also mentions that the distribution strategy of *Shwaas* was planned much ahead of the public screening of the film.
54 The emphasis on landscapes as part of the social fabric of rural Maharashtra is observed in *Deool, Valu, Savarkhed ek Gaon, Jogwa, Fandry, Tingya*, and other films. Such a narrative treatment is perhaps to uniquely situate the Marathi ruralscapes as contained by a cultural geography of language. However, my concern here is to point out that the inscription of this landscape differs from the earlier Marathi rural films. In the new Marathi film, the autonomy of the landscape is perspectivised as an identity of the people interacting with it. Often framed through an observational perspective, many of these films evoke the aesthetics of Iranian filmmakers Abbas Kiarostami, Jafar Panahi, and Moshen Mahkhalbaf.
55 Martin Lefebvre, 'Between Setting and Landscape in the Cinema'

in Martin Lefebvre, ed., *Landscape and Film* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

56 Homi K. Bhabha, 'Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences', in Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, eds., *The Postcolonial Studies Reader* (London, New York: Routledge, 1995).

57 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 98.

58 Ibid., p. 99.

59 Mayuri Phadnis, 'New GR Hails Digital Age in Marathi Cinema', *Pune Mirror*, 10 November 2013. Also see Pilali Banerjee, 'Mercury Rising', 25 September 2000, http://www.rediff.com/movies/2000/sep/25marat.htm.

60 See Omkar Sapre, 'Category Archives: Marathi Film Industry', http://omkarsapre.in/blog/category/marathi-film-industry/.

61 The case of Nanubhai Jaisinghani, the owner of Video Palace is illustrative here. In the interview that I had with his colleague, Tanmayee Deo, it was emphasised that Video Palace is a distributor. However, the company would buy rights of a Marathi film and become its co-producer, or producer depending on the content and potential returns. Video Palace and Nanubhai have co-produced *Duniyadari* (2013), which went on to make record box-office collections of around 30 corers.

62 See Manjiri Damle, 'Golden Era Returns', *The Times of India*, 21 April 2012. Virendra Chitrav is quoted: 'When we sat down to select films for the state awards in 1997, we found that there were only five films made that year.'

63 See Banerjee, 'Mercury Rising', and Kaajal Wallia, 'Bollywood's Towering Presence Overshadows Marathi Cinema', *The Times of India*, 4 June 2003.

64 See Sudhir Nandgaonkar, 'The State of Marathi Cinema (Marathi)', *Lograng, Loksatta* 2001. In this article, Nandgaonkar has criticized the Marathi film industry for expecting a raise in grants at the annual awards function.

65 See 'Marathi Movies Score over Hindi Counterparts at BO', *The Indian Express*, 10 March 2010.

66 Sapre, 'Category Archives: Marathi Film Industry'.

67 Athique and Hill, *The Multiplex in India : A Cultural Economy of Urban Leisure*. My contention here arising from the term 'leisure

experience' is that for a regional cinema like Marathi, the concept of 'leisure' needs to be situated as primarily a consumption of the cinema in conjunction with the social circulation of other visual and aural forms, which after the multiplex are increasingly being determined by the logic of consumerist entertainment. The integral aspect of leisure therefore for the Marathi film industry is inflected by audiences' interaction with various forms of entertainment in the public domain, including that of the theatre and musical performances.

68 Phil Hubbard, 'A Good Night Out? Multiplex Cinemas as Sites of Embodied Leisure', *Leisure Studies* 22.3 (2003).

69 Srinivas, 'Is There a Public in the Cinema Hall?'.

70 Athique and Hill, *The Multiplex in India : A Cultural Economy of Urban Leisure*, pp. 180-82.

71 Sharma, 'India's Experience with the Multiplex'.

72 Dharap, 'How Would the Market of Marathi Films Expand?'.

73 Siddharth Kelkar, 'Marathi Films Competing with Hindi Blockbusters', *The Financial Express*, 12 May 2008.

74 See Kalyani Sardesai, 'Now, Marathi Film Industry Takes on Multiplexes', *The Times of India,* 8 July 2009.

75 See Shubhangi Khapre, 'It's Official: Marathi Films to Get Prime Slots in Multiplexes', *DNA*, 25 August 2010. Also see Nikhil Narkar and Ananya Parikh, 'Maharashtra's Marathi Multiplex Story: Is the Gesture Simply Tokenistic?', *Economic and Political Weekly* 50.16 (2015).

76 See G. P. Deshpande, 'Marathi Literature since Independence: Some Pleasures and Displeasures', *Economic and Political Weekly* 32.44 (1997), p. 2885. He describes the class of migrants who benefitted from the post-Independence boom in industry and government jobs as the 'Pandhar Peshe', literally translated as white-collar workers.

77 Barring some exceptions like *Jogwa*, which portrayed the tribal practice of offering a person as alms to the deity Yellama, and *Fandry*, set in rural Ahmednagar and which is a significant intervention into the politics of caste in Maharashtra, a majority of the new Marathi cinema is urban-centric, addressed to the middle-class public of Pune. Another prominent film that situates sub-regional aspects is *Gabhricha Paus* that portrays the plight of farmers' suicide in the Vidarbha region. Excluded from the catchall term 'Marathi' is the

localised cinema of Malegaon and the films produced in the Ahirani dialect in north Maharashtra, an area known as Khandesh. See Lawrence Liang, 'Piracy, Creativity and Infrastructure: Rethinking Access to Culture', *Social Science Research Network* (2009).

78 The significance of Pune as the capital of Marathi cultural productions is as much a product of the transformations of Indian cities in the post-liberalisation era as its historic identity as the capital of the Maratha Empire. In the context of neoliberal expansion, the renewed public indulgence in Marathi cinema seems to preserve a cultural core that links its thriving theatre scene, musical performances, and print industry. A number of new Marathi films have been shot on-location in the villages around Pune. The city too has been represented in the films. Another aspect of this stems from the desire to chart a distinctive identity for the Marathi film industry outside the dominance of the Hindi film industry. However, this seems to have created a separation of 'capital' and 'culture', where Mumbai-based producers finance Marathi films, while the cinema is primarily consumed in Pune.

79 Vasudevan, 'Geographies of the Cinematic Public: Notes on Regional, National and Global Histories of Indian Cinema'.

80 See 'Regarding Financial Assistance for Producing Quality Marathi Films', ed. Department of Tourism and Culture (Mumbai: Government of Maharashtra, 2013).