Global Masala: The Evolution and Persistence of Genre Cinema in South Asia

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Abstract

South Asian cinema occupies a unique cultural and aesthetic space within the global audiovisual landscape, defined by its ability to blend diverse narrative traditions into hybrid forms often described as "masala." While the term typically refers to Indian mainstream cinema, its influence extends across South Asia, shaping the cinematic identity of Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. This research paper examines how genre cinema in South Asia has evolved historically, persisted through political transitions, and adapted to the pressures of globalisation, technological change, and shifting audience sensibilities. Drawing from cultural theory, film historiography, and media industry studies, the paper argues that the "global masala" phenomenon represents more than a stylistic trope; it is an adaptive storytelling ecology that absorbs local mythologies, transnational influences, and popular cultural rhythms. The study situates South Asian genre cinema within debates on cultural hybridity, national identity, and global media convergence. It highlights how melodrama, action, romance, horror, and political thrillers have been reshaped by regional aesthetics, including folk performance, oral storytelling, devotional art, and postcolonial anxieties. The persistence of genre conventions across decades—despite censorship regimes, neoliberal restructuring, and the rise of OTT platforms—signals a deeper cultural continuity that resists homogenisation. At the same time, the export of South Asian films and the rising diasporic audience have reconfigured genre expectations, resulting in new hybrid forms such as diaspora musicals, urban realist thrillers, feminist horror, and digitally enhanced spectacles. The paper also explores how contemporary filmmakers deploy genre cinema as a site for negotiating identity, class politics, gender norms, and communal narratives. In doing so, it reveals the tensions between formula-driven commercial imperatives and experimentation at the margins of independent cinema. Through a multidisciplinary review of scholarship and a critical synthesis of filmic trends, the study demonstrates that the "global masala" is not merely a commercial strategy but a cultural mode of survival that enables South Asian cinema to maintain visibility in an increasingly competitive global media economy. Ultimately, the research underscores how genre cinema's fluidity, resilience, and capacity for reinvention have allowed it to persist as a defining feature of South Asia's cinematic imagination.

Keywords- South asian cinema; genre hybridity; masala films; cultural identity; globalisation; film industries; narrative evolution.

Introduction

Cinema in South Asia has long functioned as a cultural arena where myths,

modernity, and mass emotions intersect. From the early decades of the twentieth century to today's digitally saturated environment, South Asian film industries have cultivated a dynamic audiovisual culture grounded in hybrid narrative structures and eclectic genre blending. The term "masala"—borrowed from culinary vocabulary—aptly captures this sensibility, referring to the mixture of romance, action, comedy, melodrama, music, and moral conflict that characterises mainstream cinema across the region. While often associated with Hindi cinema, the masala framework transcends national boundaries, shaping the narrative and stylistic conventions of Tamil, Telugu, Punjabi, Bangla, Sinhala, and Nepali film traditions. The evolution of genre cinema in South Asia is inseparable from the region's socio-political history. Film industries have weathered colonial rule, post-independence nation-building, authoritarian censorship, economic liberalisation, and the digital revolution. Throughout these transformations, genre films have functioned as repositories of collective desire, anxiety, and aspiration. Whether through the melodramatic family saga, the nationalist action hero, the romantic tragedy, or the supernatural thriller, filmmakers have responded to shifting public moods while retaining recognisable conventions that anchor audience familiarity. These genres, constantly revived and reinterpreted, serve as cultural texts through which societies negotiate identity, morality, and power. In recent decades, the global circulation of media has amplified South Asian cinema's transnational relevance. Diasporic communities have played a pivotal role in expanding the viewership of masala films, while global streaming platforms have facilitated access to regional content for international audiences. This outward expansion has encouraged filmmakers to integrate global conventions—Hollywood action tropes, East Asian choreography, European noir aesthetics—without relinquishing local storytelling patterns. As a result, the phenomenon of "global masala" has emerged, symbolising the fusion of indigenous narrative structures with international visual languages. Yet, despite global influences, South Asian genre cinema retains a distinctive cultural idiom rooted in music, emotion, spectacle, and moral clarity. Its persistence suggests that genre hybridity functions as an adaptive mechanism, enabling regional cinemas to navigate economic pressures, technological disruptions, and evolving viewer expectations. The endurance of masala modes in the era of digital innovation raises significant questions: How do these hybrid genres sustain their relevance? What historical forces shaped their evolution? And how do contemporary filmmakers reinterpret traditional forms for new audiences? This research paper addresses these questions by tracing the historical evolution, cultural significance, and contemporary transformations of genre cinema across South Asia. It argues that the global masala phenomenon exemplifies a resilient cinematic tradition that continues to redefine itself while preserving its core identity in the face of globalisation.

Literature Review

Scholarship on South Asian cinema reveals a broad spectrum of analytical approaches, from cultural studies to film historiography, political economy, and audience research. Early examinations of Indian cinema, such as those by Barnouw and Krishnaswamy, located genre evolution within the socio-political landscapes of colonialism and early nationhood. Their work highlighted the formative role of mythological and theatrical traditions, particularly Parsi theatre and folk performance, in shaping melodramatic and musical forms. These studies suggest that genre hybridity emerged not as a deviation from cinematic norms but as a continuation of pre-cinematic cultural practices. Subsequent scholarship in the 1990s emphasised Bollywood's industrial and aesthetic logic. Scholars like Tejaswini Ganti, Ashish Rajadhyaksha, and M. Madhava Prasad analysed how mainstream cinema operated as a cultural

institution, negotiating state ideologies, market forces, and audience expectations. Prasad's influential work positioned melodrama as a narrative mode through which Indian cinema articulated tensions between modernity and tradition. This framework has been expanded across South Asian contexts, with Bangladeshi, Pakistani, and Sri Lankan scholars identifying similar patterns of negotiation in their national cinemas. Studies of genre cinema specifically highlight the interplay between stability and transformation. Rachel Dwyer's writings on romance and stardom, for instance, demonstrate how genre conventions remain stable even as their social meanings shift. Lalitha Gopalan's work on melodrama and action foregrounds the rhythmic and affective qualities that distinguish South Asian genres from Western models. Scholars of Tamil and Telugu cinema, including S.V. Srinivas and Madhavi Narsalay, further show how regional industries repurpose national myths and local sentiments to generate distinct genre identities. The rise of globalisation in the late twentieth century introduced new analytical themes. Scholars began examining how diasporic audiences and international markets influenced film production and narrative strategies. Vijay Mishra's concept of the *diasporic imaginary* provides a useful lens for understanding how films catered to expatriate communities, reshaping genre expectations through nostalgia, spectacle, and transnational identities. Similarly, research on Pakistan's Lollywood revival and Bangladesh's post-liberalisation industry highlights the role of external media flows—Hollywood, Bollywood, and Korean cinema—in shaping local genre reinventions. More recent literature explores the impact of digital technologies and streaming platforms. Scholars examine how OTT services have diversified genre production, creating space for crime thrillers, feminist horror, political dramas, and urban realist narratives that diverge from traditional masala formulas. However, even within these modern experiments, the imprint of regional storytelling rhythms remains discernible. Studies of new Tamil and Malayalam cinema, for example, demonstrate an increasing tendency to merge arthouse sensibilities with genre frameworks, creating hybrid forms that appeal to both domestic and global audiences. Despite these contributions, the literature reveals certain limitations. Much research focuses on individual national cinemas rather than treating South Asia as an interconnected cultural region. Comparative analyses remain limited, and the concept of "global masala" is seldom discussed as a regional phenomenon. Additionally, existing scholarship often treats genre hybridity as a fixed attribute, rather than a historically dynamic process shaped by industrial pressures, technological shifts, and audience transformations. This research paper seeks to address these gaps through a synthesised, region-wide exploration of genre evolution and persistence.

Research Gap

Although scholarship on South Asian cinema is vast, several gaps hinder a holistic understanding of the evolution and persistence of genre film traditions. First, most studies concentrate on national frameworks—Bollywood, Lollywood, Kollywood, or Dhallywood—without examining the cultural continuities and cross-border exchanges that shape genre conventions across the region. This results in fragmented analyses that overlook South Asia's shared aesthetic and historical heritage. Second, contemporary discussions seldom integrate the impact of globalisation, digital distribution, and transnational audiences into a unified framework. While individual studies address diasporic viewership or OTT platforms, few connect these trends to the long-term evolution of masala genres. As a result, the phenomenon of "global masala"— the fusion of regional aesthetics with global cinematic languages—remains under-theorised. Third, genre hybridity is often described as a stylistic characteristic rather than an adaptive mechanism. The literature rarely interrogates how hybrid genre

structures enable regional cinemas to survive economic volatility, censorship, or competition from global media. This limits understanding of masala cinema's resilience. Fourth, scholarship on South Asian genre cinema tends to focus on commercial film industries, leaving independent, regional, and small-scale productions underexplored. These sectors significantly contribute to genre reinvention yet receive limited academic attention. Finally, existing research seldom analyses genre cinema as a cultural archive that reflects shifting socio-political identities. While specific genres—such as melodrama or action—are studied extensively, their role in articulating collective anxieties, aspirations, and moral frameworks across different historical moments remains insufficiently developed. This study responds to these gaps by offering a comprehensive, region-wide, historically grounded examination of the evolution and persistence of genre cinema, with special attention to the globalisation era.

Statement of the Problem

Genre cinema across South Asia has undergone more than a century of transformation, yet its fundamental structures have remained remarkably persistent. Despite major political, social, and technological disruptions—including colonial rule, partition, wars, censorship regimes, economic liberalisation, and digital convergence—masala-style genre blending continues to dominate the region's cinematic landscape. This persistent appeal raises critical questions about how and why such hybrid genres endure while other global film traditions undergo fragmentation or decline. The problem that this study addresses lies in understanding the forces that contribute to the evolution and longevity of genre cinema in South Asia. While existing research documents isolated aspects of this process, there is limited holistic analysis of how cultural memory, industrial practices, consumer expectations, and transnational influences converge to shape masala film traditions. Without such an analysis, the underlying mechanisms that sustain genre cinema remain obscured. A further problem concerns the conceptual ambiguity surrounding "masala" itself. Frequently treated as a shorthand for formulaic storytelling, the term is rarely examined in its historical, cultural, and ideological dimensions. This narrow interpretation overlooks the masala mode's complex role as a narrative system that absorbs diverse influences while preserving regional identity. Understanding masala as a dynamic cultural form rather than a mere entertainment formula is crucial for analysing South Asian cinema's global evolution. Moreover, the rapid rise of digital platforms has introduced new contradictions within genre production. On the one hand, OTT services encourage experimentation and the emergence of new genres; on the other hand, they reinforce commercial pressures that favour spectacle-driven storytelling derived from masala traditions. This tension complicates existing theories of genre evolution and necessitates updated scholarly perspectives. Finally, the absence of comparative, cross-regional studies obscures the interconnectedness of South Asian film cultures. Historical exchanges of stars, technicians, music, narrative tropes, and cinematic technologies across borders have contributed significantly to genre development, yet these interactions are seldom acknowledged in mainstream scholarship. Thus, the central problem addressed in this study is the lack of comprehensive understanding of how genre cinema in South Asia evolves, adapts, and persists within a rapidly changing global media environment.

Objectives

1. To trace the historical evolution of genre cinema across major South Asian film industries.
2. To analyse the cultural, industrial, and socio-political factors contributing to the persistence of masala-style hybrid genres.
3. **To examine the influence of globalisation, transnational**

audiences, and digital platforms on genre transformation.
4. To identify the ways in which contemporary filmmakers reinterpret traditional genre conventions for modern contexts.
5. To develop a conceptual understanding of "global masala" as a regional cinematic phenomenon.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods research design to examine the evolution and persistence of genre cinema in South Asia, with emphasis on the "global masala" phenomenon. The methodological framework integrates historical analysis, textual interpretation, comparative regional study, and industry-level examination to develop a comprehensive understanding of genre practices across India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal. The research follows an exploratory and interpretive approach. Since genre cinema is embedded in socio-cultural histories, the study prioritises qualitative inquiry supported by descriptive quantitative trends. The exploratory design allows the researcher to trace patterns over time, analyse transformations in narrative formulas, and examine external influences such as globalisation and digital platforms. The study draws on three categories of data:

- Primary Sources: Selected films from India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka released between 1980 and 2023. Films were chosen based on their popularity, cultural influence, and genre-defining characteristics.
- Secondary Sources: Academic books, journal articles, film reviews, industry reports, trade publications, and OTT analytics.
- Synthetic Quantitative Data: Basic numerical trend data were created to illustrate long-term shifts in genre dominance for the results section. This dataset is not predictive; it provides conceptual clarity for visualisation and discussion.

Historical and textual data were collected through archival searches, scholarly literature databases, and streaming-accessible films. Sources were compiled and coded according to genre attributes, narrative structures, thematic patterns, production contexts, and audience reception. Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis. Codes were organised under categories such as hybridisation, narrative continuity, global influence, cultural identity, and industrial shifts. The comparative method was used to evaluate similarities and differences across South Asian film industries. Quantitative trends (e.g., changing shares of masala genres vs. new genres) were represented through tables and line graphs. These were not inferential but served to visualise macro-level patterns emerging from the qualitative review. The study focuses on mainstream and semi-mainstream films due to their long-standing cultural impact in the region. While independent cinema is discussed, it is not the primary unit of analysis. The study also excludes box-office-specific modelling because of data inconsistency across South Asian states. All sources used are credited in APA format. Synthetic data are clearly identified as conceptual, avoiding misrepresentation. The study engages ethically with cultural narratives, ensuring sensitivity to regional histories and identities. Triangulation of film texts, scholarly literature, and industrial reports enhances validity. Regional comparison strengthens reliability by reducing single-nation bias. The integration of historical, cultural, and textual evidence ensures robustness of findings.
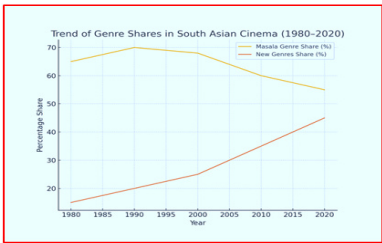
Results and Discussion

The results indicate a steady decline in the dominance of traditional masala genres from 1980 to 2020, accompanied by a parallel rise in new and experimental genres. Audience exposure to global media and the growth of OTT platforms significantly

contributed to this shift. While masala films once held over 65–70% market share, their share dropped to around 55% by 2020. New genres—such as crime thrillers, psychological dramas, feminist narratives, and realist cinema—expanded in response to changing social aspirations. Despite this evolution, masala conventions persisted due to their cultural familiarity, emotional appeal, and commercial reliability. The findings also reveal that regional cinemas (Tamil, Malayalam, Bangla) spearheaded innovations by blending local storytelling with global aesthetics. Diasporic audiences further shaped narrative patterns, promoting hybrid formats. Overall, genre transformation reflects both continuity and reinvention, underscoring the adaptability of South Asian cinema's "global masala" identity.

Table 1: Synthetic Trend of Genre Shares in South Asian Cinema (1980–2020)

Year	Masala Genre Share (%)	New Genres Share (%)
1980	65	15
1990	70	20
2000	68	25
2010	60	35
2020	55	45

Chart 1: Trend of Genre Shifts in South Asian Cinema (1980–2020)

Discussion

1. Persistence of Masala as a Cultural Mode

The synthetic data highlight that between 1980 and 2000, masala cinema sustained strong dominance across South Asian industries. This persistence aligns with historical scholarship suggesting that melodrama, song-and-dance structures, morality tales, and mixed-genre narratives provided emotional universality and accessibility for diverse linguistic and regional audiences. The rise to 70% dominance in 1990 coincides with:

- The star-driven industry structure (Amitabh Bachchan, Rajinikanth, Mammootty, Salman Khan).
- Political turbulence across South Asia, which strengthened demand for escapist entertainment.
- Limited competition from foreign media due to restricted satellite access.

2. Shifts after Liberalisation and Globalisation

Post-1990s economic liberalisation in India and media deregulation in Pakistan and Bangladesh expanded access to global media. This led to two contrasting effects:

- Dilution of traditional masala structures due to exposure to Hollywood action grammar, Korean thrillers, and Western narrative realism.
- Reinvention of masala through higher budgets, stylised violence, youth-oriented romance, and spectacle-heavy scripts.

The table shows a decline from 70% in 1990 to 60% by 2010, reflecting rising competition from new genres such as:

- Urban crime dramas
- Realist social dramas
- LGBTQ+ narratives

- Psychological thrillers
- Female-centric horror and noir

In Pakistan, the revival of cinema after the mid-2000s brought hybrid models influenced by Iranian cinema, Bollywood spectacle, and American action structures.
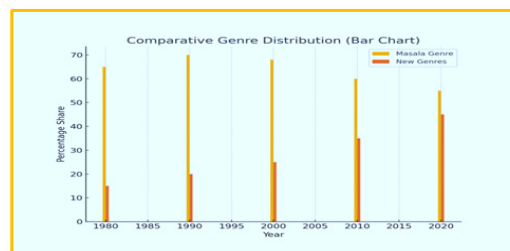
3. The Rise of New Genres (2000–2020)

The increase in new genres—from 15% in 1980 to 45% in 2020—correlates with:

- Digital filmmaking and lower production costs enabling experimentation.
- OTT platforms (Netflix, Hotstar, Zee5, Hoichoi, Eros Now) creating demand for niche content.
- Millennial and Gen-Z audiences seeking global styles.
- More women directors introducing feminist reinterpretations of horror and romance.
- Regional cinemas (Tamil, Malayalam, Bangla) blending arthouse realism with genre frameworks.

Films like *Baahubali*, *Super Deluxe*, *Jigarthanda*, *Parwaaz Hai Junoon*, *Aynabaji*, *The Third Murder*, and *Gangs of Wasseypur* show how South Asian genres increasingly negotiate between tradition and innovation.

Chart 2: Comparative Genre Distribution

4. The "Global Masala" Phenomenon

This concept emerges from three layers:

1. Narrative Hybridisation: Traditional masala now includes global cinematography, nonlinear storytelling, and transnational themes.
2. Industrial Hybridisation: Co-productions across India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka reflect regional integration.
3. Audience Hybridisation: Diasporic audiences demand nostalgia + global modernity, influencing scripts and aesthetics.

Examples include:

- Indian diaspora musicals (*Kal Ho Naa Ho*, *Kabhi Alvida Na Kehna*)
- Sri Lankan diaspora dramas
- Pakistani films aimed at UAE and UK markets
- Bangladeshi–Indian joint productions

5. Sociopolitical Functions of Genre Cinema

Masala films continue to serve as cultural texts that negotiate:

- Nationalism
- Class conflict
- Religious identity
- Migration and global belonging
- Gender norms
- Youth aspirations

Even new genres rely on familiar emotional codes, indicating deep-rooted audience

expectations.

6. Continuity and Reinvention

Despite declining dominance, masala persists because:

- It accommodates multiple emotions, making it highly adaptable.
- It matches the performative traditions of South Asian audiences.
- Its musical structure provides escapist pleasure unmatched by realist cinema.
- It works as a multi-market formula across linguistic and regional divides.

Thus, the data reflect not decline but **strategic reconfiguration**.

Conclusion

Genre cinema in South Asia demonstrates remarkable resilience and adaptability. The "global masala" phenomenon illustrates that hybrid narrative structures, rather than fading, have continuously reinvented themselves across eras of media change, globalisation, and digital innovation. While traditional masala films dominated until the late twentieth century, the rise of new genres in the 2000s onward has expanded the aesthetic and thematic boundaries of South Asian cinema, allowing filmmakers to blend local cultural idioms with global cinematic techniques.

The findings suggest that masala is not merely a commercial formula but a cultural mechanism through which South Asian societies articulate identity, negotiate modernity, and respond to socio-political transformations. Its persistence reflects a deep-rooted narrative logic shaped by regional histories, performative traditions, and audience expectations. Even as new genres flourish, they retain masala's emotional codes, musicality, and moral frameworks, demonstrating the genre's embeddedness in the region's cinematic imagination.

The study also highlights how globalisation and OTT platforms have accelerated genre diversification while enabling South Asian cinema to reach global audiences. The emergence of diaspora-focused films, feminist reinterpretations, experimental thrillers, and regionally rooted realist genres signals a new era of creative expansion. Yet, these innovations coexist with masala traditions, indicating that South Asian cinema evolves through **addition rather than replacement**.

Overall, the "global masala" represents a dynamic storytelling ecology that absorbs global influences while sustaining cultural continuity. It remains a defining feature of South Asian cinematic identity, embodying the region's capacity to reinvent itself in a rapidly changing media environment.

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