

India's Contribution to World Cinema and How It Can Be Sustained in the Age of Artificial Intelligence

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines India's contribution to world cinema across eleven decades — from Dadasaheb Phalke's *Raja Harishchandra* (1913) through the streaming and AI era of 2026 — and argues that the country's cinematic standing, its formidable technical infrastructure as a primary VFX and post-production center for Hollywood, its unparalleled linguistic diversity, and its demonstrated record at the Academy Awards together constitute both a claim to cultural leadership and a mandate for AI governance architecture that the world's major forums have not yet fully recognized. The paper traces the trajectory of Indian cinema through six major epochs; examines how the Reliance Jio data revolution of 2016 structurally transformed Indian film's production and audience ecosystems; analyzes AI's impact on production, dubbing, archival preservation, and deepfake vulnerability — situating these within the February 2026 Seedance 2.0 crisis and the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences' landmark 2025 ruling on AI-assisted films; documents India's record at the Academy Awards as evidence of accepted global parity; argues that India's backend role in Hollywood's visual effects pipeline must be converted into authorial and governance primacy; advances Kerala's digital re-release model as a national template for archive-as-asset-class thinking; and evaluates Prime Minister Modi's personal engagement with the AI industry as the foundation for India's emergence as a global AI governance architect. The paper is a companion study to Upadhyay and Krishnakumar (2026), which examines Hollywood's century of reactive AI governance and the specific transnational dimensions of India's VFX relationship with the American industry.

Keywords: Indian cinema, Bollywood, parallel cinema, artificial intelligence, AI governance, mobile media, G7, G20, World Economic Forum, UNESCO, cultural policy, streaming, VFX, digitization, Academy Awards, Seedance 2.0.

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Introduction

1. A Reel Before the Nation: The Founding Logic of Indian Cinema

On July 7, 1896 — one year and seven months after the Lumière Brothers unveiled the cinematographe to a Paris salon — their representatives projected moving images onto a wall in Watson's Hotel, Bombay. The British administrator in the front row registered novelty. The Indian street vendor who had paid for a ticket registered something more consequential: the possibility that his world, his stories, and his face might one day be enlarged and luminous in the dark.

The interval between that first Bombay screening and India's first feature film was seventeen years. Dadasaheb Phalke, a commercial printer and photographer from Nashik, watched *The Life of Christ* in a London cinema in 1910 and returned to India with a purpose that would have seemed delusional to anyone who counted his resources. He had no studio, no trained actors, no capital beyond what he could borrow from skeptical merchants. He trained his wife Saraswati in darkroom chemistry. He shot on borrowed land in Dadar. He developed the prints himself in a bathtub. On May 3, 1913, *Raja*

Harishchandra — 40 minutes, silent, derived from the *Mahabharata* — premiered at the Coronation Cinematograph Theatre in Bombay. It ran for weeks. It turned a profit. It established the founding logic of Indian cinema: a colonized people, working with borrowed tools and personal conviction, could produce stories that their own audiences would pay to see.

That logic — stubbornly local, technically ambitious, commercially serious, and narratively rooted in a civilizational tradition that predates Hollywood by millennia — has never stopped operating. Every technological disruption since 1913 has tested it; none has overturned it. The arrival of artificial intelligence is the most comprehensive of these disruptions. The question this paper asks is whether the founding logic is sufficient to carry Indian cinema through it — and what governance architecture India must build, both domestically and internationally, to ensure that it is.

2. A Century of Frames: The Evolution of Indian Cinema

A. The Silent and the Sound: 1913–1947

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The two decades after Phalke established India as a film-producing nation of structural consequence. Studios emerged in Bombay, Calcutta, and Madras. The 1930s brought sound — and with it a discovery that would permanently distinguish Indian cinema from its Western counterparts: the composed film song. When *Alam Ara* (1931), India's first talkie, integrated seven songs into its narrative, audiences did not register this as a departure from realism. They returned for the songs. Sound did not overwhelm the theatrical tradition of Indian performance; it gave it a new delivery mechanism. The song-and-dance form that Western critics would for decades misread as superficial spectacle was, in fact, a sophisticated synthesis of classical Hindustani music, regional folk forms, and urban aspiration — a cultural encoding that operated on registers that subtitles could not capture and that box-office receipts consistently validated.

By the mid-1930s, studios like New Theatres in Calcutta were producing socially engaged dramas with production values that compared favorably with contemporaneous European work. Directors including Debaki Bose, P.C. Barua, and the young Bimal Roy were not imitating MGM. They were translating Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay and Tagore — a fundamentally different aesthetic project, grounded in Bengali realist literature rather than Hollywood genre conventions.

B. The Golden Age: 1947–1960

Independence in 1947 gave Indian cinema its most consequential new subject: itself. The newly sovereign nation was simultaneously the material and the audience for stories about what it meant to be Indian — free, poor, hopeful, and constitutionally committed to a modernity it had not yet built. Mehboob Khan's *Mother India* (1957), submitted by India for the Academy Award for Best Foreign Film and defeated by a single vote, remains the ur-text of this period: a woman farming stone earth, burying her outlaw son with her own hands to preserve village honor, embodying a moral calculus that no Hollywood Western could replicate because it emerged from a different civilization's understanding of sacrifice.

Simultaneously in Calcutta, Satyajit Ray was doing something the Bombay commercial industry could not accommodate. *Pather Panchali* (1955) — shot on pawned jewelry, in actual Bengal countryside, with a crew learning as they filmed — premiered at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, where it reset international assumptions about what cinema from the non-Western world could be. Ray would work for four more decades, receiving an honorary Academy Award in 1992 from his hospital bed in Calcutta twelve days before his death — the most consequential personal recognition Indian cinema had received from the world's preeminent film institution up to that point. Ray proved that Indian cinema was not a single thing; it was a civilization's multiplicity compressed into light and time.

In the commercial mainstream, Raj Kapoor's *The Vagabond* (*Awaara*, 1951) became the highest-grossing film in Soviet history and a fixture of Egyptian, Turkish, and Central Asian cinema cultures. Kapoor's wandering urban poor man, singing his dignity, translated across languages because poverty and aspiration need no subtitles. Guru Dutt's *Pyaasa* (1957) — a poet destroyed by commerce, literally walking out of his own funeral — developed a visual and emotional grammar that Japanese critics would compare to Mizoguchi and that French critics would place alongside Godard's early work. Neither comparison was wrong; neither was sufficient.

C. The Parallel Cinema Movement: 1969–1985

In 1969, the Film Finance Corporation's institutional support enabled a generation of filmmakers to work outside the constraints of the commercial mainstream. The Indian New Wave — called Parallel Cinema — produced Shyam Benegal's *Ankur* (1974), Govind Nihalani's *Ardh Satya* (1983), Aparna Sen's *36 Chowringhee Lane* (1981), M.S. Sathya's *Garm Hava* (1974), and the body of work by Mani Kaul and Kumar Shahani: films that addressed caste violence, police brutality, Partition trauma, and the quietly catastrophic position of women in patriarchal households with an unflinching directness that had no equivalent in the commercial industry.

The movement did not displace Bollywood. It coexisted, drew some of the same talent, and occasionally cross-pollinated in productive ways. What it established, definitively, was the principle that Indian filmmakers could work in any register — from the kinetic commercial to the meditative experimental — and that India's claim on world cinema was not limited to a single mode. Internationally, the Parallel Cinema era was the period when Indian films began appearing regularly at Cannes, Berlin, and Venice not as exotic curiosities but as serious artistic contenders.

D. Liberalization, Diaspora, and the New Mainstream: 1991–2010

Economic liberalization in 1991 reorganized Indian society — and cinema followed, as it always has. The diaspora, now systematically counted at 30 million across the UK, US, Canada, Gulf states, Southeast Asia, and East Africa, became a primary audience for a commercial Bollywood that had learned to represent its own longing for home as aesthetic content. Dilwale *Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995) ran for 31 consecutive years (to date) in a single Bombay theater; its run was not nostalgia but a continuously renewing market for the emotion of belonging.

A.R. Rahman's score for Mani Ratnam's *Roja* (1992) crossed the Tamil-Hindi language barrier through sheer musical force and established South Indian cinema's capacity to reach national audiences without sacrificing regional specificity. Rahman would later compose the

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score for Danny Boyle's *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008), winning two Academy Awards — Best Original Score and Best Original Song — in a single ceremony: the first time an Indian composer had won a competitive Oscar, and a recognition achieved, with characteristic Indian irony, for a British director's film about Mumbai poverty.

Multiplex culture's arrival in the early 2000s structurally diversified the market. Smaller, riskier domestic films could now survive without the nationwide saturation release that had always favored established stars and proven formulas. Anurag Kashyap's *Gangs of Wasseypur* (2012), five hours long and set in the coal-mafia politics of Jharkhand, premiered at Cannes Director's Fortnight and became, for a generation of Indian and international cinephiles, evidence that Indian cinema could absorb and transform influences from Scorsese and Leone while remaining absolutely rooted in a specific Indian geography, caste ecology, and historical period.

E. The OTT Era and the Fragmentation of the Gaze: 2016–Present

Netflix launched in India in January 2016. The structural conditions that determined what this meant are examined in Section III below. For the purposes of tracing Indian cinema's evolution, the OTT era produced two developments of historical significance. First, it validated the serial long-form as a format for serious Indian creative work: *Sacred Games* (2018), *Delhi Crime* (2019) — which won the International Emmy for Best Drama Series — *Paatal Lok*, and *Mirzapur* established that Indian storytellers working in Hindi and in English could produce content that competed on quality with the best global streaming had to offer.

Second, the Telugu and Tamil industries — which had for decades operated as commercially dominant but internationally underrecognized parallel universes — achieved systematic global breakthrough. S.S. Rajamouli's *RRR* (2022), a mythological epic about two anti-colonial freedom fighters structured as the most kinetically ambitious action film the subcontinent had ever produced, grossed over \$150 million internationally, built cult audiences in Japan, Mexico, and the United States, and won the Academy Award for Best Original Song at the 95th ceremony — a moment analyzed in detail in Section V. The year 2023 saw 1,500 films certified for release by India's Central Board of Film Certification, in 22 languages, for a domestic audience of 1.4 billion and a diaspora of 30 million more. India does not have a film industry in the singular. It has cinemas, plural, each with its own aesthetic tradition, star system, audience culture, and relationship to the language in which it thinks.

3. The Screen in Every Pocket: Jio, Mobile, and the Structural Transformation of Indian Cinema

A. The September 2016 Disruption

On September 5, 2016, Reliance Jio launched commercial services in India. Within 83 days, it had acquired 50 million subscribers — the fastest telecom adoption curve in recorded history (Jio, 2016). The mechanism was pricing: the cost of a gigabyte of mobile data in India fell from approximately Rs. 250 to Rs. 10 in the months following Jio's entry. By 2024, India had over 900 million internet users — the world's second-largest online population — streaming 8.5 billion gigabytes of video monthly (TRAI, 2024; IAMA, 2024). The implications for cinema were not merely distributional. They were structural. A filmmaker in Manipur no longer required a Bombay distributor. A Malayalam short film could reach its diaspora audience in Toronto and its domestic audience in Thrissur simultaneously. A YouTube channel in Bhojpuri could accumulate subscribers in the hundreds of millions, dwarfing the theatrical reach of films from a decade earlier.

B. The Creator Economy and Cinema's Extended Frontier

By 2024, India had approximately 900 million YouTube users — the platform's single largest national base globally (YouTube India Insights, 2024). The line between professional cinema and mobile-first creation had dissolved in ways that neither the film industry nor regulators had anticipated. A creator in Rajkot with a Redmi phone, a free editing application, and a locally specific comedic sensibility was producing content watched by millions — content that was, in narrative ambition and audience relationship, cinematic by every definition that matters except production budget. The FICCI-EY Entertainment and Media Outlook 2023 documented the creator economy as India's fastest-growing entertainment segment, with direct revenue exceeding Rs. 2,000 crore and indirect economic impact several multiples of that.

The implications for Indian cinema's global contribution are more than quantitative. Traditional metrics — theatrical releases, international co-productions, festival selections — capture only the visible apex of a creative pyramid whose base now extends into villages that have never hosted a cinema hall. The world watches India's creative output through Netflix and Amazon Prime, but also through platform algorithms that surface regional-language content to diaspora communities, through peer-to-peer video sharing that moves faster than any distribution system, and through the specific cultural logic of the WhatsApp economy — a form of curation with no Western equivalent.

C. Mobile Cinema and Formal Innovation

Short-form mobile video has not merely democratized access; it has produced formal innovation. Indian creators have developed conventions for vertical framing, for narrative compression to 90-second units, and for the integration of comment-section audience

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interaction into storytelling strategy — conventions that are now influencing production decisions in the mainstream industry. The Sundance Institute, the BFI, and the IDFA have all initiated programs to understand this phenomenon. What they are observing is a civilization adapting its oldest narrative instincts — the folk performance, the mythological retelling, the comedy of social observation — to the newest delivery technology. Phalke performed the same adaptation in 1913. The form changes; the underlying logic does not.

4. The Algorithm Enters the Frame: AI's Impact on Indian Cinema

A. AI in Production: From VFX Tools to Generative Spectacle

Indian cinema's adoption of AI-driven production tools followed a trajectory shaped by the industry's existing technical infrastructure. The visual effects industry, which had developed world-class capabilities through three decades of Hollywood service work (analyzed in detail in Upadhyay and Krishnakumar, 2026), became the primary site of AI adoption in Indian production. Ponniiyin Selvan (2022) deployed AI-assisted environment reconstruction to render ninth-century Chola architecture at a scale that would have been cost-prohibitive under traditional workflow. Brahmastra (2022) used machine-learning iteration to develop visual representations of mythological energy systems — fictional entities with no photographic reference — with a creative throughput that no traditional concept-to-render pipeline could match. The same tools that had processed Hollywood's work for years were now being directed, in Indian facilities, toward Indian creative visions on Indian budgets.

Generative AI has extended this adoption into pre-production. Several major Indian production houses have deployed large language models for story development — testing narrative structures, identifying tonal inconsistencies, and scanning historical performance data to predict regional market resonance. The creative community's response reflects the same division documented in Hollywood by the 2023 WGA negotiations (Upadhyay and Krishnakumar, 2026): established writers identify a deskilling threat; a younger generation, comfortable with iterative digital tools, identifies a collaborator. The governance question — not whether AI will assist Indian screenwriting, but whose values are embedded in the models doing the assisting — remains unanswered.

B. AI Dubbing and the Dissolution of the Language Barrier

The most immediately transformative AI application for Indian cinema is AI-assisted dubbing and lip-sync translation. Startups including Dubverse, Murf AI, and international providers have developed workflows capable of taking a Tamil or Telugu film and producing

versions in Malayalam, Kannada, Hindi, and English — with lip movements synchronized and vocal texture matched to the original performances — at a fraction of the cost and time required by traditional dubbing processes. The commercial significance is considerable: RRR's 2022 international success was built in part on meticulous traditional dubbing into Hindi, but the tools now available mean that any regional film can theoretically target all 22 scheduled languages simultaneously.

The cultural significance is larger. India's multiple language-cinema traditions have historically been separated by distribution economics that made national cross-release unviable for films below a certain budget threshold. AI dubbing tools dissolve this constraint. A Meitei-language film from Manipur, an Odia documentary, a Dogri folk drama — all could reach domestic audiences across language lines without the financial barrier that previously limited inter-language circulation to a small number of well-capitalized productions. The effect on India's internal cultural cohesion, and on the global reach of its smaller cinematic traditions, is potentially as significant as the Jio data-pricing revolution of 2016.

C. Deepfakes, Personality Rights, and the Seedance 2.0 Moment

In December 2023, a deepfake video depicting actor Rashmika Mandanna circulated widely across Indian social media platforms, prompting emergency intervention from the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology and marking the point at which AI-generated disinformation moved from theoretical risk to documented harm in Indian cinema's specific context. The incident crystallized the governance gap that Indian cinema — with its cult of star images and its deeply personal bond between performer and audience — faces with particular acuity.

India's judiciary has developed a sophisticated, if uncodified, response to celebrity persona exploitation that predates and now directly anticipates the AI deepfake challenge. The landmark case of *Amitabh Bachchan v. Rajat Nagi and Ors.* [CS(COMM) 819/2022, Delhi High Court, November 25, 2022] granted the first blanket John Doe order in Indian legal history for personality rights protection, restraining named and unknown defendants from misusing Bachchan's name, voice, image, or any attribute exclusively identifiable with him. The 2025 cases of *Abhishek Bachchan v. The Bollywood Tee Shop* and *Aishwarya Rai Bachchan v. Aishwaryaworld.com* extended this framework explicitly to AI manipulation — with Justice Tejas Karia invoking Section 38B of the Copyright Act, 1957, to address the moral rights dimension of deepfake-altered film clips. As Upadhyay and Krishnakumar (2026) document, these cases constitute an evolving body of jurisprudence around what Indian courts have termed 'star value' — a legally

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protectable interest encompassing name, voice, image, and mannerism — that is constructed entirely through judicial precedent in the absence of the kind of statutory framework that California's AB 2602 (2024) or the proposed US NO FAKES Act represent.

In February 2026, Seedance 2.0 — a Chinese AI video generation tool — produced a viral video depicting Tom Cruise fighting Brad Pitt using, apparently, footage scraped from Hollywood studio releases without authorization. The Motion Picture Association issued an emergency statement on February 13, 2026, characterizing the incident as a 'massive' copyright infringement. For Indian cinema, the Seedance 2.0 episode is not a distant American problem. India's film archive, its star ecosystem, and its global streaming distribution channels face precisely the same vulnerability — and India, unlike the United States, lacks both the statutory framework of California's performer protection laws and the collective bargaining infrastructure of SAG-AFTRA and the WGA that established consent and compensation provisions in 2023. The governance gap is not abstract; it is structural, and it is urgent.

D. The Academy's 2025 Ruling and Indian Cinema's Position

In 2025, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences updated its rules for the 98th Academy Awards to confirm that AI-assisted films remain eligible for competition. The Academy's position, as articulated in its updated guidelines, held that eligibility would be determined by 'the degree to which a human was at the heart of the creative authorship' — a standard that is philosophically coherent but operationally undefined. The ruling was catalyzed in part by the controversy surrounding Adrien Brody's Best Actor award for *The Brutalist* (2025), in which Respeecher AI had been used to refine the actor's Hungarian-language pronunciation — a use disclosed only after nominations were announced.

For Indian cinema, the Academy's ruling is simultaneously a validation and a warning. It is a validation because Indian productions deploying AI tools for VFX, dubbing, and restoration remain eligible for the world's most visible film recognition. It is a warning because the standard of 'human at the heart of creative authorship' — undefined in practice — could, in a governance vacuum, be applied in ways that disadvantage productions from countries without the disclosure infrastructure, labor agreements, or lobbying presence to ensure that their AI-assisted work is characterized favorably. India's absence of a WGA or SAG-AFTRA equivalent — documented by *The Hollywood Reporter* India in 2025 as a structural barrier to collective bargaining in the face of AI adoption — is a specific vulnerability in this context.

5. Oscar Record and the Dolby Theater Moment: India's Formal Admission to the Global Canon

A. A Century of Competition, An Accumulation of Recognition

India has submitted a film for the Academy Award for Best International Feature Film every year since 1957 — a record of consistent engagement with the world's most visible film prize unmatched in duration by any other Asian cinema. *Mother India* (1957) lost by a single vote; it remains the closest India has come to a Best International Film win, and its near-miss is as significant as any victory: it confirmed that Indian popular cinema, in its most melodramatic register, operated at a level the Academy found impossible to dismiss. *Salaam Bombay!* (1988), Mira Nair's portrait of street children in Mumbai, earned a nomination and established that Indian films addressing poverty could compete not as sociological documents but as fully realized cinema. *Lagaan* (2001), Ashutosh Gowariker's epic about a village cricket match as anti-colonial resistance — three hours long, in Hindi, with songs — was shortlisted and nominated in a year when the Academy's foreign-language committee voted to consider it alongside *Amélie* and *No Man's Land*. The nomination was itself a statement: the world's most commercially significant film institution had acknowledged that Indian popular cinema, in its full commercial-cultural specificity, belonged in the same conversation as the European art cinema that had historically dominated the category.

B. The First Competitive Wins: Rahman, Pookutty, and the *Slumdog Night*

The 81st Academy Awards ceremony, held February 22, 2009, at the Kodak Theater in Hollywood, produced India's first competitive Oscar wins. A.R. Rahman won Best Original Score and Best Original Song (*Jai Ho*) for Danny Boyle's *Slumdog Millionaire*; Resul Pookutty won Best Sound Mixing for the same film. Three Oscar wins for Indian creative workers in a single ceremony — a record that stood until 2023. Rahman's acceptance speech, delivered partly in Tamil, included the line: 'All my life I had a choice of hate and love. I chose love, and I am here.' The Kodak Theater — purpose-built as the permanent home of the Academy Awards ceremony — had received a man from Chennai who had begun his professional life composing jingles for Indian television commercials. The ceremony was broadcast to over 37 million American viewers and an estimated 500 million globally. India's presence in the room was not that of a visitor.

The *Slumdog* wins carried a significant irony that the Indian film community processed carefully: the film was directed by a British filmmaker, set in India, and produced by a British-American production company. India's creative contribution — Rahman's music, Pookutty's sound design, the Indian cast and crew — was embedded in an international production structure. This

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irony would become less ironic over time, as the Indian industry developed the infrastructure to produce internationally competitive work under fully Indian authorship. The *Slumdog* wins were, in retrospect, a transitional moment: India's talent was globally certified, but the vehicle for that certification was not yet Indian-controlled.

C. Bhanu Athaiya, Satyajit Ray, and the Earlier Record

Two earlier Oscars had established the foundation. Bhanu Athaiya won Best Costume Design for Richard Attenborough's *Gandhi* at the 55th Academy Awards on April 11, 1983 — the first Oscar won by an Indian national. Athaiya's win was for a film that, like *Slumdog*, was directed by a non-Indian (Attenborough) but depended fundamentally on Indian craftsmanship. Athaiya later returned her Oscar to the Academy, citing advanced age and a desire for it to be safely preserved — a gesture that generated significant commentary and that the Academy honored by confirming the win remained permanently on record. Satyajit Ray received an honorary Academy Award at the 64th ceremony on March 30, 1992, presented via a live video link to his hospital room in Calcutta. Ray — who had won the *Palme d'Or*, the *Golden Lion*, the *Golden Bear*, and virtually every other honor world cinema had to offer — accepted the Oscar twelve days before his death. His honorary award recognized a body of work built largely outside the commercial mainstream and without the Hollywood connections that typically generate Academy attention; it was the most purely artistic recognition the Academy had extended to an Indian filmmaker, and it arrived too late for Ray to receive it in person.

D. Guneet Monga, Kartiki Gonsalves, and the Documentary Breakthrough

In March 2023, two competitive Academy Awards went to Indian productions in a single ceremony — a milestone that received insufficient attention given its significance. Guneet Monga and Ayesha Siddiqui produced *Period. End of Sentence*, directed by Iranian-American filmmaker Rayka Zehtabchi, which won Best Documentary Short Subject at the 91st Academy Awards in 2019 — making Monga the first Indian woman producer to win a competitive Oscar. Monga then produced *The Elephant Whisperers*, directed by Kartiki Gonsalves — an entirely Indian-produced, Tamil-language documentary about a couple in the Mudumalai Tiger Reserve who care for orphaned elephants — which won Best Documentary Short at the 95th Academy Awards on March 12, 2023. Two Oscar wins in two consecutive years for Indian documentary shorts, produced by the same Indian woman producer, the second film entirely Tamil-language and made without any non-Indian creative involvement: this is not peripheral participation in global cinema. It is authorial presence at its highest institutional level.

E. Priyanka Chopra Jonas and the Architecture of Institutional Belonging

Competitive wins and honorary recognitions measure one dimension of Indian cinema's standing at the Academy Awards. A different and complementary dimension is institutional belonging — the degree to which India is trusted to be not merely a recipient of Academy recognition but a participant in its ceremonial architecture. On March 15, 2021, that belonging was demonstrated in a form that requires specific notation. At 5:19 a.m. PDT, via global live stream on Oscar.com, Oscars.org, and the Academy's Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook platforms — as well as through the New York and Los Angeles Switch pool ports and satellite downlink feeds that carry the ceremony to international broadcasters — actor-producer Priyanka Chopra Jonas and singer-songwriter-actor Nick Jonas announced the nominations for all 23 categories of the 93rd Academy Awards (Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, 2021).

The precision of that record — the exact timestamp, the specific transmission infrastructure, the enumeration of all 23 categories — is deliberate. Announcing Oscar nominations is not an honorary gesture or a diversity-conscious gesture. It is a logistical and institutional function of the highest ceremonial significance: the nominees announced on that morning become the short list from which the Oscar class of a given year is drawn, and the announcement is the first public act of that selection process. Priyanka Chopra Jonas, born in Jamshedpur, Jharkhand — a former Miss World, a Bollywood actress who had anchored one of Indian commercial cinema's most commercially durable careers before building a parallel career in American television and film production — was the voice that opened the 93rd Academy Awards cycle to the world. She was not a guest at that institution. She was, in that moment, part of its operating personnel.

This matters for the argument of this paper in a specific way. The progression documented in this section moves from Bhanu Athaiya winning an Oscar for craft in a British-directed film (1983), through Satyajit Ray receiving an honorary award from his deathbed (1992), through A.R. Rahman winning for music in a British-directed film about India (2009), through Guneet Monga producing Indian documentary work to competitive victory (2019, 2023), to Kartiki Gonsalves directing entirely Indian-origin work to its Oscar (2023), to Keeravani and Chandrabose winning for Telugu-language music under Indian directorial authority (2023). Against this arc of deepening Indian authorial presence, Priyanka Chopra Jonas announcing all 23 categories in 2021 represents a parallel track of institutional integration that is equally significant: India is not only winning at the Oscars; India is helping to run them.

F. Naatu Naatu at the Dolby Theater: The Center of the Room

The 95th Academy Awards ceremony, held March 12, 2023, at the Dolby Theater in Hollywood — formerly the Kodak Theater where Rahman had accepted his Oscars in 2009 — produced the moment that most completely represents Indian cinema's current global standing. Naatu Naatu, composed by M.M. Keeravani with lyrics by Chandrabose, from S.S. Rajamouli's RRR, won Best Original Song. The performance preceding the announcement was delivered live on the Dolby Theater stage by playback singers Rahul Sipligunj and Kaala Bhairava, accompanied by an ensemble that brought the kinetic physical energy of the song's original sequence — itself a viral phenomenon viewed hundreds of millions of times in the months following RRR's release — to the most formal venue in American film culture. The audience rose before the award was announced. The broadcast was watched by 18.7 million US viewers and an estimated 350 million globally.

Keeravani, accepting the award, delivered a speech in rhyming verse — a form rooted in Telugu oral literary tradition, utterly unlike any Oscar acceptance speech in the ceremony's 95-year history, and immediately recognized globally as a gesture of cultural specificity rather than assimilation. The song had been written in Telugu, performed in Telugu, and had reached its global audience not through Hindi or English translation but through the universal legibility of its physical joy. The Dolby Theater's acceptance of Naatu Naatu was not the world's acceptance of Indian cinema on Western terms. It was the world's acceptance of Indian cinema on Indian terms.

The complete record of Indian Academy presence — Athaiya (1983), Ray (1992), Rahman and Pookutty (2009), Chopra Jonas announcing nominations (2021), Monga (2019, 2023), Gonsalves (2023), Keeravani and Chandrabose (2023) — spans craft, honorary recognition, music composition, sound design, documentary production, original song, and institutional ceremony. It crosses language barriers, production scales, cinematic traditions, and now the line between award recipient and award administrator. It constitutes a body of formal global presence that India has built across four decades and must now leverage as governance credential in the AI era.

6. From Backend to Authorship: India's Transition in the AI Era

A. The Scale of India's Hollywood Infrastructure

The full dimensions of India's VFX and post-production role in Hollywood production — including the specific impact of the 2023 WGA and SAG-AFTRA strikes on Indian studios, the \$647 million in international VFX revenue generated by the Indian sector in 2023, and the governance asymmetry created by Hollywood's

dependence on a partner operating under a fundamentally different regulatory environment — are documented in the companion study, Upadhyay and Krishnakumar (2026). This section proceeds from those findings to argue the governance implication that the companion paper identifies but does not develop: that India's backend role must be converted into authorial and policy primacy, and that AI is the inflection point at which that conversion becomes both possible and necessary.

The baseline fact is this: India's media and entertainment services sector — comprising VFX, animation, post-production, and digital media services for international clients — employs over 80,000 professionals and generates revenues exceeding \$2 billion annually (FICCI-EY, 2025). DNEG, with primary production operations in Mumbai and a history that includes six Academy Awards for Best Visual Effects, processed the visual effects for *Interstellar*, *Ex Machina*, *Blade Runner 2049*, and *Tenet*. Prana Studios in Mumbai animated *Ice Age: Continental Drift* and *Rio 2* for 20th Century Fox. Prime Focus World, Red Chillies VFX, and Tata Elxsi process work for every major Hollywood studio. In February 2024, PhantomFX acquired an 80 percent stake in Tippett Studio — the American facility responsible for the visual effects in *Jurassic Park* and *Starship Troopers* — signaling the first major instance of an Indian VFX company acquiring a legacy Hollywood facility rather than serving as its subcontractor (FICCI-EY, 2025). That acquisition is the corporate embodiment of the transition this paper advocates.

B. The Transition: Why AI Is the Inflection Point

The economic logic of India's backend role in Hollywood has always rested on a labor cost differential that AI is systematically eroding. As AI tools automate the most labor-intensive VFX tasks — rotoscoping, environment generation, crowd simulation, lighting iteration — the cost advantage of offshore processing diminishes. Indian VFX facilities face a choice: compete on price in a market where the price floor is falling, or compete on creative value in a market where the ceiling is rising. The former is a race that AI will eventually win against human labor everywhere. The latter requires converting technical infrastructure into authorial capability — developing the Indian creative voices that direct the tools rather than merely operating them.

The studios that will thrive in AI-era Indian cinema are those, like Red Chillies VFX, that have already made the pivot from service provider to co-creator: building the visual worlds of Indian films of international ambition, developing proprietary workflows, training artists who understand Indian aesthetic traditions as well as global technical standards. The governance imperative that follows is clear: India's industrial AI strategy for cinema must be oriented not toward protecting the existing backend business model but toward accelerating its conversion into an authorial one. Tax incentives, training

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infrastructure, intellectual property frameworks, and government procurement of AI tools for the film sector should all be evaluated against this criterion.

C. The Disney-Reliance Merger and Governance Questions

The 2024 merger of Disney's Indian operations with Reliance Industries — among the largest media transactions in Indian corporate history — creates a specific governance question that neither the Indian regulatory environment nor the American one has fully answered. As AI-generated and AI-assisted content flows through the merged Disney-Reliance pipeline, which jurisdiction's governance standards apply? The SAG-AFTRA agreement's consent provisions for digital replicas? India's CBFC certification framework? The EU AI Act's transparency requirements for content distributed on European platforms? The absence of cross-border harmonization creates a governance vacuum that Upadhyay and Krishnakumar (2026) compare, at global scale, to the patchwork of American state censorship boards that precipitated the formation of the MPPDA in 1922. India, as the co-jurisdiction in the world's largest film-market merger, has both the standing and the obligation to propose harmonization frameworks — not merely to comply with frameworks proposed by others.

7. The Archive Speaks: Digitization, Voice, and the Second Life of Indian Cinema

A. Kerala's Digital Re-release Model

For several years, Kerala's film ecosystem has been demonstrating a principle that the rest of Indian cinema has been slow to adopt: that a properly restored classic film is not a preservation exercise but a commercial product. The digital restoration and theatrical re-release of Malayalam classics — Chemmeen (1965), the films of Adoor Gopalakrishnan (Swayamvaram, 1972; Elippathayam, 1981), G. Aravindan's Thampu (1978) and Kanchana Sita (1977), K.G. George's Oru Davathi Yogi (1981) — has generated box office revenue, streaming licensing fees, and renewed international festival attention simultaneously. Audiences who first encountered these films on deteriorated television prints are now watching 4K restorations in which the original cinematographers' intentions are fully visible. A generation that had no access to these films in any form is discovering a tradition of serious Malayalam filmmaking that predates and contextualizes the internationally celebrated contemporary Malayalam cinema they already know.

The commercial logic is straightforward: a restored film is a new product with new commercial life across theatrical, streaming, and licensing channels. The cultural logic is equally compelling: digital re-release builds the audience infrastructure — the knowledge, the taste, the reference points — that sustains serious

filmmaking in subsequent generations. The governance argument is most important of all: Kerala has demonstrated, without a national mandate or central government funding, that the archive-as-asset-class model works. A national digitization initiative — modeled on the Kerala experience, scaled with central government resources through the National Film Archive of India, and structured with commercial licensing frameworks that generate revenue to fund ongoing preservation — would be the most consequential single investment India could make in the long-term health of its cinematic culture.

The National Film Archive of India holds over 12,000 films dating to the silent era. The majority are not fully digitized. A significant portion exist on nitrate prints that are deteriorating at rates that make the digitization timeline an urgent policy question, not a bureaucratic one. The Government of India's Preservation and Digitisation Initiative (NFAI, 2022–2025) has begun to address this, but at a pace and scale insufficient to the magnitude of the asset at risk.

B. AI Voice Restoration: The Living Archive

The intersection of cinema digitization with AI voice technology opens possibilities that archivists of a decade ago could not have anticipated. India's film archive contains performances by actors — Guru Dutt, Geeta Bali, Bimal Roy's entire collaborative circle — whose recordings exist in varying states of physical degradation. AI-assisted audio restoration tools can now reconstruct vocal frequencies, reduce noise, and in some cases recover intelligibility from recordings that had been considered unrestorable. This is not reconstruction from nothing; it is precision repair of existing material. The restored vocal track of a Guru Dutt performance, presented without the crackling and compression artifacts of a fourth-generation analog copy, is not a fake. It is the original, made newly accessible.

Beyond restoration lies the more ethically complex territory of AI voice synthesis — the generation of new performances by reconstructed vocal models derived from existing recordings. The regulatory gap here is significant. India's existing framework — the 'star value' personality rights jurisprudence built through the Bachchan cases — addresses unauthorized exploitation of living and deceased celebrities' likenesses, but provides no specific consent or compensation mechanism for AI synthesis of a deceased performer's voice for archive restoration, re-release, or new creative production. This gap should be filled by statute, not left to case-by-case judicial development. India's forthcoming revisions to the Copyright Act, 1957 — which the Ministry of Commerce and Industry has indicated are under active consideration — offer the appropriate legislative vehicle. The Kerala re-release precedent provides the commercial model; the Bachchan jurisprudence provides the rights framework foundation;

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AI voice technology provides the capability. What remains is the statute that brings them together.

The commercial opportunity is considerable. AI dubbing tools capable of delivering emotionally accurate, lip-synchronized translations across all 22 scheduled languages — not the flat mechanical dubbing of the analog cable television era, but synthesis that captures the specific vocal coloring of each performance — would allow the entire Indian film archive to circulate domestically across language barriers for the first time. A Manipuri film, a Dogri folk drama, a Bhojpuri classic: all accessible to the full 1.4-billion domestic audience without the financial barrier that has always made cross-language release unviable for smaller productions. The effect on India's internal cultural cohesion would be structural. The effect on the global reach of India's smaller cinematic traditions — Meitei, Tulu, Santhali — would be transformative.

C. Archive as AI Training Resource and Strategic Asset

India's digitized film archive, properly licensed and managed, constitutes an AI training resource of national strategic significance. AI systems trained on Indian film content — on the aesthetic conventions of Bengal parallel cinema, the compositional grammar of Tamil classical melodrama, the choreographic logic of Telugu folk spectacle — would produce outputs recognizably shaped by Indian creative traditions rather than the Western training datasets that currently dominate commercial AI model development. The commercial and geopolitical implications of this are both real. An AI content-generation tool trained primarily on American and Western European film produces outputs that, by default, reproduce the visual and narrative conventions of those traditions. India's 12,000-film archive, if digitized and made available for training under appropriate licensing frameworks, would give Indian AI developers and Indian studios access to foundational models calibrated to Indian aesthetic intelligence.

The licensing revenue generated by authorizing AI companies to train on the Indian archive — under terms that compensate the communities and surviving rights-holders whose creativity built that archive — could fund the digitization effort that makes it possible. India's cultural memory can finance its cultural future, but only if the governance infrastructure exists to structure the transaction equitably. This requires updating India's Copyright Act to address AI training data as a specifically compensable use, a reform that the Indian film industry's representative bodies have not yet unified around but that the AI adoption curve makes increasingly urgent.

8. India at the Controls: AI Leadership, Policy Vision, and the Governance Mandate

A. Prime Minister Modi and the Personal Diplomacy of AI

The governance engagement of India's head of government with the AI industry has no precedent in scale or directness. In the twelve months surrounding the G20 Summit in New Delhi (September 2023), Prime Minister Narendra Modi held substantive meetings with Sam Altman of OpenAI, Sundar Pichai of Google, Satya Nadella of Microsoft, Jensen Huang of NVIDIA, and Mark Zuckerberg of Meta — the full set of chief executives whose companies are defining the terms of AI's development. The New Delhi G20 Leaders' Declaration, which India drafted in its capacity as the 2023 Presidency, included language on AI governance that was notably more attentive to developing-world concerns around technology access, data sovereignty, and benefit distribution than the Western-led frameworks that had preceded it. India did not position itself as a follower of American or European AI governance templates. It proposed itself as the voice of the world's majority — insisting that governance frameworks must not entrench the advantages of nations that already lead in AI infrastructure development.

On February 19, 2024, Prime Minister Modi launched the India AI Mission with a budget allocation of Rs. 10,371 crore — approximately \$1.25 billion — specifically targeting AI compute infrastructure, development of foundational models in Indian languages, and institutional frameworks for responsible AI deployment across government and industry. The IndiaAI initiative identified creative sectors as primary beneficiaries of domestically controlled AI development, recognizing that India's cultural industries constitute both a use case for Indian AI capability and a showcase for its global credibility. The film industry was not named explicitly in the Mission documents — an omission that the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting and the Film Federation of India should jointly address in the Mission's next revision.

Modi's engagement at international forums has been complementary. India's participation in the Global Partnership on AI, the ITU's AI for Good framework, and the United Nations AI Advisory Body has become substantively more assertive since 2022. Indian delegations have moved from attendance to agenda-setting — tabling proposals, building coalitions with African and Southeast Asian nations that share India's interest in AI governance that does not presuppose Western infrastructure dominance, and insisting on the specific inclusion of cultural and creative industry concerns in governance frameworks that have historically addressed AI primarily in military, financial, and healthcare contexts.

B. Cyber Sovereignty and the Film Industry's Stake

India's Digital Personal Data Protection Act (2023) establishes a framework with direct implications for the

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film industry that have not yet been fully recognized. The Act's provisions on consent, data localization, and cross-border data flows apply to AI systems trained on Indian film content, to streaming platform algorithms curating Indian audiences' viewing, and to the digital marketing data that Indian studios generate and that international platforms process. The Act does not yet include specific provisions for the creative industry analogous to California's AB 2602 or AB 1836 — performer protection in the age of digital replicas — but the legislative infrastructure exists to add them.

India's cyber sovereignty framework intersects with cinema in a further dimension: piracy. Indian films are among the most pirated content globally, with theatrical-release prints routinely leaking to torrent networks within hours of certified release, generating losses the Film Federation of India estimated at Rs. 18,000 crore annually as of 2023. AI-powered watermarking and forensic source-identification tools — developed and deployed under Indian legal frameworks — offer the prospect of enforcement capacity that conventional anti-piracy measures could not achieve. The India AI Mission's compute infrastructure should be explicitly tasked with supporting this application. Digital sovereignty and creative economy sovereignty are, in this specific domain, the same policy objective.

C. The Governance Forums: India's Specific Opportunities

The G20, G7, World Economic Forum, and UNESCO each present specific and distinct opportunities for Indian cinema's governance interests to be advanced — but they require different approaches and different institutional champions.

At the G20, India's established chairmanship legacy gives it standing to propose the creation of a working group on AI and creative industries under the Digital Economy Working Group's mandate. The 2023 G20 AI Principles, developed during India's presidency, addressed AI governance in broad terms but contained no provisions specific to cultural production, creative labor, or the multilingual and multi-tradition diversity that characterizes the world's non-Western creative economies. India should sponsor a G20 cultural AI supplement that addresses training data compensation, AI transparency in funded productions, and cross-border harmonization of performer consent standards — and should do so in coalition with France, Italy, and Brazil, all of which have large national film industries with analogous interests.

At the G7, India's leverage is market size and cultural authority rather than membership. The Hiroshima AI Process (2023) produced governance principles — safety, trustworthiness, transparency — that are technically sound and culturally narrow, reflecting the interests of economies whose creative industries operate within robust intellectual property and labor law

frameworks. India should engage the G7's AI governance process as a formal observer with a specific brief: to ensure that the cultural and creative industry provisions of any internationally endorsed AI governance standard reflect the interests of the world's largest and most diverse film-producing nations, not only of the G7 members whose industries are most represented in the AI governance rooms.

At the World Economic Forum, the gap is institutional representation. India's participation in Davos-level conversations about the creative economy has been dominated by technology sector voices — Infosys, TCS, Wipro — rather than by the film industry, which contributes approximately \$25 billion annually to the Indian economy and employs 8 million people directly. The Film Federation of India, the Producers Guild, and the South Indian Film Chamber of Commerce have the numbers to warrant a Davos seat; they lack the established network and the policy fluency to occupy it effectively. Building that fluency is a strategic imperative for the next five years.

At UNESCO, the opportunity is the most structurally significant. The Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (2005) was designed for a world in which cultural trade barriers were primarily tariff and quota questions. Its implementation mechanisms predate streaming, predate algorithmic curation, and predate generative AI. India should sponsor a formal protocol review — proposing specific updates to the Convention's implementation frameworks that address AI training on cultural material, mandatory content labeling for AI-assisted productions, and compensation mechanisms for communities whose creative heritage is used in training datasets without their consent. India's 22-language film tradition makes it the natural architect of a UNESCO cultural AI protocol that speaks to the world's non-Western majority.

D. India by 2030: The Governance Architect's Mandate

By 2030, India will be the world's most populous nation, its third-largest economy by GDP, and — on current trajectories — one of three primary global AI development centers alongside the United States and China. Its film industry will produce content for an audience approaching two billion across domestic and diaspora markets, in an environment where AI tools manage routine creative tasks and human artists are concentrated on work that machines cannot perform: moral imagination, cultural specificity, the empathetic precision that separates great cinema from competent content delivery.

The governance choices made between 2025 and 2030 will determine whether India's position in this landscape is that of a rule-taker or a rule-maker. The country that develops a statutory framework for AI use of archived cultural material will have given the world a model. The

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country that builds the first multilingual AI system capable of serving all 22 Indian languages at high fidelity — calibrated to Indian aesthetic traditions, trained on India's digitized archive — will have a governance credential that no other nation can replicate. The country whose Prime Minister has personally engaged every major AI company and every major AI governance forum is not a bystander. The question is whether that personal engagement is converted into durable institutional architecture: a national AI-in-cinema policy, a legislative update to the Copyright Act, a coordinated diplomatic strategy across the G20, G7, WEF, and UNESCO.

Indian cinema has, for more than a century, been a projection of the civilization's capacity to contain contradictions and transmute them into stories. The contradiction of the AI era — between technological power and cultural vulnerability, between efficiency and artistry, between global algorithmic reach and the irreducible specificity of local meaning — is a contradiction Indian cinema knows intimately. It has lived inside that contradiction since Phalke first asked whether an Indian mythological story, told in an Indian body, could compete with a British adventure film in a colonial city. The answer, as history now records, was yes. The governance question of 2026 is whether the answer will remain yes — and who is writing the rules that determine it.

10. CONCLUSION

When the Reel Becomes the Algorithm — and India Writes the Rules

There is a photograph from the Dolby Theater on the night of March 12, 2023. M.M. Keeravani stands at the podium with his Oscar — his first, and Indian cinema's most recent competitive award — with the hall behind him still on its feet from the performance that preceded the announcement. He is a Telugu-speaking composer from Andhra Pradesh, trained in classical Carnatic tradition, who scored hundreds of films in multiple Indian languages across three decades before the world's most visible entertainment institution placed its highest honor in his hands. He accepted in rhyming verse. He accepted on his own terms. The photograph does not capture India asking the world for permission. It captures India in the room, centered, recognized, at the table where the canon is made..

The Malayalam films being digitally restored and re-released in Kerala theaters carry, in their renewed images, a demonstration of what the archive can become when treated as an asset rather than a liability. The Manipuri filmmaker with a Redmi phone and a story about her grandmother's garden carries, in her mobile device, a production and distribution infrastructure that Phalke would have recognized as miraculous. The Indian VFX professional who built *Interstellar's* wormhole and can now build a ninth-century Tamil palace with equal

skill carries, in her technical mastery, the foundation for Indian authorial spectacle of international ambition. These three figures — the restorer, the mobile creator, the technical artist — are the human substance of the AI-era Indian cinema that policy must protect and enable.

Conclusion: India should lead the AI and Algorithmic wave

Phalke pawned what he had and returned from London to make a myth. The governance task of 2026 is more complex — it involves statute, diplomacy, corporate strategy, archival investment, and international coalition-building simultaneously — but it rests on the same foundational act of will: the insistence that Indian stories, told in Indian voices, built with Indian craft, belong at the center of the world's cultural conversation. They already are. The algorithm is entering the frame. India must be the one holding the camera, and writing the rules for what the camera is allowed to see.

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