



History of the Odia Cinema from its Origin to 21st Century

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ABSTRACT

Odia cinema has enjoyed a rich and storied past, beginning with the release of *Sita Bibaha* and evolving through multiple transformative phases—from the silver screen era to the rise of OTT platforms. Despite its legacy, one of the persistent challenges facing the Odia film industry is its limited geographic reach, with a predominant focus on Coastal Odisha, leaving other regions of the state relatively untouched. This study explores the trajectory of Odia cinema's development across different parts of Odisha and underscores its cultural significance. As the industry approaches its centenary in 2036, a historical reflection reveals that between 1936 and 1976, only 44 films were produced. However, between 1980 and 2010, there was a substantial boom, with over 600 feature films and countless documentaries created in the Odia language. Unfortunately, the post-1990 era marked a downturn, characterized by the erosion of indigenous cultural values and the increasing influence of South Indian and Hindi cinema. The influx of non-Odia directors, actors, and borrowed scripts—coupled with the growing dominance of television—further accelerated the decline. Today, the Odia film industry finds itself in a troubling state. This research aims to delve into the causes behind this decline and seeks



potential strategies for revitalization, examining the multifaceted issues and dynamics shaping Odia cinema today.

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Introduction

Odisha holds a distinct position on the cultural landscape of the Indian subcontinent. Since ancient times, Odishan culture has evolved in tandem with the broader cultural development of India. As cinema emerged and flourished across India at the beginning of the 20th century, Odisha too embraced this new medium. Within a relatively short span, Odia cinema established a significant presence along the eastern coast of the country. Since its inception in 1936, Odia cinema has traversed a journey marked by challenges, achievements, and moments of celebration. This essay seeks to present a concise history of Odia cinema—from its early days to its present state.

The Beginning: Goswami and *Sita Bibaha*

Odisha was officially declared a separate state based on linguistic identity on April 1, 1936. This marked a pivotal moment of cultural, social, and political awakening for the Odia people, who began to seek expressions of their identity through various forms, including cinema. Merely twenty-seven days later, on April 28, the first Odia film *Sita Bibaha* was released at Laxmi Cinema Hall in Puri. This pioneering work was the brainchild of Mohan Sundar Dev Goswami, widely regarded as the father of Odia cinema. He chose to adapt the well-known and beloved Odia folk tale of *Sita Bibaha*, a story deeply rooted in the region's oral and theatrical traditions.

Creating *Sita Bibaha* was no easy feat. Goswami faced numerous obstacles, but with the unwavering support of members of the Jagannath Club in Puri—who were inspired by the emergence of Bengali talkies—he brought his vision to life. The film was screened in makeshift halls across Cuttack, Puri, Berhampur, and Sambalpur. The script was penned by Kamapal Mishra, while Mari Charan Mohanty composed the music. With a runtime of approximately two hours, the film featured eleven songs and was produced under the banner of Kali Films. At the time, permanent cinema halls were scarce, and one of the few means of exhibition was through "Remeria Touring Cinema," which travelled across the state, setting up temporary venues in key locations.



Much like Dadasaheb Phalke, Goswami encountered substantial challenges during the production. Though he secured funding from Kali Films proprietors Priyanath Ganguli and Kanduri Charan Saha, casting posed another difficulty—especially in finding a female lead, as acting in films was still considered socially inappropriate for women. Eventually, theatre artist Smt. Prabhabati Devi agreed to play the role of Sita. Makkhan Lal Banerjee portrayed Ram, while Goswami himself played Vishwamitra. Most of the supporting cast came from Puri, though final casting decisions were made by producer Priyanath Ganguli.

The film was shot over three to four months at the Kali Films studio in Calcutta, with an estimated production cost of ₹30,000. Despite its critical acclaim and positive audience reception, the movie failed commercially. Its financial backers faced significant losses, leading to the closure of Kali Films. Legal complications further prevented Goswami from receiving any remuneration, and tragically, he died in poverty at the age of 46.

As mentioned earlier, the film premiered in Puri through a travelling cinema. Ticket prices varied by seating arrangement—four paise for floor seating and two annas for a bed. Unfortunately, the film did not meet commercial expectations and failed to resonate with a large audience.

The Dark Period: 1936–1948

Following the release of *Sita Bibaha*, there was a long hiatus of fourteen years during which no Odia films were produced. This gap can largely be attributed to the film's commercial failure, which discouraged future investments. Moreover, the idea that cinema could be a profitable enterprise was yet to take root among the people of Odisha. The lack of basic infrastructure, trained professionals, and an established distribution and exhibition network further hindered any attempts to revive film production during this time.

It wasn't until the post-Independence period, when India was swept up in a wave of national celebration, that Odia cinema saw a revival. In 1948–49, Shiv Pratap Singhdeo and Gourachandra Pratap Singhdeo joined forces to establish the production house *Great Eastern Movietone* and released the film *Lalita*. The movie premiered at Capital Cinema in Cuttack and marked a turning point for Odia cinema. Directed by Kalyan Gupta, *Lalita* featured Loknath Mishra and Uma Devi in the lead roles.



For the first time, all aspects of filmmaking—direction, production, music, and lyrics—were handled with professionalism and dedication. Specialized personnel were engaged in each department, setting a new standard for future productions in the Odia film industry.

The First Blockbuster of Odia Cinema

The 1950s marked a significant milestone in the history of Odia cinema with the release of its first blockbuster, *Sri Jagannath*. Prominent figures like Nitai Palit and Gopal Ghosh recognized the need for a strong cinematic presence in their native language and culture. This realization led to the formation of a public limited company, Rupa Bharati, which went on to produce *Sri Jagannath*. The film turned out to be a landmark in Odia cinema, redefining its commercial potential and popularity.

Premiering on 5 February 1950 in Cuttack, the film broke records by running for ten weeks in the city and six weeks in Kolkata. It was the first Odia film to enjoy such widespread commercial success and public acclaim. Due to its popularity, it was later dubbed into Telugu and even remade in Bengali—making it the only Odia film to be dubbed into Telugu so far. With only 26 cinema halls across Odisha at the time, the producers reached wider audiences using mobile or touring cinemas, which helped generate substantial profits. More importantly, the film helped Odia cinema gain traction among rural audiences.

Actors Gour Prasad Ghosh and Gloria Rout emerged as Odia cinema's earliest stars. The film featured exemplary talents from Odisha, including the celebrated music director Bala Krushna Das. The acclaimed dramatist Gopal Chotray penned the powerful dialogues, and the film was even released in other regions such as Bihar, Assam, Kolkata, and Burma, enhancing its reach and impact.

1950s: Shifting from Mythology to Social Themes

The early 1950s also introduced a thematic shift in Odia films, moving from mythology to social issues. Two significant films from 1951—*Saptasajya* and *Rolls Two and Eight*—reflected this transition. *Saptasajya*, produced by Sesh Pratap Singhdeo of the royal family of Dhenkanal, was based on a story by revolutionary poet Ananta Patnaik, depicting the exploitation of common people under the guise of industrial development. *Rolls Two and Eight*, produced and acted in by Ratikant Padhi of Great Eastern Movie Tone Pvt. Ltd., also tackled social issues. Though neither film succeeded commercially due to



weak direction, they paved the way for more effective and successful socially themed films later in the decade.

Following this trend, *Aamari Gan Jhia* was released in 1953. Produced by Naren Mitra, a cinema hall owner from Cuttack, it was Odisha's first bilingual film—made in both Odia and Bengali under the title *Panarakhya*. The film addressed the pressing issue of dowry and was screened in all 46 cinema halls across the state, yielding commercial success. Other notable films followed: *Bhai Bhai* (1956) dealt with caste discrimination and featured an inter-caste marriage that challenged orthodox beliefs, while *Maa* highlighted the struggles of a poor widow determined to educate her son. Nitai Palit's *Kedar Gouri*, a romantic tragedy, also left a mark in 1954.

During this era, the Odia film industry was heavily influenced by Bengali professionals. Director Kalyan Gupta made three Odia films, while music legends like Balakrishna Dash and Bhubaneswar Mishra composed memorable scores for several blockbusters. Their collaboration brought a new musical era to Odia films before eventually parting ways. Prominent actors during this time included Samuel Sahu (Babi), Gopal Ghosh, Byomkesh, Gloria Rout, Anima, Ram Pratihari, Krushna Chandra Pande, Govinda Tej, and Chapala. Renowned composers such as Kali Charan Pattnaik, Parashuram Pattnaik, Surendra Kumar Dash, Krushna Prasad Ghosh, and Janaki Mohanty contributed immensely to the industry's growth.

Despite challenges like financial constraints and a lack of trained directors and actors, the Odia film industry made remarkable progress during the 1950s. Key transformations included the annual release of multiple films, improved technical standards, and critical acclaim at both regional and national levels. With eight films released during the decade, Odia cinema witnessed growth in both quantity and quality.

A Cooperative Initiative and Expansion

In 1958, the first cooperative initiative in Odia cinema was launched. Kabiraj Krushnachandra Tripathy Sharma, a respected Ayurvedic doctor and political figure, founded Utkal Chalachitra Pratisthan in Aska, Ganjam district. This cooperative society aimed to produce films and promote cinema in southern Odisha. By 1959, they had established the town's first cinema hall and released *Mahalakshmi Puja*, based on a popular mythological tale. The film was commercially successful and introduced new talents



like Sarat Pujari, Dhira Biswal, and director Biswanath Nayak. It also became the first Odia film dubbed into Hindi and two other languages, inspiring new producers and expanding the film's reach.

During this era, Odia films increasingly reflected societal realities. Issues like casteism, superstition, and social orthodoxy were brought to the forefront through films like *Bhai Bhauja* and *Amada Bata*. Script and dialogue writing became a serious and respected craft, led by literary figures such as Manoj Das and Gopal Chhotray. Singers like Akshaya Mohanty and Pranab Pattanaik also made a lasting impact.

This phase marked a transitional period where Odia cinema was trying to define itself amidst the wave of modernization sweeping across post-independence India. While the broader Indian film industry embraced Western influences, Odia filmmakers were navigating the balance between cultural preservation and progressive storytelling.

1960s: An Era of Consolidation and the Dawn of the Golden Age

The 1960s began with a landmark moment in Odia film history—*Sri Lokanath*, released on 15 April 1960. The film became a phenomenal success, running for over 100 days at the Capital Cinema Hall in Cuttack. Its cast and crew were honored by the Chief Minister in a special felicitation ceremony. *Sri Lokanath* won the National Award for Best Regional Film and introduced talented newcomers like Mammala Devi, Urbasi, Akshaya Mohanty (Kashyap), and Babi.

This decade marked a turning point for Odia cinema with increased production, higher artistic standards, and critical acclaim. A total of 25 films were released in the 1960s, many of which are now considered classics—*Laxmi* (1962), *Nuabou* (1962), *Sadhana* (1963), *Suryamukhi* (1963), and *Matira Manisha* (1967) among them. With contributions from renowned directors and musicians from other regions, Odia films reached new heights of excellence.

In 1961, the foundation stone for Odisha Film Studio Limited was laid in Bhubaneswar, signifying the beginning of state patronage in the cinematic field. Although political instability delayed progress, the initiative eventually led to the establishment of Kalinga Studios Limited at Khandagiri. This period witnessed technological experimentation, narrative diversity, and growing national recognition for Odia cinema.



The 1960s can rightly be seen as the golden age's inception for Odia cinema. The industry matured significantly, embracing its cultural roots while expanding its artistic vision—leading to an era of stability, confidence, and acclaim.

1970s – The Arrival of Colour on the Silver Screen

Until the 1970s, Odisha remained relatively untouched by the mainstream Indian film industry. However, this decade witnessed a shift as successful producers and distributors from Telugu and Bengali cinema began experimenting in the region. Distributors based in Calcutta started financing and managing Odia film production and exhibition, while filmmakers from Madras introduced Odia remakes of popular Telugu, Tamil, and Hindi films. During this transformative phase, several technically skilled young Odia professionals entered the field, contributing to its growth.

Prior to 1970, Odisha lacked a proper filmmaking infrastructure, prompting local filmmakers to seek government assistance. In response to industry demands, the Eastern India Motion Picture Association (EIMPA) established a branch in Cuttack in April 1970 to facilitate film distribution and exhibition within the state.

Throughout the 1970s, the Odia film industry witnessed substantial growth, producing 47 films during the decade, with 16 of them released in 1978 alone. Investments began pouring into the industry, and a number of box office hits such as *Adina Megha*, *Ghara Sansar*, *Dharitri*, *Kanakalata*, *Mamata*, *Jajabara*, *Krushna Sudama*, *Sindur Bindu*, *Sesha Sravana*, *Sunar Sansara*, *Chilika Teera*, *Sati Anasuya*, *Gouri*, *Abhiman*, *Bandhu Mahanti*, *Nagaphasa*, *Jhihmili*, *Pati Patni*, and *Mathura Vijaya* captivated audiences and became commercial successes.

A historic milestone came in 1976 with the release of *Gapa Helebi Sata*, the first full-length Odia colour film, which premiered exactly 40 years after *Sita Bibaha*, the first Odia movie. Produced by businessman Subimal Chandra Mallick, the film debuted at the New Delhi International Film Festival. Mallick invested a significant sum of ₹8 lakh, employing renowned technicians and artists from Bombay to ensure the film's quality. The film earned acclaim and international attention, being showcased by a Middle Eastern company and winning State Government recognition for actress Banaja Mohanty's outstanding performance.



Following this, several films such as *Sesha Sravana*, *Sati Anasuya*, *Taapoi*, *Srikrushna Rasaleela*, *Sri Jagannath*, and *Mathura Vijaya* continued the colour trend, making black-and-white films feel outdated. This period also marked the integration of the 'masala' formula, popular in Hindi and South Indian films, into Odia cinema, which gradually began eroding its distinct identity.

In 1971, EIMPA proposed the creation of a dedicated film development body for Odisha. Consequently, the Odisha Film Development Corporation (OFDC) was established in 1976 and became fully operational by 1978-79. Its purpose was to address the industry's shortage of entrepreneurs, capital, and technical expertise. With Cuttack emerging as a central hub, the initial control still rested with Calcutta-based distributors.

During this decade, the dominance of producers and financiers over scriptwriting led to a surge in plagiarism and sensationalism, prioritizing entertainment over originality. Telugu producers led the trend of remaking films from Tamil and Telugu into Odia, starting with the hit *Punarmilana*. Despite this, original productions like *Nagaphasa* (1977), *Suna Sansara* (1978), *Taapoi* (1978), and *Chilika Tire* (1978) earned recognition, with the latter credited as a forerunner of Odisha's parallel cinema. Meanwhile, mythological narratives such as *Srikrushna Rasaleela* and *Sri Jagannath* gained widespread popularity by the end of the decade.

Although creative integrity was often compromised in favor of financial gain and stardom, this era brought increased film production, rising cinema hall numbers, and a boost in audience engagement, helping the Odia film industry flourish.

1980s – Quantity over Quality

The establishment of Kalinga Studio Ltd. in Bhubaneswar in 1982, under the initiative of OFDC, marked a significant advancement. For the first time, Odia filmmakers could carry out technical processes like editing, dubbing, and sound recording within the state itself, freeing them from dependency on studios in Madras or Calcutta.

OFDC also provided crucial support through soft loans, subsidies, and by advocating policies such as reduced sales tax on raw film and compulsory screening of Odia films in cinema halls. These measures, along with a rise in theatre infrastructure, led to an increase in production—156 films were made during

the decade. However, only about 32 were deemed artistically or commercially successful, with just a few achieving “super hit” status according to the *Trade Guide* journal.

Notable films from this decade include *Ramayan*, *Tapasya*, *Ashanta Graha*, *Bhakta Salabega*, *Abhilash*, *Danda Balunga*, *Janani*, *Jaiphula*, *Sita Rati*, *Niraba Jhada*, *Maya Mriga*, *Hakim Bahu*, *Klanta Aparanha*, *Badhu Nirupama*, *Tunda Baida*, *Babula*, *Suna Chadhei*, *Bhooka*, *Sasti*, *Agni Parikshya*, *Maa O Mamata*, *Aparichita*, *Kacha Ghara*, *Samaya Bada Balaban*, *Phoola Chandari*, *Jhiati Sita Para*, *Swapna Sagar*, *Basanta Rasa*, *Kaberi*, *Mamata Mage Mula*, *Gruha Lakhmi*, *Eai Ama Sansara*, *Maninee*, *Paka Kambala Pota Chhata*, *Lalpaan Bibi*, and *Jahaku Rakhibe Ananta*. Some of these works received national and international recognition.

Despite these achievements, the industry struggled due to internal conflicts, competition, and mismanagement. Dominance by a few successful producers over institutions like OFDC and Kalinga Studio led to unequal access to resources. Many filmmakers still preferred costly out-of-state facilities over local ones. Of the 156 films produced during the decade, only 40 were box office hits, while others failed due to poor distribution strategies, leaving many producers in financial distress and artists underpaid.

1990s – Globalization and Identity Crisis

The 1990s, marked by economic liberalization and globalization, introduced sweeping changes across industries, including cinema. This decade also marked the Diamond Jubilee of Odia cinema. The growing popularity of television and cable TV contributed to a gradual decline in film production—only 71 films were produced between 1990 and 1995, and not all saw theatrical release.

During this time, OFDC-backed financial schemes led to a rise in cinema hall construction. However, many films produced in this era bore titles and themes resembling traditional *jatra* performances but lacked coherent plots, causing audiences to lose interest, especially during the early 1990s.

The influence of Hollywood became apparent as filmmakers attempted to replicate international cinematic styles. Unfortunately, the rise of video piracy, television, and escalating entertainment and electricity taxes posed serious challenges. With home viewing through VCPs and cable TV costing far less, cinema lost much of its footfall.



Still, the Odia film industry retained a market within the state. However, a worrying trend emerged—many films became mere replicas of Bollywood and South Indian ‘masala’ films, emphasizing sex, violence, and fantasy over substance. The moral and cultural fabric that once defined Odia cinema began to erode.

The lyrical, poetic storytelling of previous decades gave way to vulgar dialogues, explicit content, and superficial narratives. The soulful music and subtle comedy were replaced by cheap slapstick and objectionable humor, alienating discerning audiences and placing the industry in a crisis of identity.

OTT Platforms and the New Digital Era

With the rise of digital consumption, OTT platforms like Netflix, Prime Video, Zee5, Tarang Plus, Aao NXT, Kanchalanka, and Hotstar captured the attention of a new generation of smartphone users who consume content primarily on mobile devices.

Renowned Odia filmmaker Nila Madhab Panda’s Hindi-language projects and Akshaya Parija’s productions in Hindi and Bengali have found a place on these platforms. However, it was only during the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020 that the first Odia film—*Khyanikaa: The Lost Idea* by Amartya Bhattacharyya—was released on OTT, signaling a turning point. This critically acclaimed film won numerous awards and significantly widened its global audience through digital platforms.

Bhattacharyya's earlier film *Capital I* also saw a digital release in the US, along with *Tulasi Apa*. These films demonstrated that independent Odia cinema could thrive on OTT, reaching global viewers and bypassing the traditional limitations of theater releases.

Capital I became Odisha’s first independent feature to be released on *Cinemapreneur*, a pay-per-view platform for Indian independent cinema. Yet, despite these successes, Odia content remains underrepresented on major platforms like Netflix, Prime, and Hotstar. Meanwhile, regional OTT services like Hoichoi (Bengali) and Sun NXT (Tamil, Telugu, Kannada) have made notable strides.

Recognizing this gap, homegrown platforms such as *Tarang Plus*, *Aao NXT*, *Olly Plus*, *Kanchalanka*, and *Kosal Prime* have emerged to promote Odia-language content. These platforms are now preparing to launch original web series and films, creating hope for a vibrant digital future for Odia entertainment.



Conclusion

Over the last 85 years, the Odia film industry has witnessed numerous transformations. Although *Sita Bibaha* marked the beginning, it was with *Lalita* in 1949 that Odia cinema truly found its rhythm. With around 400 films produced to date, many have earned both national and international accolades.

The journey of Odia cinema is one of relentless perseverance, artistic passion, and resilience. Despite periods of crisis and reinvention, the industry continues to evolve, standing as a testament to the dedication of countless artists, producers, and film lovers committed to preserving and enriching Odisha's cinematic legacy.

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