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Reconstructing
The Indian Filmography

Sitara Devi and the Indian filmographer

An apocryphal story has V.A.K. Ranga Rao, the irascible collector of music and authority on South Indian cinema, offering an open challenge. It seems he saw *Mother India* on his television one night and was taken aback to see Sitara Devi's name in the acting credits. The open challenge was to anyone who could spot Sitara Devi anywhere in the film. And, he asked, if she was not in the film, to answer two questions. First, what happened? Was something filmed with her and cut out? If so, when was this cut out? Almost more important: what to do with Sitara Devi's filmography? Should *Mother India* feature in that or not?

Such a problem would cut deep among what I want to call the classic years of the Indian filmographers. The *Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema* decided to include Sitara Devi's name in its credits, mainly because its own key source for Hindi credits before 1970 was Firoze Rangoonwala's iconic *Indian Filmography, Silent and Hindi Film: 1897-1969,* published in 1970 and Har Mandir Singh 'Hamraaz's somewhat different, equally legendary *Hindi Film Geet Kosh* which came out with the first edition of its 1951-60 listings in 1980. The Singh *Geet Kosh* tradition would provide bulwark support both on

its own but also through a series of other *Geet Kosh*es by Harish Raghuvanshi on Gujarati, Murladhar Soni on Rajasthani and many others. Like Ranga Rao, Singh and the other *Geet Kosh* editors have had his own variations of the Sitara Devi problem: his focus was on songs, and he was coming across major discrepancies between film titles, their publicity material and record listings. What was he to do when songs named a particular singer in film credits and another in the record label? Was the version released on record a different, 'cover' version, or was there a deliberate cover-up?

Two years after Rangoonwala, B.V. Dharap's annual *Indian Films* compilations began in 1972 with, on the face of it at least, a somewhat different agenda. This agenda was to assemble, for the first time, all the material of the Indian Censor Board in one place. Although avowedly a job of the State, it was in fact a commercial venture owned by his Motion Picture Enterprises initiative housed at the Alaka Talkies theatre. Dharap managed to bring these volumes out reasonably punctually between 1972 and 1978, but couldn't sustain them. The unpublished material, between 1920 and 1950, the three poorly brought out volumes between 1983-85, and the four years in between (1979-82) recently acquired from his son-in-law, all present at the NFAI, show none of the attention to detail that the classic 1972-78 series possess.

By the early 1980s, Rangoonwala and Dharap – and the focus on Hindi, or at least Mumbai-based, cinema – had been substantiated with significant regional scholarship. Dr. Vijaya's *Kannada vakchitra suvarna mahotsava 1934-1984* (Smarana Sanchike, 1984, Kannada), was followed by 'Filmnews' Anandan's Tamil filmography *1931 Mudal, 1985 Varai veliyana padamgal* (1986), and that very year, Bagishwar Jha's extraordinary *Filmography of Bengali Cinema (1897-1981)*, in his even more extraordinary *Indian Motion Picture Almanac* brought out in 1986.

It is not easy to understand, or interpret in today's times, the significance or the dedication of the work of Rangoonwala, Dharap, Anandan or Jha. And so it is also not easy to understand their purpose: what were they working for? Such dedication also required choices to be made, as filmographers went well beyond any fidelity to the record they were reproducing, and into what I want here to call the 'likelihood' paradigm – playing a kind of curatorial role of choosing from various sources, without necessarily mentioning them, that record that they considered most likely to be the truth.

But to what was the fidelity to be? Take Dharap: the Dharap work was

meant to be based on Censor Board records. Dharap was at the time a very privileged recipient of Censorship material via the NFAI. But he too strays into what we have outlined as the Sitara Devi problem. He moves beyond scrupulous fidelity to the Censor record, which may have permitted historians to explore why they had the attributions they did, and inserts 'likely' attributions based on nothing more than personal knowledge. To take one example, all Hindustan Cinema Films productions between 1920 and 1931 are attributed to Phalke's directions, and all Kohinoor scripts to Mohanlal Dave. Since the only agency that could have maintained such a record was the Censor Board, but it didn't do so – partly due to its own procedural incompetence but also partly, I now wonder, whether it was disqualified in this task mainly because of a conflict of interest (how could a Censor be the authentic historian of record?) – the problem was not so much the truth of what happened to a particular film (was Sitara Devi's footage chopped by the CB?) but something *else* that was bothering Dharap. The 'truth' itself was now and forever more to be a combination of state record with an independent record of *what must have actually happened*, at the service of a more *authorized* national historiographic record than the Censor Board could mandate, one that would happen more on a voluntary communitarian basis closer to the spirit of today's Wikipedia than anything the State could provide at the time. Indeed, the driving need among scholars to keep weeding out less reliable data and replacing it with something considered more reliable – reliability being entirely subjective, since the truth itself was unlikely to be ever known – accompanied by a curious reluctance to record sources from where the data was received, in fact had the consequence of making these filmographies into Wiki-type organic databases: as things that grew, occasionally changed, but kept being updated. So Tapan Roy's *Sattatar bachharer bangla chhabi*, Bapi Prakashan, 1996, updates Jha, but rarely corrects him. Likewise, Rajendra Ojha's *75 Glorious Years of Indian Cinema: 1913-1988* does nothing new with Rangoonwala, actually eliminating some of Rangoonwala's data, but updates it to 1988. Necessarily, such an organic process does not make it easy to understand gaps and omissions in the record: so we may never know why, say, Jha inexplicably eliminates all credits except the director's name in the period 1942-52 of his Bengali filmography. Were these credits not there in Jha's sources, in which case, what *were* Jha's sources? Why did he not take these details from Kalish Mukhopadhyay's *Bangla chalachitra shilper itihas 1897-1947* which had come out almost two decades earlier (Rupamancha, 1962)?

Whatever its credo, by 1970, Mukhopadhyay's generation, which included for instance A. Paul, editor of the *Kerala Film Guide* (Chitravedi, Kozhikode, 1966, in Malayalam), B.D. Garga, Rangoonwala, and Dharap himself, had firmly established the key tenets of the Indian filmography, which would rule for the next decade. Both this material and the credo itself would be an invaluable source for the *Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema* itself as it sifted through all kinds of sources to get its filmographic data. This kind of sifting through, especially through obviously unreliable sources like publicity pamphlets, cheap periodicals and unreliable autobiographies, was perhaps new even to the social sciences, as I recall M.S.S. Pandian admit, one afternoon on Mount Road, when we discovered the invaluable Manimekalai Prasuram series on various filmmakers and stars, each available for Rs 5. Opening the end of the Tamil book with fevered hands, I asked whether the long lists at the end were filmographies. He asserted that they indeed were, and said ruefully, "Social sciences really should look wider for their sources".

Reconsidering the 'Likelihood' factor

As ever, with the Indian cinema, when we start exploring the particular uses to which a historiographic device has been put, we find much, much more: in this instance, a particular fascination with a factomania that came together with cinephilia and a selfless commitment to maintaining what we are now exploring: the insides of what came to be widely understood as a public record of the cinema of their times.

Such an agenda does not produce its purpose easily. By the 1980s, several regional film publications were routinely carrying exhaustive filmographies. Perhaps the best of these were Harish Raghuvanshi's regular lists in *G* magazine, in Mumbai, but several journals, like *Nana* in Malayalam (which did the outstanding special issue 'Malayalam Cinema from *Vigathakumaran* to *Manjil Virinja Pookkal*' (1982), or the Diwali special issue of *Roopavani* in Marathi which did D.B. Samant's *Marathi chitrapat samagra suchi* in 1993, were doing great work in putting together definitive lists of regional film industries. While these included local film industries, the really popular ones were those of individual stars, composers and singers.

The startlingly independent career of the Indian filmography requires us to think through the very purpose of filmographies as such, and their popularity. This when filmographies never took upon themselves a key function that bibliographies always had: they never pointed the reader to

locations where listed titles may be actually themselves found. A major exception to this was the redoubtable and completely under-discussed *Collections: Indian Film &Video Guide*, edited in English by Ratan Sharda and in Hindi by Javed Zaidi, and published by Update Video Publication Pvt Ltd , which linked all titles to the video rights holders, so a typical title went: *Aparadhi* (Feroze Khan, Mumtaz, Action, Rights: Video Palace/TNT, Emperor) (I have referenced the 3rd edition, 1991). For the rest, given the strong assumption that film titles could never be available in one place, and indeed were for the most part never available at all, filmographies had to function as popular analytical devices: means by which careers got tracked, individual titles distinguished especially in the context of remakes, dubbed versions, multiple-language versions and reissues.

And so within the Indian filmographic tradition, which the *Encyclopaedia* too inherited, instead of paying any attention to the *diversity* of *equally significant* but varying sources – requiring the historian to analyse variations rather than choose from them – there came to be a *hierarchy* of reliability. Almost all the initial filmographies emerged from publicity material, which included both publicity leaflets and newspaper advertising. Publicity material also effectively determined the categories recorded: Production Company, Stars, Composer, Scenarist, and coming into the present, Director. The *Encyclopaedia* itself, despite considerable debate, finally stayed with these categories, attempting only to make a distinction between story, screenplay and dialogue credits, and adding the cinematographer. Rangoonwala of course additionally categorized his films by genre, leaving us with no clarity as to where he got them from (most probably these would have been his own attributions).

To this would be added the far more unreliable data provided by personal testimony: and the new problem of dubious claims (my own personal favourite being Sarvottam Badami, formerly of Sagar Movietone and for four years Chief Producer of Newsreels at Films Division, telling me that 'he started' Films Division because Vallabhbhai Patel asked him to) or variations of the well known Sam Goldwyn problem ('I made the film, he only directed it').

By the late 1930s, several quasi-governmental agencies had begun recording data of their own regions, with the primary purpose of putting authentic linguistic region-specific lists together. The South Indian Film Chamber of Commerce started in 1938 and launched its key *Journal of the Film Chamber* in 1955. The Andhra Film Chamber began its journal the

following year, and was to carry the first definitive Telugu cinema filmography covering fifty years of Telugu film (1931-76) and 20 years of the journal itself in December 1976. In all instances, Film Chamber journals – which carry both periodic reports of censored titles, local and from elsewhere (including imported films), as well as lists of releases – straddle both industry sources as well as Censor Board data but without any particular effort to correlate the two. Equally importantly, even the South Indian Film Chamber, whose job it was to link all four Southern industries, makes no attempt to address pan-regional disparities, often making both bilinguals and dubbed versions into independent productions. Film Chamber records would become definitive sources for producing regional histories, such as the Kerala Film Chamber, which started in 1956, began its own journal in 1970, but produced the sources for both M. Saraswathy (ed.), *Malayala cinema-aranoottandu* (1987) and M.G. Radhakrishnan (ed.) *Malayalam cinema: 50Years* (1989). The problem that ensued whenever people crossed over from region to region, has no solution in this methodology. So Raja Sandow's remarkable Mumbai career features nowhere in his Tamil work; Gubbi Veeranna's silent productions in Mumbai (which constituted Prithviraj Kapoor's entry into the cinema, no less) do not appear anywhere in the career of the 'founder of Kannada cinema'; and Tamil cinema has never heard of Nemai Ghosh's *Chinnamul* , while Bengalis are unaware of Ghosh's landmark work in Chennai as cinematographer (including, of all things, G.V. Iyer's *Hamsageethe*, 1975), and his achievements as trade unionist in the Tamil film industry.

I personally believe it was Virchand Dharamsey who took what I have called the 'likelihood' factor into a new level: translating the organicity and evolving nature of the data into a kind of speculative filmography based on individual careers, and what was most likely, in a particular studio or production outfit, for which people to have done what. Or to use distribution strategies to distinguish between remakes and reissues. Dharap too, we have seen, departs (at least in his silent and early sound listings) from his avowed purpose of recording Censor data to get into the likelihood syndrome but perhaps with far less attention to detail than what we have seen Dharamsey do with his main work, the Silent Cinema filmography, originally published in Paolo Cherchi Usai/Suresh Chabria (eds.) *Light of Asia* (1994), and continuously updated since then.

Dharamsey's work would provide the direct inspiration of the *Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema*'s escalation of the 'likelihood factor' into a new realm, even making it a major virtue in its claim that that, since most

facts around Indian cinema can only be gleaned from secondary sources – given that film prints don't exist, or are not always available – the only strategy possible is to cull out from available sources the 'most reliable ones' available for each of India's cinemas. It goes on to state that:

> Given the nature of the Indian film industry, however, there were compelling reasons for drawing on this material alongside other, not always less 'reliable' sources. The editors of this book, quite deliberately and as a matter of policy, have refused to accept any single 'authoritative' source on any of India's cinemas. On the contrary, we have endeavoured to produce a book providing the 'most likely' truth on the basis of often deeply conflicting sources…
> ('Introduction', *Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema*)

What the editors of the book did not of course do was to address a question that no Indian filmographer has yet asked: namely, why do different records differ? Why do film titles from different times give different credits? What is the reason for, say, Censor records to differ from publicity material? Were titles reissued with different attributions at different times? If so, why?

As the *Encyclopaedia* went on to propose, one of its key claims then was not so much to correct the sources of its materials – although between conflicting sources, it definitely implemented the 'likelihood' system – but rather that

> in consistently mapping India's film histories on to a national canvas, we also present several new discoveries, such as the sheer contiguity of historical processes nationwide that most Indian regions persist in viewing as unique, the influences of film-makers from one region onto another, or even the trajectories of individual careers that transgressed boundaries sometimes decades before these boundaries came to be asserted.

By the 1970s, adding to film publicity material and Chamber of Commerce records, a third source had emerged, directly from the industry itself. Pioneered by *Filmfare* – and more particularly its public call for voting for its coveted awards – between 1953 and 1971 all *Filmfare* awards would be preceded by an annual list of all titles in Hindi that qualified for its awards, making for an invaluable source for filmographies. By the late 1980s, *Film Information* had started carrying systematic information that was a cross between Censor material and trade data. This responsibility was taken on by the short-lived NFDC publication *Cinema in India*, for some years.

What of course was never done in India, interestingly, was a *Monthly*

Film Bulletin-type listing of credits from film prints themselves. And thereby perhaps hangs a further tale: the fact that film prints do not, for the most part, constitute a significant source for the Indian filmographer. I am tempted to go further and even speculate that the films themselves are more a problem than an aid to their factomaniac endeavour. Returning the problem back to Sitara Devi, I would even speculate that the avowed unreliability of film prints to give correct credits – amid strong if somewhat unsubstantiated rumours that producers changed credits whenever they got their titles re-censored, possibly to get illegitimate versions beneath the radar of the CBFC – was symptomatic of the larger problem: that films themselves were more a hindrance than an aid to the Indian filmographer.

Tracking filmographies to extant titles

Two years ago, as a part of creating an archives of Indian cinema, the Sarai team including Jeebesh Bagchi and Ravi Vasudevan, Moinak Biswas and I, attempted a project that would unfortunately not come to fruition, but which nevertheless had conceptualized a somewhat different strategy for filmographies. The problem we had was that digital versions of films were fast disappearing, and we wanted to create a collaborative system – in partnership with the pad.ma initiative – of assembling a gateway, in which film titles themselves, along with metadata gathered about them, would be made available through a network of servers. The rest of that project does not concern this argument, but I do want to recall some key decisions that were made, which both responded to, and shifted, the filmographic tradition as it has come to be.

First, the fact that film titles had to be the key source of all filmographic data. All data not from film titles had to be listed as secondary data, in itself immensely useful, but listed as data not emanating from the film print itself. But we agreed that two further decisions would follow: no two film prints of the same title would be considered identical, unless (as was now possible with digital versions) their digital signatures matched. We would have to assume that two copies of, say, *Awara*, had to be seen – unless conclusively proved otherwise – as two different versions of *Awara*, since one could never tell in what way a title deviated from another. Some versions were shorter than others, some varied their aspect ratio (the disappearance of *Kaagaz Ke Phool*'s cinemascope version may be substantially attributed to its video and digital career), others their colour (b/w versions of *Mughal-e-*

Azam are already almost impossible to find), and so forth.

This effectively meant that we could have multiple versions of a single film, each to be treated as an autonomous title. Parallelly, we could have multiple references to a specific film, with different filmographies having small variances in their attributions. These too needed to be maintained, and so the database would look a little like this:

Root title
> Print version 1/Credits and metadata of Print version 1
> Print version 2/Credits and metadata of Print version 2
> FIlmographic data 1: Dharap material on this title
> FIlmographic data 2: Rangoonwala material on this title

> (and so forth)

As mentioned, the project has not yet taken off, but if and when it does, it would have perhaps found a way to record the key vagaries of the Indian film archive, as well as to comprehend the rough-and-ready means by which Indian filmographers dealt with this history.