



Day Two, Session One
Presentation 1

Teaching Indian Cinema

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With reference to ‘Teaching Indian Cinema’ my primary concern is the structure of syllabus; therefore I will highlight some of the basic problems and ways in which these could be tackled in a somewhat makeshift manner. Historians like Kaushik Bhaumik and others, have questioned the existing frameworks within Indian film studies, where Bhaumik (PhD thesis, 2001) is critical about the ‘four models’ of writing histories for Indian cinemas. Moreover, it may be useful to analyze Sumita Chakrabarty’s article ‘Teaching Indian Cinema’ published in *Cinema Journal* (2007). Chakrabarty elaborates on certain over-bearing trends of Indian cinema courses in the US. In fact, in her book Lalitha Gopalan (2002) had also discussed her problems of teaching such courses. These difficulties are connected to the uncertainties of framing the syllabi. Chakrabarty writes about the three phases of ‘teaching Indian cinema’. She describes the ‘first phase’, popular during the 1980s, to be limited to the idea of ‘Third World’ cinemas. This by the 1990s was re-framed as studies of ‘National cinema’, and eventually by 2000 the Indian cinema courses reorganized themselves around issues of transnationalism and ‘Bollywood’ in the context of globalization. Thus,

Chakrabarty explains the manner in which she began by teaching Satyajit Ray's films, and then quickly shifted to Bombay musicals. She mentions how more recently her teaching is confined to 'Bollywood' from the perspective of Asian cinemas. Therefore, the question in our context is, first, the significance of Indian cinema courses within the broader outline of film studies syllabi, as well; the rationale of the Indian Cinema syllabus in specific University curriculum such as ours.

The existing syllabus [2004-2012] is guided by the concern to offer a historical overview to the students of cinema. The logic is similar to the world cinema courses, which involves histories of the industry, movements, styles and *auteurs*. However, while the 'Indian Cinema: A Historical Survey' model is by and large an all-inclusive one; nevertheless, the syllabus addresses some the major debates pertaining to film studies scholarship on Indian films. I have discussed this earlier elsewhere. Clearly, that the syllabus speaks to the groundbreaking arguments raised by Indian cinema scholars is one of its most interesting aspects, as well as one of its problems. Here I am expressing my self-doubt, as I try to negotiate classroom realities and a set of basic problems like, 'which would be the text films?', 'what can be useful study material?', 'how to tackle both popular cinema as well as alternative films? along with 'the great masters and regional cinemas?', and so on.

Popular cinema and Hindi films curiously dominate the syllabus, rather than simply offering a historical overview of films made in different languages and locations, or by important filmmakers. Clearly, it is not the study of landmark films. Therefore, there are major areas of overlap particularly with courses like 'Film as Popular Culture' where there is a thrust on melodrama studies, as well as with the course on 'Special Director/Text' which often includes works of Indian masters. In general, the broader divisions deal with a chronological development of the industries located especially in Kolkata, Mumbai and Pune, and these are framed by the recognized thesis on these topics. For instance, first component is 'Silent cinema', which is defined by the terms and concerns elaborated in one particular essay. Thus, I am being speculative here, and raising this question whether we can incorporate more recent interventions and writings on Indian cinema in the 1920s? For example, do we need to begin with D.G. Phalke? Can we start with discussions on Indian cinema with the kind of material, which Stephen Hughes brings to our knowledge (regarding cinemas in South India) or should we continue to study cinema from and in Bombay as a dominant condition?

So these are the some of conceptual doubts that I have. I will clarify this.

For instance, as we move to the studio era one is supposed to provide an overview of the major studios and the rise of the *socials*. In effect, the rationale of the syllabus actually develops from the existing literature. This may be problematized by our own researches on neglected studios (like Sree Bharat Laxmi Pictures) or by the availability of new material. I particularly find Valentina Vitali's arguments interesting in this context. But, what I find particularly intriguing is a certain kind of preference towards a) Hindi cinema and b) towards the popular, and this comprises a major section of our syllabus.

Thus, the difficulty is how does one teach 'film history'? In my understanding, that several syllabi are framed by the existing literature and emergent researches, indeed opens up a range of possibilities, and can begin fresh debates within film studies. I am particularly thinking about the kinds of deliberations, which were initiated by the *Journal of Arts and Ideas*. Though, my exposure to other syllabi shows that particularly M. Madhava Prasad's *Ideology of Hindi Film* is being taken as a model. Thus, several courses, include 'Silent Cinema' with Ashish Rajadhyaksha's essay as reading material, the '1950s melodrama' and Ravi Vasudevan's work, and thereafter, the 1960s films, Amitabh Bachchan phenomenon etc. Yet, for example, one of the major discussions that came up in the mid-nineties in the renowned journal *Economic and Political Weekly* was around *Roja* (1992). I think it was interesting because rapidly everybody was writing on *Roja!* This instance, however, in retrospect appears like a momentary 'nationalist' phase of film studies in India. The current phase, thus, may be provocatively put as the 'Bollywoodization of film studies', since much of the recent researches, writings and speculations are about contemporary Bombay cinema and its transnational reach. In these contexts, will syllabi be all-inclusive ones (to give students a fair idea about the range of issues), or should we follow a specific framework connected to the broader concerns of the discipline?

Sometimes, while teaching I take up speculative methods. For instance, last time I taught the Bombay film industry through the Hindi films, which tackle the industry question [films like *Kismet*, *Sree 420*, *Kagaaz Ke Phool*, *Guddi* etc.]; as well, these were the films regarding which there are scholarly articles. Around this I tried to build an argument, and arrived at the subject of viewership, popular debates and the theatres. These issues acted as a bridge to bring up the histories of alternative cinemas and film societies both in Bengal and Kerala. Nevertheless, this seemed like a rough-and-ready remedy, though quite interesting to my mind, to deal with another section of our syllabus that includes films of Ritwik Ghatak, Satyajit Ray and New Indian Cinema.

Sometimes, a short hand method may be deployed, since these subjects are also taught in other courses (namely ‘Special Director/Text...’ or ‘Culture, Modernity, Post-Coloniality’).

Moreover, there are other issues, including the question of personal choices or fascinations, thus, where does one locate Mani Kaul (my favourite), within the periphery of New Indian Cinema? As well, the subject of regional cinemas, and new researches and material on this area, is a pertinent one. For example, there have been a lot of writings on Tamil cinema or Telugu and Bhojpuri films. While, our syllabus has a substantial section on Bengali cinema, the topic of regional cinemas remains outside our purview. Clearly, our syllabus addresses the concerns of film studies in India, and then goes on to include the rest, as it were! This obviously is a practical solution, since a comprehensive history of Indian cinemas is yet to be written. Therefore, I often use some primary resources, like the ICC Report (1927-28), writings from the early 1930s, memoirs, interviews etc. Certainly, such primary materials do not directly speak to film theory, and thus requires substantial amount of introduction in order to locate these within a film studies framework.

However, my problem is, ‘what is to be done’ actually? Should we teach separate courses on popular films and Bombay cinema, as well as on alternative films and regional cinemas? Personally, I would enjoy teaching a course on the major debates within film studies; in order to explore its trajectories and the ways in which it has evolved. Thus, the following are the series of questions, which we need to address. A) Perhaps we can have more than one Indian cinema course? B) Courses should not be circumscribed by the existing material; instead it should have a broad outline, and may be reworked by individual teachers (keeping in mind the fact that students should have a reasonable idea about the topics and the debates). So I will stop there, with a concern connected to the thought whether emergent researches (for instance, Gregory Booth’s work on music studios in Mumbai) ought to provoke us to think about new methods and new courses? And, what are the basic disciplinary issues that an ‘Indian Cinema’ syllabus needs to confront?

Subhajit Chatterjee

Let me put my concerns, some of which I share with Madhuja [Mukherjee], into a broader perspective. Currently I don’t teach a whole course on Indian cinema but actually one called ‘Film as Popular Culture’ which includes a module on ‘Indian Film as Popular Culture’. The course is designed in such a way that aspects of Indian popular culture centering around cinema— say

stardom, regional genres etc.— are mapped alongside studies of global popular culture such as melodrama, postmodernism or cult films and cinephilia. Such mappings are framed through larger debates on modernity and popular culture that allows students to critically examine historically specific situations. For instance the Indian debates on film melodrama usually follow from introductory discussions on revisionist melodrama studies and relevant discussions on Hollywood melodrama of the 1950s. Reflections on the rationale for situating Indian cinema in such a pedagogic structure coupled with my own researches into popular film cultures have raised a number of significant questions and observations that I want to discuss here.

To begin with, what do we set out to achieve when we teach Indian cinema? Following from descriptive accounts and revisionist histories that are essential to introducing the field we have to settle for some framework of analysis. So do we primarily discuss indigenous film forms in terms of their determinations within specific socio-political upheavals? However non-linearly we conceive of such ideological determinations this framework necessarily presents a picture of cinema as an effect or symptom of larger and seemingly more noteworthy symbolic frameworks. Madhava Parasad's works do draw our attention to cinema's actively constitutive and complementary role in formulation of such political fields. My point however is to rethink whether the dominant project of Indian film studies is to use the cinema in order to tell stories that are larger than and sometimes insensitive to its various other capacities and functions. What then is the distinction between social, political histories that map specific cultural objects and 'film history'? Is analysis of cinema's cultural manifestations merely a conduit to weave narratives about the nation, state, communities and the politics that brings these elements into complex negotiations?

On the other hand there is this whole domain of industrial, studio and formal histories of Indian cinema which select classify and mobilize archival evidences to critically revise existing accounts. These are often based on a framework that seeks to complement or sometimes problematize dominant narratives by marginalized ones—those concerning smaller studios, disreputable genres, or lesser stars. It is this dual demand for documentation and expansion of focus of a largely unexplored field as well as the need to generate theoretically sound analytical frameworks that often raise problems for methods of enquiry and pedagogy. It seems that one can also pose different sorts of questions pertaining to the field, for instance regarding the cultural effects of film as popular culture in the public domain. To ask of the cinema — what it does in a particular kind of domain over and above what is happening

around it in such domains? Rather than merely as a series of ideological effects related to various moments of socio-political turmoil one can also see cinema in terms of its interventions into the public domain, for example to map how films classify themselves alongside shaping public taste and sense making practices.

Here I am thinking in terms of a reformulation or a differential modulation of the pedagogical gaze towards familiar moments, say the debates around the ‘escapist’, mainstream-popular trends and a ‘socially conscious’ cinema promising alternatives paths around the 50’s. The ensuing transformations could be located quite differently in the course on Indian film and popular culture than when it is addressed in a film history course where broad scale institutional transformations require more careful attention. So for instance how does an alternative aesthetic designate itself to its spectator? How does a particular film or generic tendency distinguish itself in the public domain as an object bearing values associated with a progressive-realist ethos? The objective may be to investigate how cinematic trends aspire towards significant differentiations but instead of charting formal histories or generic details, a foray into their promotion as cultural products could unravel different historical trajectories. For instance to examine how film products that depart from the popular may be compelled to traverse the same public domain and mobilize a rhetoric familiar to the very popular taste they seek to transform. Here we can think about new pedagogical approaches or at least differential aspects of teaching Indian cinema in terms of the materials that may be used to illustrate or make arguments. The same newspaper or other print archives, which may be used to clarify historical facts or revise existing records in lectures on film history, may be used in a ‘popular culture’ course as a map to demonstrate how varied cultural objects get juxtaposed in the domain of advertizing and promotion, which remains an important aspect of cinema particularly when being discussed as popular culture.

Certain historical specificities of film form and film cultures, the ‘so many cinemas’ feature for example, are of course difficult to master given our limited pedagogic contexts ridden with linguistic/cultural barriers. The dynamics of ‘regional cinemas’ gets further complicated by curious cases of assimilation and remakes, both historical and contemporary, that are often difficult to incorporate into the syllabus. We should grapple with efficient development of comparative studies frameworks enabling close examination of say specific periods of Bengali and Tamil cinema. Apart from extensive translation exercises one also requires more varied and cosmopolitan academic expertise at state

level colleges and universities.

However, I am concerned about one other issue that remains difficult to be addressed within the existing curriculum—which is research and analytic training. While textual criticism involving analysis of filmic elements such as mise-en-scene or time constitutes the basis of courses on film language, the idea of ‘analysis’ in film studies incorporates a broader spectrum of objects. At a research level this involves data retrieval, management/classification enabling formulation of knowledge to be brought into classrooms. One encounters a variety of objects (ranging from newspapers to business records or legal documents) and possible methods for which no disciplinary background is often available to the student. Disciplines with firm establishment and therefore solid institutional base would have lesser problems in this regard. But for academicians in new areas such as film studies this remains an imperative, to train students to do that work which defines our discipline. It is thus important not only to impart knowledge but also to reflect on other questions such as how we arrive at such knowledge and how we mobilize it? How do academicians find out and how do they classify what they find? What are the material base and analytic processes that constitute Indian cinema as a field of knowledge? This is something the syllabus itself doesn’t address unless we decide to give it a partial orientation in that direction.

We reiterate epistemological or methodological constraints and the dearth of primary materials and ponder upon how to deal with extant materials—film stills, studio records, reviews, legitimacy of oral or hagiographic accounts, as Madhujā rightly pointed out. I am suggesting that instead of a discourse premised on lament and confusion we could perhaps think of ways in which such thoughts that pester us at every point in research and teaching work can be incorporated into the classroom. In other words while figuring out how to deal with certain research objects and materials, part of that thought process can serve as useful illustrations of film studies research processes.

Evidently, this is a debatable issue. Not everything that one writes qualifies in the academic domain. The business of academy is largely with ‘finished products’— knowledge that are classified, organized, tabulated following institutional norms. Then there are vexed questions regarding what constitutes proper material for the classroom which involves not only knowledge production but also quantitative evaluation. We often come across the problem of distributing suitable and accessible essays for specific topics. Efficient textbooks on many aspects of our Indian cinema syllabi being still unavailable we have to rely on academic essays often addressing a scholarly community

rather than introductory students. In this regard my insistence on introducing ‘unprocessed’ knowledge or ‘raw’ materials could produce further problems. But I am thinking of them as tools and techniques for demonstrating the field, somewhat naively perhaps, say like workbooks where a finished piece of puzzle or drawing is often accompanied by ‘how to’ demonstrations. In fact, while reading a critical essay in the classroom such is precisely the logic of insisting on careful attention to footnotes or other references, which in a way stands for the sort of labour invested into the finished publication.

Another related matter is that films are used by other humanities disciplines, for varied purposes often using tools that do not gel with analytic methods in film studies. This is of course inevitable and I do not see it as a problem but rather a provocation to define certain pedagogic methods that are specific to our discipline. It is an imperative to distinguish between ways of reading cinema, so that one can fruitfully describe how an anthropologist or a historian’s work, which may very well require films to aid certain arguments, differ fundamentally from what a film scholar does. For instance when we introduce landmark research works in film studies it may be prudent to stress on the specific research methods and critical tools they employ, both in terms of form and intent. As Madhava [Prasad] was mentioning at a conference in EFLU, Hyderabad a few days back, a dominant problem in student motivation sometimes lies in the seduction towards theorizing or framing fancy arguments from minimal data. The problem I think may lie in overt familiarity with processed knowledge alongside very limited access to the sorts of data or labour that goes into the constitution of those fashionable theoretical approaches. There is indeed huge amount of data related to Indian cinema that requires retrieval and classification, which may provide some interesting training materials for postgraduate students. In this way the student community can actually partake in the process rather than habitually waiting for legitimized and sophisticated formats which often prove way too difficult to mimic at a junior research level, which is in principle their ideal and immediate future. Can this be conceived of a more democratic model of pedagogy if it’s possible to incorporate such training methods in Indian cinema courses? Or should they forever be strategic and informal methods dependant on the proclivity of individual teachers?

One view is to make a distinction between postgraduate and doctoral level courses allowing self-reflexivity to feature at the latter level. But if we conceive of dissertation writing as a valid exercise at postgraduate levels the problem of research training surfaces and it is often perceived that a few formal lectures

on writing methods do not suffice. I would be willing to bet on experimentation with the reflexivity exercise as part of their training just after they finish their basic courses on film history and theory. In fact texts that are used in introductory classes can be brought back with a different focus in a module on historiography or popular culture. The issue here is to make the student confront the methods and problems of processing data, the making of arguments that defines our field and distinguishes between several other academic approaches to cinema. Such exercises I believe will make students

more attentive as well as sensitive to textual criticism of audio-visual media that saturates their environment, academic or otherwise.

To get back to the example I began with, the transition of Bengali cinema into the 1950s alongside a range of generic differentiations emerging at that point provides a vivid picture of the public domain that cinema, both popular and modernist had to traverse. One could take the example of a recent work such as Sarmishtha Gooptu's book on Bengali cinema (2010), a first of its kind narrative history covering a wide period. Take her argument that considers the shift into the 1950s, the emergence of film thrillers and how Bengali nationalism and the existing tradition of crime/ghost fiction could be invoked to understand that moment. If you were to look at the argument and map it against archives other than those she is using (eg. periodical articles), say promotional ads, it is possible not merely to generate an alternative view but also provide ways for students to examine the processing of her arguments for nationalist counter framing of a regional cinema. There are few evidences such as posters of a thriller like *Sanket* (1951) which mobilizes the image of a regional literary public to promote its traditional appeal in the way Gooptu insists. However there are also parallel promotional tactics that entail quite a different narrative. Take the instance of another successful



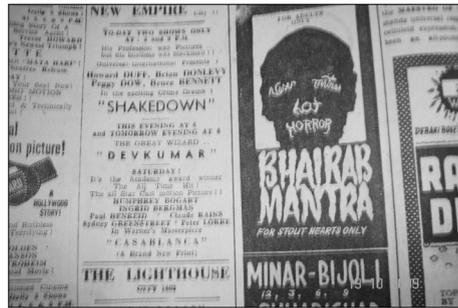
Sanket and the literary tradition



Jighangsa and the modern film audience

thriller *Jighansa*, released a month earlier, and you will come across certain internationalist logic of promotion drawing attention to technical specificity of the medium and citing comparisons with Hollywood. In fact here in one of the ads you have the image of a modern viewing community in lively praise of the film's alleged technical finesse at the exhibition venue. This invocation of a mature, modern film audience comes into yet another focus if one connects it to another promotional pattern in this crime-detection genre—the use of adult certificate and sensationalism as a strategic response to the newly stratified and centralized film certification board (January 1951). The issue becomes complex here throwing light on a wider public domain where Bengali cinema has to inscribe itself as a value laden commodity alongside Hindi films, foreign adult genres, technological innovations such as 3D, sensational entertainment such as wrestling, so on so forth.

Some relationships between popular cinemas, a developed literary public and Bengali nationalism is undeniable but that may be suspect as the most valid analysis of that moment. However this parallel narrative I cryptically charted also entails a specific mobilization of data, a certain selection of archival evidences as all narratives about film cultures and histories do. Arguments and debates are crucial to scholarly studies of cinema as they revise our understanding of history but to learn how such arguments are made is equally crucial to the student of film history and of popular culture. So what constitutes evidence when the object at hand is Indian cinema? Where and how are they gathered? How they are strategically mobilized for pre-existent analytic frameworks? What kind of processing of data is likely to generate new knowledge or frameworks? These are questions that should engage students of cinema from a considerably early level.



Bhairab Mantra (1951) for adults only



Jighansa as a sensational fare

All this can perhaps make some sense if we try to distinguish between intent of courses or modules. What sort of knowledge is better provided where? There is a difference between a kind of historical survey which provides narrative accounts of disparate significant moments in and around Indian cinema and another sort of data processing that may seek to unravel, for instance, the legitimizing trajectories of Indian cinema as it traverses various media and public domains. The formal specificities of a period or genre of Bengali cinema, for example the highly popular Uttam-Suchitra film romances of the 50's, can be very significant for a film history course but its relevance could shift for a research methodology module or a popular culture course where aspects of historical reception could be addressed. The existing archival evidence reflecting a tension and hostility that such romantic films produced in the 50's could come handy in order to introduce students to the range of conflicting evidences and the ways in which they problematize seemingly logical conclusions that genre or mise-en-scene analysis entail. At the level of training we do not always need critical resolution or wholly processed arguments, sometimes materials themselves, their own histories and arrangements serve useful purpose without pointing towards immediate conclusions. But then we might require forums other than lectures in order to attract students and generate their interest in the field. Workshops maybe, or more inventive platforms... we will have to ponder about that.

Madhuja Mukherjee

I would refer to a specific instance and then maybe we can start discussing. In the previous year I did try to follow this kind of an argument referring to the early debates around the 1930s particularly and then sort of bring up the writings of Ray and Ghatak. Then this entire heating up of the debate around an alternative cinema and it was much pretty much useful in the sense that I could build an argument about this desire for an alternative cinema and historical determinations of those moments. But I also had my doubt in a sense that it became a certain kind of a debate on cinema in the context of Bengal. There's a kind of cultural specificity here.

Subhajit Chatterjee

One last point regarding this issue of processing data and arguments, this is about a strange image I came across in a 1954 March issue of *Amrita Bazaar Patrika* where De Sica's *Miracle in Milan* (1951) was advertised as playing with Hindi commentary to be shown along with a 1932 Laurel and Hardy film and

‘Film Star Cricket Festival.’ Now the cricket film probably referred to excerpts from 1952 cricket matches that were organized around the International Film Festival. But there was another film in this package called ‘Play Back Singers’ which I could never identify. Now the question is— if I have this kind of data which throws into confusion our received understating of film culture and reception how do I deal with it? What kind of knowledge does it lead to? To begin with, what may be the determining logic of this strange package? Then of course what is the nature of the ‘commentary’ that accompanied *Miracle in Milan*? How many other foreign films followed such kind of distribution? What about English films? Did the critical appreciation of contemporary Italian cinema lead to their widespread popularity? In order for this data to appear meaningful it is required to push our thought pattern in horizontal directions, follow and read the network of data by organizing new research questions. Perhaps our haste to put



Miracle in Milan combo

it into valid classificatory frameworks often restricts such materials to be incorporated for other purposes such as training where in fact they could provide excitement about the very activity that defines our existence as film studies scholars.