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Problems Faced by Film Historians in India

Though cinema is a hundred years old in India, the subject of film history has been receiving scholarly attention only since the last decade. At the international level, interest in Film Studies has been building up. Since it is a young discipline, the principles, theories and concepts are still in the process of taking shape. The discussion is on. What constitutes film history? What should be the aim of the film historian? What should be her approach? And what methods should be adopted in its study?

A nascent discipline

Cinema's appearance on the scene as a product of technology was not as abrupt as it seems. A few of the existing art forms were incorporated into it. Some other art forms such as the shadow puppet theatre in South India, anticipated filmic entertainment. Thus, the prehistory of cinema would include all the precursors of movies and other arts related to it, such as music, photography and the company drama. While working out the pre-history of a cinema, the film historian has to trace these connections, 'what is related to what'.

The close interaction between politics and cinema in South India is another factor in evoking academic curiosity towards this medium. Robert L. Hardgrave looked at this phenomenon in 1970 and since then a number of scholars have been studying this subject. At a different level, films are increasingly being recognized as a source of historical information and scholars from varied disciplines are dipping their hands into cinema.

I would like to argue that for most of the difficulties encountered by the film historian in India, there is a common origin; the conventional attitude to cinema as an entertainment medium. The respectability given to traditional art forms such as music and dance was not extended to cinema. Though this phenomenon of stigmatizing cinema has been observed in other countries also, it is much more accentuated in India because of the rigid stratification of the society on the basis of caste. We have to see the problems relating to film history in the context of this elitist apathy.

Paucity of source material

A major impediment a film historian faces is the lack of films themselves, the basic source material. Films have not been preserved. The first feature film was made in Madras (Chennai) in 1916 and more than 124 feature films and 38 documentaries were made in the silent period. But we have very little material on this period. Only one feature film, *Marthandavarman*, made in 1931, has survived. In 1976, when I was gathering material relating to silent cinema in South India, there were a few pioneers still alive and I was able to interview them.

Similarly, in the first decade of Tamil cinema (1931-1941) after the arrival of sound, more than 240 films were made, out of these only about fifteen have survived. In the early years, the film stock used contained nitrate. In tropical climate the nitrate content proved disastrous and the reels rapidly deteriorated. Once the films completed one or two runs, they were forgotten and no effort was made to save them.

Even if the film historian has access to a film, the facility for screening it was hard to come by. The arrival of VCR and videocassettes in the nineteen eighties mitigated the problem to some extent and led to an interest in film history. However it was still difficult to view specific films that might be of significance to the film historian. After the introduction of private television channels, many old films were screened and this helped in kindling interest in old films.

Neither the government nor the trade outfits had taken any initiative

till the 1960s to preserve films. The films that were made and screened were uncared for after the first run; often the print was lost. It was only after half-a century of filmmaking in India, that the need the preserve films was felt. In 1964 the National Film Archives was set up in Pune. Even here in the initial years only a few films were preserved. In 1990 a branch of the National Archives was opened in Bangalore. Though Chennai is the film capital of South India, there were no archivet there.

During the years of World War II prints of a number of Tamil films were doing the rounds in Singapore and Malaya, and there they remained. Recently, some of these films, long lost in India, have surfaced in the form of DVDs in Singapore and the list includes Modern Theatres, *Burma Rani* (1944), a war effort film.

The Board of Film Censors

From 1918, when the censorship machinery was established through the Indian Cinematograph Act, the Police Commissioner of Madras headed the board and but the records had not been preserved. After India became a Republic a new Board of Film Censors was formed in Chennai for the southern language cinemas. Details of the portions excised from the films were published in the *Gazette of the Government of India*. This practice continues. One can get an idea of the issues to which the Government is sensitive. It was mandatory to submit the script to the board when a film went before them for screening. While the back numbers of the gazette are accessible in the archives, not all the scripts submitted to the board have been preserved.

Reliance on imprints

For the silent era and for the early phase of talkies, the film historian has to turn to print material and even that is scarce. Though cinema belongs to the realm of recent history, there is not much written material on the subject. While most of the films of the early decades have been lost, even the print material relating to cinema have not been preserved well and so are hard to come by.

In the early years, writers did not consider cinema worthy of any notice. If you look at the magazines of the nineteen twenties or thirties you hardly see reference to cinema. This apathetic attitude still persists in many ramified forms. We do not even have a complete list of Tamil films released so far.

The researcher has to turn towards the secondary sources which may

not have much connection with the film-going experience. When a film historian uses print material as a source she has to be conscious that she is dealing with two different media. Therefore, the insights one may get on films through printed material are limited. The historian has to fight the temptation to write about the content of the film relying on what is available print material.

When sound came to cinema in South India 1931, it basically came in the form of songs. In the first decade, films were a mere vehicle for songs. People went to a cinema show as if they were going for a concert. The reviews of this period read like concert reviews, discussing ragas and the manner in which they were handled by the singer. So it is difficult to get an idea of the film that one is reading about.

Songs books and publicity material

In Tamil cinema, the practice of publishing in book form the songs featured in a film was part of film culture. This book, usually of about ten to fifteen pages, was sold in cinema houses and elsewhere. It contained, in addition to the songs, the credits and a resume of the story. Frequently, it carried advertisements for forthcoming films and these insertions also provided the credits. The songs were often used in political campaigns and listened to as independent aural experience. When films are not available for viewing, the songbook assumes significance as a source material. However, by the mid-eighties this practice of publishing the songs was given up. So we had to look for other sources to get details of filmography, such as an advertisement that carried the full credits.

One of the main contemporaneous sources of printed material is mostly popular magazines in regional languages. However, you find that in very few libraries these magazines are preserved. Material such as film magazines, songbooks, handbills and posters are not preserved. Though there were a number of film magazines, they were not preserved because they were not considered worthy of preservation. It is in this context that the collection such as the one held in the Roja Muthiah Research Library in Chennai assumes importance.

There are other documentary sources that have not been harnessed properly such as autobiographies and literature from different eras. Print material of this category may yield interesting insights. Stephen Hughes claims, "What is required is more imagination about what counts as a source on early cinema in India".[1]

There is another difficulty here. A vocabulary in Tamil to discuss cinema is yet to be developed and put into use. The concepts and principles relating to cinema are rarely discussed or written about in Tamil so the researcher is not able to get an idea of the style or form of the early Tamil cinema through cinema-related writings. The discussion in these imprints is still in terms of literature. Much of the research on Tamil cinema is still done in language departments, either English or Tamil departments. There is little evidence of any sensitivity to images and the various dimensions of the language of cinema such as lighting, and use of symbols and so on. For instance if you look at most of the books on world cinema, and check the entry on *Citizen Kane*, there will be invariably mention about lighting and about deep focus, and not just the story. The writings relating to film do not provide us an idea of the nature of the film that is being written about. This is a major handicap when dealing with print material relating to cinema.

Private collections of imprints: Roja Muthiah Research Library

Efforts to preserve cinema-related material have been rare. One such was by Film News Anandan, who has been working as a Public Relations person to film personalities for a few decades in Chennai. Over the years be built up an impressive collection of photographs and press clippings. He also prepared a filmography year-wise for some years. In 2003 the Government of Tamil Nadu nationalized his collection but the material is yet to be documented and classified.

The largest collection of printed material relating to South Indian cinema is preserved at the Roja Muthiah Research Library, Chennai. Roja Muthiah Chettiar (1926-1992), a painter of signs from Kottaiyur, a tiny village in the Chettinad area of Tamil Nadu, moved to Chennai (Madras) to set up Roja Arts, a signboard shop. In Madras he got to know the book dealers of the now defunct Moore Market and was introduced to the world of antiquarian books. He bought old and new books, and also collected handbills. When he died in 1992, his collection had grown to nearly 100,000 items in Tamil, consisting of books, journals, and single sheet materials such as drama notices. In addition to film, Chettiar had also built up an impressive collection of songbooks and handbills. In the absence of the film or songbook, film advertisements that appear in the magazines come in handy as a source for credits.

There could be other such private collections, on smaller scales. A case

in point will be a recent collection that surfaced from Karaikudi. In the 1940s, M.S.M.M.Meyyappa Chettiar had a film distribution company, the South India Pictures, and like many other commercial outfits during the war years it moved from Madras to Karaikudi. This company had collected all the magazines and dailies that carried any reference, including advertisements, to the films handled by this company. This collection contains a cross section of English and Tamil imprints, some of them uninterrupted runs of at least seven dailies and fourteen magazines, accounts books, publicity brochures and a near complete set of acts and rules connected with cinema that were brought out during this period. For example, during the war years the government passed an order that the length of a film should not exceed 11000 feet, as a measure of economy. A copy of this order, with the related papers is in this collection. Referred to as the Karaikudi collection by film scholars, this collection, indexed and catalogued, is now a part of Roja Muthiah Chettiar library.

Government reports and other archival material

In 1921 the British Government appointed W.Evans, a cinema expert, to visit India to study the state of cinema there. In his report, *Cinema Publicity in India* Evans drew the attention of the government the possible damage western films could do, in terms of the image of westerners. This is the first ever governmental look at the impact of cinema on Indian audience.

However, our main source of information for the silent period[2] is *The Report of the Indian Cinematograph Committee 1927-28*. The committee's brief included three main points 1.To examine the organization and the principles and methods of filmmaking in India. 2. To survey the organization for the exhibition of films and film producing industry in India and 3. To consider whether it is desirable to encourage the screening of British films and make recommendations. The committee had sittings in the major cities, examined 353 witnesses and received 320 replies to the questionnaire it had sent out.[3] Brian Shoesmith, who has studied the silent era of Indian cinema, says that this report is "the most comprehensive document extant on the formation of film industry in a non-western country, it pays attention to the reception of film among India's major communal groups – the Anglo-Indians, the Hindus, the Muslins and Parsis. As such it provides insights into the sociology and psychology of film in a colonial situation".[4] The committee had sittings in Madras in January 1928. One of the five volumes is devoted exclusively to this sitting in which some of the pioneers of filmmaking in

South India appeared as witnesses before the committee. The list included A.Narayanan of General Pictures Corporation, T.H.Huffton of the Peninsular Film Services, R. Prakasa, the cinematographer and Joseph A.David, an amateur filmmaker. Of these A. Narayanan's statement was the most detailed about the state of the industry. Though at least three other national level reports followed, none was as thorough and detailed as the 5-volume ICC report.

After India gained independence, the government announced an enquiry committee to look into cinema industry. The committee, under the chairmanship of S.K.Patil included V.Shantaram and B.N.Sircar and held sittings in ten cities. Though it received only 463 replies to the 7140 questionnaires it had sent out, even these were not published. Only a general report, single volume, with details concerning the number of films released in different regions was published and goes under the title *The Report of the Film Enquiry Committee of 1951*. It goes to the credit of this committee that a number of institutions envisaged by it were established in the nineteen-sixties – the National Film Finance Corporation, the Film and Television Institute of India and the National Film Archives. The film societies were organized into a national federation with Satyajit Ray as the president.

Archival material

Searching for cinema related material in the vaults of the Government archives presents problems of a different kind. Both in the national archives and in the state archives there is no section on cinema; information concerning a film may often be in a file relating to law and order problems. It was a time when there was no separate ministry dealing with press and films. I found most of the records relating to banned films in the Home Department files. Whenever a film came under scrutiny of the Board of Film Censors, a file was created. The song book was often kept in the file, providing a valuable source for film credits. Whenever a film created a law and order problem the details were recorded in the file. For instance, the film *Peasant's son / Ryatu Bidda* (1940, Telugu) which dealt with the Zamindari system was first banned by the magistrate of Nellore, followed by an order from the Government of Madras banning it throughout the presidency. The Raja of Bobbili and the Raja of Venkatagiri had raised the issue as they inferred that the film had made insinuations against them. These details are contained in a Home ministry file preserved in the Tamil Nadu archives.[5]

Fortnightly dispatches, which were sent by the Chief Secretary of the

Presidency to Delhi, occasionally had reference to film-related subjects. Whenever the nationalist struggle gained momentum and censorship of the media was tightened, the number of film-related material that went into the archives increased. In the years that followed the Civil Disobedience Movement of 1931 and the Quit India Movement of 1942, films were subjected to closer examination. So there are more files on the subject of cinema in these years. It was while perusing the index of the Law Department in the Tamil Nadu Archives that I stumbled upon the Evans Report of 1921 (a copy of his report was sent by the Government of India to Tamil Nadu Archives). Important documents on the subject of cinema were sent to the headquarters of other British colonies also. A set of the ICC volumes is preserved in the Canberra Archives in Australia. In fact I was able to get a copy of the Vth volume from Canberra archives.

Trade outfits

The film industry and trade outfits are quite indifferent to documenting its own history. The South Indian Film Chamber of Commerce, founded in 1939 is indifferent to maintaining its records relating to films. It showed no interest in preserving prints of films, photographs or documents related to cinema. In recent years, displaying disregard to any sense of film history, the chamber has allowed titles of old films to be used again, for new films. Even titles of well-known and important films are used again, such as *Chandraleka*. However the quarterly journal it brings out can contain valuable information.

Trade unions

In the film industry in India, the trade union movement appeared very late indeed. Only in the nineteen eighties , the workers of various categories in the film industry organized themselves into unions and set up regular offices. Therefore what could have been a valuable source of information, the trade union records, has been barren . However, the Madras-based Cine Technicians Association founded in 1943, has been bringing out a monthly publication *The Journal of CTA*, and this could be a valuable source of information for a researcher. The Association of Actors, *Nadigar Sangam* was not a union but took up the causes of actors both from the stage and screen. The monthly it ran, *Nadigan Kural* (Voice of the Actor) is a rich source of information on South Indian cinema.

The question of authenticity

One of the main issues in collecting material relating to film history is authenticity. Facts relating to this industry, particularly in the initial decades , were not documented properly. Though much of the information that has been recorded is unreliable, it becomes part of the imprints relating to film history. If wrong information is registered, it percolates into many other records and it is difficult to eradicate them. So it is essential to go to the original source and on the basis of that, create authentic information. Even with this precaution, we cannot claim that there are no inaccuracies in the data. There can be incorrectness even in the titles of films. We read about different claims for introducing double acting or playback singing and other such devices of cinema.

Brian Shoesmith talks of three stages of film production in India. The first was the cottage industry stage, in which individual filmmakers raised money and shot movies. The second was the studio system in which films were produced in well-equipped studios, run like a factory, with artistes on a regular pay roll. The third was the star era in which the film industry revolved around stardom. The present stage can be described as an era of free lancers. In the first stage there was no attempt at preservation of any film or related printed matter. There are very little business records and the contemporary press seems to have taken no notice of the arrival of this new medium. In the era of the studio system, films and records were preserved. However when major studios such as Gemini in Madras, Central in Coimbatore and Modern Theatres in Salem were closed the records were not saved. The disappearance of the studio system in the late fifties accentuated the problem of the dearth of source material. Production outfits did not even have a place where one can look for material dealing with Tamil cinema.

Technology

The story of technological development of cinema is one important dimension of film history. These two cannot be separated. Let me illustrate this with two examples. The first relates to the silent era when films were shot in the open air, in available light, oblivious to the environmental noises. But once sound came in shooting had to be done indoors, in sound proof studios, under artificial lighting. The other example is the appearance of playback singers. Until the late thirties, only artistes who could sing were engaged to work in films. When the facility of recording sound separately

and synchronizing it with the images developed there was no need for actors to possess singing ability. This marked the exit of classical musicians from films. Actors came to be chosen for their looks and acting talent: a distinct group of artistes known as playback singers who lent their voice to non-singing heroes and heroines emerged. Thus the introduction of a technological device, in the present case independent recording of sound (playback singing) changed the very nature of actors and therefore their screen performance.

Visual material and the historian

In the tradition of Indian historiography visual material has been discounted as a source of information. No methodology has evolved to handle visual material. Photographs of the 19th and early 20th centuries are yet to receive the attention of historical investigation. The question of how a historian should look at pictorial representations has not been raised. From the early days the emphasis has been on words, be it inscriptions or dispatches during the Raj. The neglect of film studies and the approach to cinema in literary terms that is so widely prevalent in India are part of this continuum. Researchers have not developed a tradition of handling visuals; therefore they tend to ignore them and stick to printed material with which they are familiar.

Stills

When the films are not available, stills acquire an importance in film studies. Some still photographs from the early era have survived in private collections. They are useful to gain some idea about costumes, set and camera angles. But the researcher has to bear in mind that most of the stills we have in South India cinema are shot separately for publicity and continuity purposes and are not enlarged frames.

Gramophone discs and audio-tapes as sources

By the time talkies appeared, the gramophone industry was well established in India. Film songs were released as 78-rpm plates and soon an independent industry of discs of film songs grew. The label pasted in the centre of the disc contained details of the film, the singer, the composer and the songwriter. The sleeves of the disc contained advertisement and occasionally illustrations. In addition to the credits, if a researcher wants to study the lines in the song and the nature of the music, a disc is a primary

source.

But very few gramophone discs have survived and these are also in some private collections. However, not all the collections have been catalogued and indexed. Some collections are not accessible to scholars. The largest and the most well known collection of discs belong to V.A.K.Ranga Rao of Chennai. Rukmini Arundale of Kalakshetra had a rich collection.

Historiography of Cinema

If you observe the writings on cinema in India down the years, you see that the first generation of film history was a mere list of who did what and when. These works were mostly by journalists, which were not based on research, but upon an uncritical reproduction of materials and ready-made historical narratives. The emphasis was on commercially successful films and film stars. Often such writings were promoted by the families of the filmmakers and were personality oriented. It is only in the last fifteen years that scholars, particularly those from research institutes, have been taking a serious look at Indian cinema. So, in recent years a new form of cinema discourse has emerged in which the content of a film and the background have become the subject of enquiry. The third stage came about after Cultural Studies /Cinema Studies appeared in research institutes. The ideological approach came to the fore. The writings of M.S.S.Pandian, and Venkatesh Chakravarthy are important in this area.

A significant development in recent times is the position taken by scholars like Robert C. Allen. They argue that the definition of film history should be expanded to the exhibition side also. He points out that the audience and their response to films should form part of film history. Understandably, one cannot discuss films as if they existed by themselves. His article in *Screen*, in which he had argued the case for film audience research, changed the concept of film history and influenced many.[6]

A film historian is somewhat like an archaeologist, trying to get an idea of a society gone by, with the help of a few potsherds, broken bangles and some beads. An exaggerated analogy, no doubt, but it makes the point.

References:

[1] Hughes, Private communication by e-mail, April, 2001

[2] *Report of the Indian Cinematograph Committee*, 1927-1928. Calcutta, Government of India, Central Publication Branch, 1928

[3]The committee sent a questionnaire to Gandhi and he wrote back on 12.11.1927 "Even if I was so minded, I should be unfit to answer your questionnaire, as I have never been to cinema. But even to an outsider, the evil that it has done and is doing is patent. The good, if it has done any at all, remains to be proved" ICC. Vol.IV. p.56

[4] Shoesmith, Brian, 'The Problem of Film: Reassessing the Significance of the Indian Cinematograph Committee 1927-28 Inquiry' in *Continuum*, Vol.2:1. 1988/89

[5] G.O.1378-79 Home 2.5.1944

[6] Allen, Robert 'From Exhibition to Reception: Reflections on the Audience in Film History' *Screen* 31 No.4 (Winter.1990)