Indian Cinema – A Vanishing Legacy

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Walking through a maze of alleys in Pathanwadi, a slum in the suburbs of Mumbai, I am being taken by my guide, Bipin “Silver”, to the place where films go to die. Bipin Silver has earned his name from his choice of livelihood – extracting silver from black-and-white films. He has brought me here on one condition – he will not come in front of the camera.

I duck down through the narrow door of a tin shed into a dark room in which there are two drums, an old film winder, and strips of film hanging from makeshift bamboo poles. A door leads into another room piled high with 16mm and 35mm film cans... all waiting for their funeral. I watch in fascinated horror as a thin old man systematically strips these films bare of silver, of cinema, of memories, leaving ghostly translucent white strips of nothing scattered on the floor. So what is a film worth in terms of silver? Bipin says he strips 1,000 kg of film in one go, 50 films stripped bare to extract three kilograms of silver. As a silver scavenger, his personal preference is for nitrate, a better source of silver than safety film. He has been doing this for the last 40 years!

Growing up, I always thought film would last forever. Somehow one never thought that these images that seemed so much larger than life on a screen and evoked such powerful emotions, actually had such a fragile existence. As a filmmaker, one is so engrossed in the craft of cinema that one tends to forget how ephemeral the lives of our creations can be if they are not preserved. The making of my film Celluloid Man (2012) was a journey of discovery of the vanishing legacy of Indian cinema and its butterfly existence.

The journey of Indian cinema began on May 3, 1913, with Dadasaheb Phalke’s Raja Harishchandra, released as a four-reel film, 3,700 feet long. Phalke advertised the film as “a performance with 57000 photographs. A picture two miles long. All for three annas.” Today, of Phalke’s wonderful two-mile long film, only one mile remains. Seventeen hundred silent films were made in India, of which the National Film Archive of India (NFAI) has only five or six complete and ten or twelve in fragments. The film industry in Madras made 124 films and 38 documentaries in the silent era. Only one film survives – Marthanda Varma (1931). By 1950, India had lost 70 to 80 percent of its films.

It was half a century since the story of cinema began in India, when P. K. Nair started the National Film Archive of India (NFAI) in 1964, and already there were gaping holes in the history. At the time, India was already making
films in 11 languages. By the 1980s, films were being made in 17 languages, and, according to the latest figures released by the Central Board of Film Certification, in 2013, India produced 1,724 films in 32 languages. Of these, 744 films were shot on celluloid. But even though India celebrated one hundred years of cinema last year, and as the NFAI celebrates its 50th anniversary this year, the archive has only about 6,000 Indian films in its collection.

Many early nitrate films were destroyed by fires in vaults and studios, and even during projection. Raja Harischandra fell victim to a fire, forcing Phalke to reshoot the film in 1917. During the Second World War, a major fire took place at B. N. Sircar’s New Theatre Studio in Calcutta, resulting in the loss of many original negatives of the classic New Theatre films of the 1930s. As recently as 2002, a fire at the Film and Television Institute (FTII), in Pune, home to the great Phalke Studios, saw the destruction of 45 original negatives of Phalke films as well as prints of rare silent films like Raja Harischandra and Koliya Mardon / The Childhood of Krishna (1914) that P. K. Nair had personally collected from the Phalke family.

Another fire story that set the rumour mills buzzing in the late 1940s was when the Ranjit Movietone warehouse in Bombay went up in flames. The word on the street was that it was a clever insurance scam perpetrated by the studio head, Chandulal Shah, who had lost heavily at the races and was up to his neck in debt. Indian cinema lost almost 150 films of the 1930s and 1940s in that fire, many of them box office hits. Only six or seven films survive today. Among those lost were the popular matinee star K L Saigal’s debut film for the Bombay film industry, Bhakt Surdas (1942) and the well-known classic, Holt (1940), directed by A. K. Kardar.

Climactic conditions were not ideal for preserving films. India’s film industries developed in the three major colonial port cities of Bombay, Madras, and Calcutta (now Mumbai, Chennai, and Kolkata), where the high humidity did its own damage as most producers stored their films in labs or warehouses with no proper storage facilities. The usual practice was for producers to pay an annual deposit fee to a lab to keep the original camera negative of the film. However, if the film was not very successful, the producers would stop paying, and the labs would dispatch the prints to be forgotten in old warehouses.

Standing under the branches of an old tree in Mumbai’s Jyoti Studio, where India’s first sound film was shot, P. K. Nair told me the tragic story of Alam Ara / The Ormament of the World (1931), directed by Ardeshir Irani. Mr Nair visited the director in 1970 to persuade him to archive Alam Ara. Mr Irani pointed to a few cans lying in his office and told Mr Nair he was free to take them to the Archive. But when Mr Irani’s son Shapur was escorting him down the stairs, he confessed that he had sold the film for silver a long time ago without his father’s knowledge, and only the cans remained. Today, that old tree is the only witness to the fate of India’s first talkie.

I faced a similar heartbreak on one of my trips to Kolkata. I was told that I might be able to get my hands on the original camera negative of the Debaki Bose film Ratnadeep / The Jewelled Lamp (1951). I rushed to his son’s house and was very excited when he told me that he had the film and could show it to me. The tragedy was that the cans had been left out in the open, subject to the elements for several seasons, and were rusted and jammed shut. We opened them with great difficulty only to find that the film was brittle and breaking apart. It could not be saved.

On my visits to the NFAI, I noticed a huge pile of film cans lying in the basement near the vaults. I was curious to know where these films had come from. When I asked the Film Preservation Officer, he told me how the Indian Railways had been an unwitting contributor to film archiving in India. Often, after a film had made its run at the box office, producers found themselves with several prints in hand. Not knowing what to do with them, they put them onto trains with no destination marked on them. They knew that if the prints were unclaimed, it would be the Indian Railways’ legal responsibility to deal with them. This is how thousands of cans have found their way to the NFAI, courtesy of the railways.

The advent of television in India in the 1970s saw producers scrambling to look for their film cans as they realised that there was still money to be made out of these productions. But for many films it was too late. While extraction of silver from black-and-white films and dyes from colour films, nitrate fires, wrong climactic conditions and the industry’s neglectful attitude were major contributors, for me, the root cause of India’s tragic loss of its cinematic heritage is the way cinema has always been regarded here. It has been viewed merely as a medium of mass entertainment and never as an art form that constitutes an integral part of our social and cultural fabric.

I believe that while film may be a relatively new art form, it is deeply rooted in our culture. We can go back 30,000 years to the cave paintings of Bhimbetka, in Central India. I remember, during my early school days, my father taking me to see the paintings in those caves. They are fascinating. You enter the darkness of the cave and, when you look at the paintings, you get a sense of movement, the time, who these people were, and where they came from. These paintings are nothing but depictions of daily life, but they make you imagine what is not depicted. The power of imagination goes beyond reality to create an illusion and that is what cinema is. Take, for instance, Chitrakathi. “Chitra” means picture and “katha” means story. In this folk art form, pictures were painted in a series on a long scroll, and the painter – the chitrakathi – would recite alongside. In a nutshell, this involved a person who narrated a story with the aid of visual support – just like cinema.

The intelligentsia were quick to recognise cinema as a new mode of expression. Natir Puja / The Dancing Girl’s Worship (1932) was Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore’s experiment with film. In the 1930s, great literary figures like Saadat Hassan Manto and Munshi Premchand were drawn to the industry in Bombay, writing scripts for films like Kishen Kanhaiya (1936) and Mill Mazdoor / The Mill (1934) respectively. Unfortunately, neither of these films survives today. The celebrated Indian artist M. F. Husain made his first film, Through the Eyes of a Painter, in 1967.
India, hailed amongst the most ancient civilisations of the world, does not have a culture of preservation. We just don’t preserve anything. Maybe this is because we have had a largely oral tradition where knowledge has been passed down the generations from guru to shishya, with each generation losing a bit of the essence. Most of our historical records seem to have been written by foreign travellers and scholars like Megasthenes, Hiuen Tsang, Fa Hien, Al Beruni, Ibn Battuta, Niccolao Manucci, and Lieutenant-Colonel James Tod. Another possible theory is that Hindu philosophy’s espousal of detachment from the body and material goods, symbolised in the cremation of the body, runs contrary to the basic idea of preservation and archiving. Whatever the reasons, the loss to Indian cinema has been irrecoverable.

At a time when no one seemed to care about the future of Indian cinema’s past, we were fortunate to have a true cinephile like Mr Nair at the helm of the NFAI. He literally built the archive can by can during his 27-year career.

I first knew Mr Nair when I was a student at the Film and Television Institute (FTII) in Pune. I remember him as a shadowy figure in the darkened theatre, scribbling industriously in a notebook by the light of a tiny torch, winding and unwinding reels of film, shouting instructions to the projectionist, and almost, always watching films. His knowledge of cinema was encyclopaedic and awe-inspiring for young students like us. He was the only person I knew who could tell you exactly in which reel a particular scene from a film could be found. It was almost like a game to ask him and he was always right. When I was shooting Celluloid Man, I dared to ask him a question that I had always wanted to ask, right from my student days: did he ever surreptitiously make copies of films that came to India for screenings at the Archive or during festivals? He pretended not to hear me the first time, but when I asked again, he said a true archivist should have the immunity to overcome these legal problems. Had it not been for him, early pioneers like Phalke, Damle, and Fatehali and P. C. Barua would just have been names that appeared in history books.

The man who knew the films that existed also knew the films that were lost. His top ten on the missing list are:

1. Bhakta Vidur / The Devotion of Vidura (1921), Kanjibhai Rathod for Kohinoor Film Company, Bombay
2. England Returned / Bilet Pherat (1921), N. C. Laharry for Indo-British Films, Calcutta
3. Savkari Phas / The Indian Skylock (1925), Baburao Painter for Maharashra Film Company, Kolhapur
4. Baidan / Sacrifice (1927), Naval Gandhi for Oriental Pictures, Bombay
5. Alam Ara / The Ornament of the World (1931), Arshed M. Irani for Imperial Film Company, Bombay
6. Sairandhri (1933), V. Shantaram for Prabhat Film Company, Poona
7. Mill Mazdoor / The Mill (1934), Mohan Bhavnani for Ajanta Cinetone, Bombay
8. Seeta (1934), Debaki Kumar Bose for East India Film Company, Calcutta
9. Khoon ka khoon / Hamlet (1935), Sohrab Modi for Stage Film Company, Bombay

As a true archivist, Nair still lives in hope that these films will be found somewhere in some part of the world, like the 1927 John Ford film Upstream, discovered in New Zealand, or the Chaplin film A Thief Catcher (1914) which was found in an antique fair in Michigan.

India has also had unsung archivists like Abdul Ali, a cinephile, who single-handedly assisted the NFAI in retrieving over 350 films. Among the titles he salvaged from warehouses all over the country were milestone films like Akchut Kanya / Untouchable Maiden (1936) and Izzat (1937), both directed by Franz Osten for

Legendary musicians like Pandit Ravi Shankar, Ustad Vilayat Khan, Bade Ghulam Ali Khan, Ali Akbar Khan and renowned Carnatic vocalist M. S. Subbulakshmi have all collaborated on films. Yet India does not recognise cinema as an art form that is a reflection of our society and culture, and this attitude has been prevalent right from the start.

Filmmaker K. A. Abbas wrote an letter to Mahatma Gandhi, published in the October issue of filmindia magazine in 1939. In part it says:

To whom shall we, the sons of India, go for consolation and guidance, but to you – you whom we have come to love and honour like a father? Today, I bring for your scrutiny – and approval – a new toy my generation has learned to play with – the CINEMA!

In a recent statement you include cinema among evils like gambling... horse-racing, etc. which you would like to banish...

Ironically, even today, in India’s Constitution cinema is mentioned under Item 62 in the Seventh Schedule, List II – State List, which deals with “Taxes on luxuries, including taxes on entertainments, amusements, betting and gambling”. Current Indian laws dealing with cinema focus on censorship and taxation, and these dictate the interest and dialogue of the film industry with the government.

Bombay Talkies. Ali also recovered the iconic film Mahal (1949), directed by Kamal Amrohi, and re-released it at Bombay's Roxy Cinema in the 1970s, when it had a successful ten-week run. It was therefore with great sadness that I read a newspaper article, dated 2 July 2014, reporting that master prints of 60 Bombay Talkies films had been destroyed in a fire in Mumbai.

One of my favourite haunts in Mumbai is the infamous Chor Bazaar or “Thieves’ Market”. One of the largest flea markets in India, it is a treasure trove of the country’s cinematic history. I often walk the narrow lanes, stopping for a cup of tea and a chat with my friends Shahid, Aziz, Arif, and Iqbal, who have had shops here for generations, selling rare memorabilia and film-related artefacts. Once, I even managed to acquire an original camera negative of the film Bharosa (1965), starring Guru Dutt, that had been discarded by a lab. Films are sold here by length and weight: 8mm films for Rs.300 a reel, entire films on 16mm for Rs.4000, and 35mm films for Rs.100 a kilo. Paradoxically, Chor Bazaar or its unwrittenly has been a guardian of Indian cinema; even today, one can find rare prizes like the only known extant song booklet for Alam Ara. Sadly, this is the beginning of the end for Chor Bazaar: the whole neighbourhood will soon be redeveloped and nothing will remain of these old streets.

People are now talking about the death of celluloid. This is a very emotional topic for me as I grew up watching films on celluloid with the sound of the projector, the flicker, the smell of the film. While I have to accept the reality, I will continue to shoot on celluloid as long as I can. But cinema is all about technical innovation. First it was black and white, then came sound and colour. People were shooting in different formats, with different cameras, on different stocks; now the advent of the digital era has made it possible to restore films and to see them the way they would have been on the day they were released.

When Guru Dutt’s Kaagaz ke Phool / Paper Flower (1959), India’s first CinemaScope film, was originally released, it was not a success. It was only in the 1980s that it started being viewed again at film societies, and interest in Dutt revived. A film may be released at a particular time, but it is viewed differently at different times, and it is this timeless quality of cinema that makes it so important to preserve films. One doesn’t know how a film will be viewed 50 years from now when the context, the values and the times have changed. For instance, the “Fearless Nadia” films, made by Wadia Movietone in the 1940s and 1950s, were looked on as C-grade stunt films when they were first released, but today they are considered classics.
India has a singular cinematic legacy that is endangered. What is lost, we need to find; what is there, we need to restore; what we create, we need to preserve. It's high time we recognised cinema as a national treasure, one that must be saved and protected.

More information on the Film Heritage Foundation may be found at [https://www.facebook.com/filmheritagefoundation].

De tous les pays producteurs de films, l'Inde est le plus prolifique et probablement le plus divers, les films indiens étant réalisés dans un grand nombre de langues ou dialectes. En 2013, par exemple, 1,724 films y ont été produits dans 32 langues. Cependant malheureusement, pour diverses raisons, le patrimoine cinématographique indien a été négligé et bien que l'Inde aît célébré son premier siècle de cinéma en 2013, il ne reste plus grand-chose pour en témoigner. 1,700 films muets ont été réalisés en Inde, mais les Archives nationales du film de l'Inde (NFAI) ne détiennent que cinq ou six films complets et des fragments d'une douzaine d'autres; un seul film subsiste des quelque 150 réalisés à Madras durant l'ère du muet. P. K. Noir a créé la NFAI en 1964, mais malgré tous ses efforts, un immense pourcentage de classiques a été perdu. L'élite intellectuelle indienne a rapidement reconnu le cinéma comme un mode d'expression artistique nouveau, et nombre de productions ont bénéficié de l'apparat de peintres et musiciens célèbres. Toutefois, d'une manière générale, le cinéma reste considéré là-bas comme une forme de divertissement. La législation actuelle en matière de cinéma se focalise sur la censure et la taxation plutôt que sur sa dimension patrimoniale. Les films sont vendus sur les marchés de rue à la bobine et même au kilo. Bien que l'Inde soit un pays amateur de cinéma, celui-ci n'est guère reconnu comme faisant partie intégrante d'un patrimoine social et culturel national qu'il conviendrait de protéger. Bien peu ont conscience du besoin de préserver les supports d'origine, ou comprennent ce que signifie une restauration digne de ce nom, par opposition à une simple numérisation corrective. Beaucoup d'œuvres ont déjà disparu et chaque jour d'autres sont perdues. Des mesures urgentes doivent être prises afin de favoriser une prise de conscience de l'importance du sauvegarde et de la restauration du patrimoine cinématographique indien avant qu'il ne soit trop tard pour préserver le peu qui a survécu jusqu'à nous.

India es el primer productor mundial de películas en el mundo, presentando también una gran variedad, particularmente en cuanto a lenguajes y dialectos se refiere. Por ejemplo, en 2013 se produjeron 1724 películas en 32 lenguajes. Sin embargo, por este y muchos otros motivos, el legado cinematográfico índio ha sido lamentablemente descalificado. A pesar de que India celebró los 100 años de su cine en 2013, nos queda muy poco material de esos 100 años. Se estima que se realizaron unas mil setecientos películas mudas en India, pero el National Film Archive of India (NFAI) contiene solamente cinco a seis películas completas y fragmentos de una docena más. Por otra parte, queda solamente una de las más de 150 películas hechas en Madrás durante la época del cine mudo. P. K. Noir fundó el NFAI en 1964, pero, a pesar de sus grandes esfuerzos, un gran porcentaje de esos obras se perdieron. Los intelectuales indios fueron rápidos en reconocer un nuevo modo de expresión artística en el cine; varias pintores y músicos famosos empezaron rápidamente a colaborar en muchas producciones. Sin embargo, el film en su conjunto ha sido siempre contemplado como un divertiement en India. Las leyes en vigor respecto al cine se centran en la censura y la tasación y no en el patrimonio. Las películas en carrete se venden en los mercados callejeros, a veces al kilo. A pesar de que India sea una nación que ama el cine, hay poca conciencia y reconocimiento del cine como parte integrante del legado social y cultural que la nación debería cuidar. De forma general, los indios no tienen conciencia de la necesidad de preservar los materiales originales o de lo que debe significar una restauración completa, al contrario de los simples escaneos y las reparaciones digitales. Ya han desaparecido muchas películas y se pierden otras tantas cada día. Por lo tanto, se deben tomar medidas urgentemente para concienciar al público sobre la importancia de salvar y restaurar el legado Filmada de India antes de que sea demasiado tarde para preservar lo poco que queda.