

# Yesterday's Films for Tomorrow

Shruti Narayanswamy

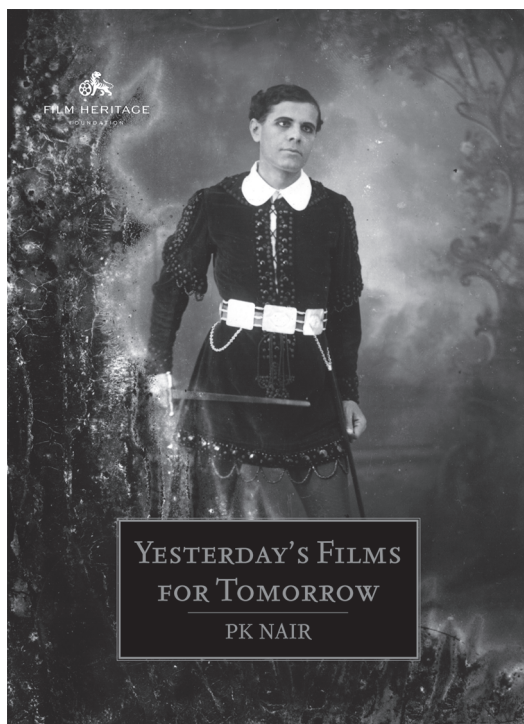
Shruti Narayanswamy is a PhD student at the University of St Andrews, researching the influence of women's reform and the Indian nationalism movement on Indian film publicity in the 1930s and 1940s. She is an alumna of the Film Heritage Foundation's preservation workshops, and a former intern at the National Film Archive of India.

Reviewing this book is a bitter-sweet experience for me, having known Mr P.K. Nair towards the final years of his life in my capacity as an Indian cinema researcher. For those of us who learned of Mr Nair through Shivendra Singh Dungarpur's 2012 documentary *Celluloid Man*, or from the numerous stories about "Nair Saab" that every researcher of Indian cinema inevitably comes across, he was the cultural force responsible for saving and preserving endangered Indian films.

*Yesterday's Films for Tomorrow*, published by the Film Heritage Foundation and edited by Rajesh Devraj, is a collection of Mr Nair's selected writings on cinema, sourced from his personal diaries and published articles. The collection serves as an important introduction to Mr Nair's critical role in shaping the culture of Indian cinema appreciation and its future directions.

Nair's writings vividly bring to life the era when filmmaking was born in India, through a spirit of entrepreneurship and the desire to make, as he refers to it, a "national cinema". Mr Nair's recollections of the monumental efforts to obtain early Indian films for the archive are especially illuminating, though he never romanticises the process. His essays as an archivist inevitably channel his sadness at the devastating loss of films from the first few decades of Indian cinema, and he writes unerringly about the institutional and cultural myopia, and an indifference to film as an art form and historic memory of the nation, that precipitated this loss of cinema heritage.

The essays are organised in such a way as to give voice to the various facets of Mr Nair's appreciation of cinema – Nair the moviegoer, the



archivist, the film historian, the film critic, and the columnist. For newly inducted enthusiasts, the book will reveal the many layers of the chronology of Indian cinema history. While the writings themselves are short, the span of this collection is ambitious – essay range from informative commentary on the early Indian studio system, recollections of the burgeoning film society movements in the 1950s, and Mr Nair's personal reflections on the filmmakers he admired.

Though this collection is not intended to be academic, it will be of enormous interest to scholars of Indian cinema as a gateway to understanding the birth of film preservation in India, and the significance of the National Film Archive of India (NFAI), an institution that has been crucial to our cinema research. Nair's writings also refer to important historiographical sources that will be familiar to researchers of early cinema, such as the *Report of the Indian Cinematograph Committee 1927-1928*, and the personal memoirs of J.B.H. Wadia of the Wadia Movietone Studio. The essay on the evolution of film posters in Indian cinema emphasises the importance he placed on extra-filmic material such as publicity materials, which remain invaluable sources for early Indian cinema researchers (especially when the film in question is considered lost).

As some of the essays in this collection have been sourced from writings commissioned for various publications, the focus remains on Indian cinema. The collection doesn't fully reflect Nair's equally voracious passion for watching and preserving international cinema. As one of the essays reveals, while he believed that the first and foremost duty of an archive is to preserve its indigenous cinema, he felt that a national archive should always be international in its wider scope and approach, a philosophy embodied by the significant holdings of international films that Mr Nair acquired for the NFAl.

The collection also chooses to focus on Mr Nair's personal musings on two filmmakers, Adoor Gopalakrishnan and John Abraham. In several places, the impression is that Nair had more to say on the subject. However, this sense of incompleteness is to be expected from an introductory compilation on his expansive body of work; indeed, it also speaks to Nair's own sense that his work remains incomplete. In the piece entitled "The Ten I Miss Most", Nair attempts the impossible task of choosing the ten "most wanted" Indian films considered lost. In my own interview with him in 2013, which would be his last interview on cinema, Nair spoke about the significant loss of materials that scars India's film legacy. The final section, in particular, underscores Mr Nair's belief that the task of film preservation is ongoing and unending, and one that requires future archivists and practitioners to avoid the pitfalls of eschewing celluloid in favour of going all-digital.<sup>6</sup>

It is fitting that the cover image of the book is of actor, director, and producer Sohrab Modi in *Khoon Ka Khoon*, a 1935 adaptation of Hamlet, and the first Indian Shakespeare adaptation on film, now considered lost. Just as the image locates Indian cinema in the context of world culture rather than as an exotic "third cinema", it is a reminder that – just as Hamlet is plagued by doubt, and like the vexation permeating Nair's writings – Nair's work is not finished. In fact, it has barely begun.

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*Yesterday's Films for Tomorrow* présente une sélection d'écrits de P. K. Nair, pionnier de l'archivage de films en Inde et ancien directeur de la National Film Archive of India (NFAl). Publié par la Film Heritage Foundation et supervisée par Rajesh Devraj, cette collection constitue une introduction essentielle à l'immense érudition de Nair au sujet du premier siècle du cinéma indien. Il fournit un panorama historiographique et biographique de la culture cinématographique indienne, tout en retraçant le parcours de Nair, abordant notamment la création de la NFAl et le défi de collecter et préserver des copies de films et divers documents annexes dans un pays en voie de développement et dans un environnement tropical.

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*Yesterday's Films for Tomorrow* es una colección de escritos seleccionados por P. K. Nair, archivero cinematográfico pionero y ex director del National Film Archive of India. Publicado por la Film Heritage Foundation y editado por Rajesh Devraj, la colección es una introducción importante al extenso conocimiento de Nair del primer siglo del cine indio. Proporciona una visión historiográfica y biográfica de la cinematografía y la cultura fílmica india, y relata las experiencias de Nair formando el NFAl y la dificultad de recuperar y preservar copias de películas y otros materiales en un país en vías de desarrollo y en un ambiente tropical.

6. <<http://www.thebeekkeepers.com/chin-chin-chu-mission-one>>.