

## A much-needed lesson in film preservation and restoration

Though we are very rapidly veering away from celluloid film towards a digital world, the value of old classics on celluloid film can never be overestimated. **Shoma A. Chatterji** provides details about a workshop which discussed the best practices of restoring and preserving filmic and non-filmic material

The Film Heritage Foundation and the International Federation of Film Archives, in collaboration with the Kolkata International Film Festival and the Indian Council of Cultural Relations (ICCR) and in association with similar foundations across the globe, recently put together a seven-day course on film preservation and restoration, Training and Outreach, coordinated by FIAF (International Federation of Film Archives), in Kolkata. Conducted by David Walsh, it covered both theory and practice and included practical sessions in the best methods of preservation and restoration of film and non-film material. Besides, there were daily evening screenings of restored classics from around the world.

This was the fourth workshop being conducted by the Film Heritage Foundation in India, which was founded in 2014. The first workshop was organised in Mumbai in 2015. The Kolkata workshop was special because it coincided with 100 years of Bengali cinema. Besides, FIAF was celebrating 80 years of existence. "Bengal is the jewel in the crown of India's film heritage as it is the home of masters like P.C. Barua, Debaki Bose, Nitin Bose, Bimal Roy, Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, Ritwik Ghatak, Asit Sen and Ajoy Kar and screen icons like Uttam Kumar, Suchitra Sen... the list is endless," writes Shivendra Singh Dungarpur, who is the founder-director of the Film Heritage Foundation in India.

"Film is unfortunately a perishable commodity, but it is probably



Shivendra Singh Dungarpur.

the most effective record, whether it is fiction or non-fiction, it is a record of history in the making. Because what you shoot and record is the perennial present and that is the most important quality of cinema which no other medium can actually reproduce. I think that is the greatest value of film and that is why film must be preserved," is what Shyam Benegal said about the preservation and restoration of films.

Why is restoration and preservation necessary? Though we are very rapidly veering away from celluloid film towards a digital world, the value of old classics on celluloid film can never be overestimated. These films are an integral part of our socio-cultural history and if you want to look deeper, they are also studies in cinema technique through silent cinema and its evolution to talking film in terms of sound, cinematography, editing, art direction and so on. It is our collective responsibility to see that celluloid classics do not fade away over time.



Photos: SC

A still from *Bicycle Thieves*.

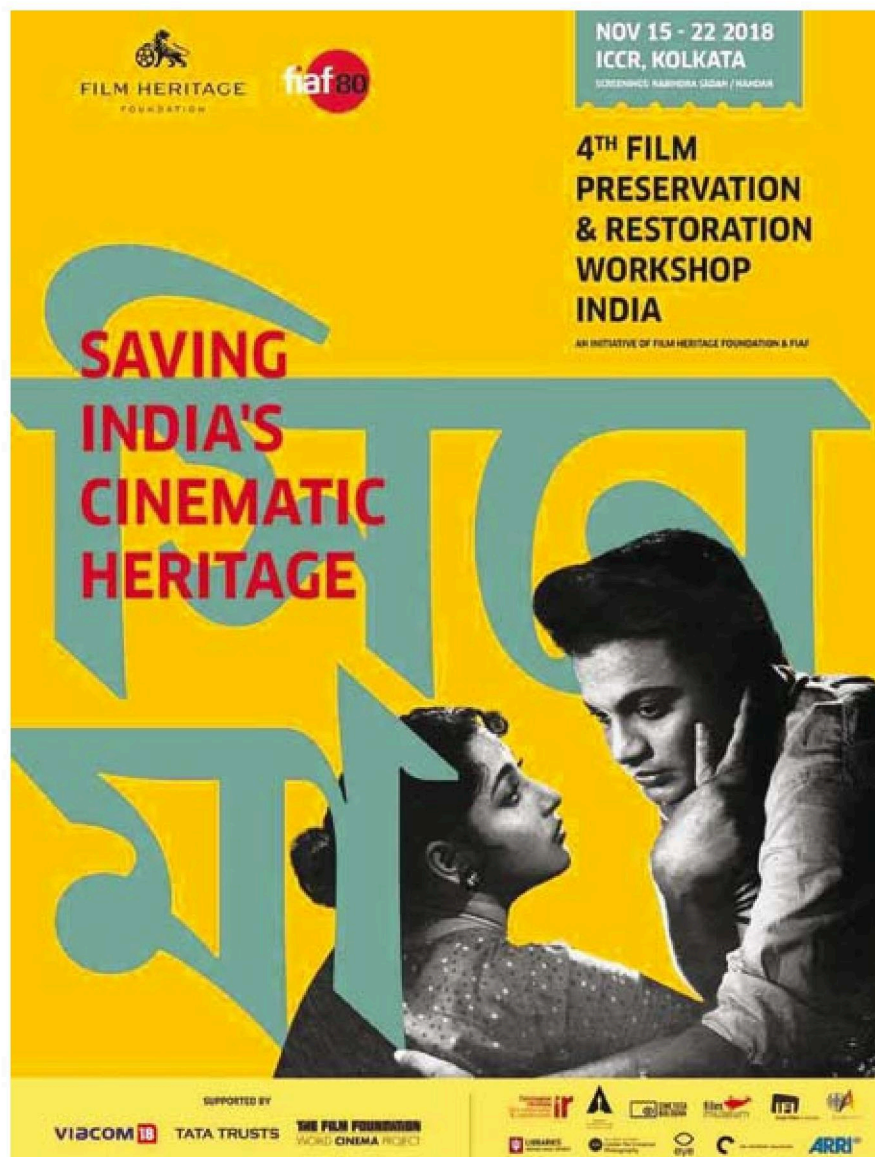


As Dungarpur rightly comments, “The sheer magnitude of the heritage to be preserved is overwhelming: a century worth of celluloid stored in thousands of film cans mostly rusted and reeking of vinegar, tattered film posters, yellowing lobby cards, curling film stills, reams of moth-eaten newspapers, fraying magazines abandoned and littered all over the country – dying a slow death. We are fighting a war with no army, limited resources and close to empty pockets – no surprise then that there are days when we feel like players in a Greek tragedy.”

Dungarpur is deeply committed to the preservation and restoration of cinema. He travels the world to meet and extensively interview on camera great masters of cinema for his personal archive. He has spent time with Manoel de Oliveira in Porto and shot documentaries on Jiri Menzel and Raoul Coutard. He has also shot in-depth interviews with Andrzej Wajda and Krzysztof Zanussi in Warsaw, Miklós Jancsó and István Szabó in Budapest and Věra Chytilová, Juraj Herz and Jan Nemeč in Prague.

“The idea for the Foundation was born because I realised the dire need to preserve India’s cinematic heritage that has been severely neglected for all these years. We have lost a significant part of our cinematic history and this will continue to happen if we do not take immediate steps to save this legacy,” says Dungarpur about his non-profit organisation. The Foundation is dedicated to supporting the conservation, preservation and restoration of the moving image and to develop interdisciplinary educational programmes that will use films as an educational tool to create awareness about the language of cinema.

Film preservation is a key process because films have organic



*Suchitra Sen and Uttam Kumar bring alive a poster announcing the film restoration workshop in Kolkata.*

components, which, like all organic material, are prone to decay. Poor storage and handling take a further toll on them. When exposed to heat and humidity, films deteriorate rapidly — a process that is hard to reverse. Attention must also be paid to a film’s “micro environment” or the condition inside a film can. Films stored in humid conditions can become a host for mould, mildew and fungus that will soon damage it beyond repair.

To restore a film one needs to find a copy that is as clean, sharp and as clear as possible. Although the film’s original negative is the ideal source from which to begin the restoration, these are often either not available or in such poor condition that they cannot be used. This is because commercial films were shot on nitrate film before the early 1950s. This film stock is highly flammable and often decomposes quickly if not stored properly.



Another reason is that early film negatives were often discarded by production companies after the film had gone through the distribution cycle, since it was felt there was no longer a market for them. The acetate "safety film" used from the early 1950s until recently has also been found to be unstable, and it has a tendency to fade rapidly.

The attractions for cinebuffs attending the 24th KIFF were multiplied by the fact that the Film Heritage Foundation along with its collaborators had curated an excellent package of films, Indian and International, which had been restored from the terrible condition they were found in. These films were – Satyajit Ray's Apu Trilogy – PatherPanchali, Aparajito and Apur Sansar, Uday Shankar's Kalpana and international classics like Amarcord, Blow-Up, The Magnificent Ambersons and Bicycle Thieves.

A description of Vittorio De Sica's Bicycle Thieves in The Criterion Collection goes like this: "In poverty-stricken post-war Rome, a man is on his first day of a new job that offers hope of salvation for his desperate family when his bicycle, which he needs for work, is stolen. With his young son in tow, he sets off to track down the thief. Simple in construction and profoundly rich in human insight, Bicycle Thieves embodies the greatest strengths of the Italian neorealist movement: emotional clarity, social rectitude, and brutal honesty.

Michelangelo Antonioni's Blow-Up, the highest-grossing art film of its time, was picked as the best film of 1967 by the National Society of Film Critics, and got Oscar nominations for screenplay and direction. The film still offers a model lesson in cinematography, in self-referential filmmaking, in surrealistic imagination that also raises moral and ethical questions about

the metamorphosis in the human psyche. Even to this day, Indian filmmakers and keen viewers will be amazed at this film about a London photographer who may or may not have witnessed a murder, who lives a life of cynicism and ennui, and who ends up in a park at dawn, watching college kids play tennis with an imaginary ball.

The Magnificent Ambersons is one of the earliest films in movie history in which nearly all the credits are spoken by an off-screen voice and not shown printed onscreen – a technique used previously only by French director and player Sacha Guitry. The only credits shown onscreen are the RKO logo, 'A Mercury Production by Orson Welles', and the film's title, shown at the beginning of the picture. At the end of the film, Welles's voice announces all the main credits. Each actor in the film is shown as Welles announces the name. As he speaks each technical credit, a machine is shown performing that function. Welles reads his own credit – "My name is Orson Welles" – over the top of an image of a microphone which then recedes into the distance.

Federico Fellini's Amarcord is a beautiful and warm nostalgic piece. It explores the everyday lives of

people in an Italian village called Rimini during the reign of Mussolini. It won the 1974 Academy Award as Best Foreign Film. The film's greatest asset is its ability to be sweet without being cloying, mainly because of Danilo Donati's surrealist art direction, and to the frequently bawdy injections of sex and politics by screenwriters Fellini and Tonino Guerra. On the other hand, it is also a semi-autobiographical tale about Titta, an adolescent boy growing up among an eccentric cast of characters in the village of Borgo San Giuliano situated near the ancient walls of Rimini.

"Films are a part of our cultural history. I was shocked to discover that of the 1700 silent films made in India, only nine survive thanks to the efforts of Mr P.K Nair. He travelled to remote parts of India to collect and save cans of rare films. The fact that Dadasaheb Phalke is recognised today as the father of Indian cinema is Mr Nair's doing. He was truly democratic as an archivist trying to save any film that he could get his hands on be it world cinema, Hindi popular films or regional Indian cinema. He even took world cinema to the villages of India," says Dungarpur. ■

## **Firstpost newspaper to be 20-page broadsheet**

Eight years after Firstpost.com, Network18 will be launching its first weekly newspaper – *Firstpost*. Positioning itself as the last word on news, *Firstpost* will be a 20-page broadsheet appearing every Saturday and shall cater to readers in Mumbai and New Delhi. Aiming to change the way in which the consumer perceives newspapers, *Firstpost* emphasises on narrative, long-format journalism with a focus on national politics, culture and art and being a mix of hard and soft feature news. With a strong and vibrant design, the newspaper has been designed by Jacek Utko. ■

(Courtesy: exchange4media.com)