

Article

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**Wither Film Culture?**

Cinema came to India in July 1896 within months of its advent in Paris. But till mid 50's Indian cinema was in hibernation without caring for the progression in this new art in other parts of the world. Our cinema was contented with the devotionals, unskilled adaptations from epics, 'puranas' and other shallow stuffs meant for the masses. Imitating 'Parsi Theatre' with all its extravaganza of colorful sets and costumes, our cinema incorporated songs and dance in its body and it was treated as a concoction of all art forms. Noted film professor Satish bahadur is genuinely evaluating the early period of Indian Film History when he states 'Indian cinema had been isolated from the mainstream of creative developments in the international art of film till early fifties and the average Indian film has shown little awareness of the expressive possibilities of

the film language'.

Films set in the same pattern without itself undergoing any progressive change continued to be produced. The producers corroborated their position by formulating an indigenous theory of 'escapist attitude' of the audience. They reiterated that people tired of the boredom and lassitude of the daily life wanted to escape from it for a short while and movie house would be the best place suited for it. The designers of the popular cinema are still ill-using this 'fictious' theory related to the audience. Here lies the relevance of 'good cinema' where it is treated as an art form best matched for the illustration of modern life with all its trials and tribulations.

***Film Culture***

Cinema is only of two kinds; good and bad.

Good films are the one which display full allegiance to the medium and depict or interpret life in its varied manifestations and happenings. By film culture, we mean the combination of all faculties put together to facilitate the appreciation and enjoyment of cinema as an art. The development of film culture is the sum total of the contributions of so many factors. The regular viewing of good movies, exposure to writings on cinema, participation in discussions, seminars and conferences on cinema and attending film festivals are the essentials required to build up a film culture.

‘Conditioning’, a term often used in psychology, is a major impediment in the appreciation of a work of art. If you are frequently exposed to a certain kind of thing, you will become addict to it. This was generally happening to the Indian audience of cinema. They were persistently watching a typical kind of ‘escapist cinema’, away from the realities of life, packed with romantic fantasies, songs, dances, and stunts presented in a melodramatic way. Indian audience was addicted to this kind of cinema and the state of affairs endures till now. It was a great challenge to interfere with this ‘conditioning effect’ and inculcate a new film culture allied to good cinema.

Here I would like to relate the experience of the International Film festivals organised in Heggodu, a remote illiterate village in Karnataka, in early seventies. The villagers of Heggodu were never open to any kinds of films before. World film classics like *Battleship Potemkin*, *Bicycle Thieves*, *La Strada*, *Seventh*

*Seal*, *Wild Strawberries*, *Pather Panchali* etc were screened at the festival followed by discussions on the respective films. The open discussions proved that they could understand and appreciate the films in spite of the ignorance of the intricacies of the media. The astonishing fact is that they developed a liking for this sort of films and were eagerly looking forward to the forthcoming festivals with fervour. This divulges the fact that it is not a quandary to build up a pure film culture if the subject of ‘conditioning’ is absent.

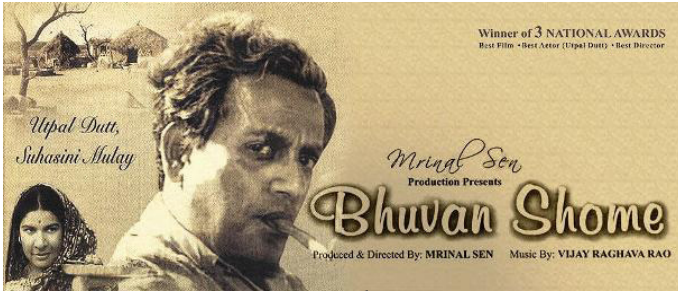


Satyajit Ray

### ***Film Society Movement***

Even though film societies originated in different countries of the world in 1920's we had to wait till 1947 for Calcutta film society, the first of its kind in India. Satyajit Ray, Chidananda Das Gupta and a few other film enthusiasts were instrumental in the formation of the film society. The first International Film Festival of India held in 1952 was a great fillip to the film society movement of India. With the establishment of Federation of Film Societies of India (FFSI) in 1959, a new vista was opened up to co-ordinate the activities of

film societies to meet the demands for films. The film society movement rose to its zenith in 70's but quite unexpectedly by the close of 80's it witnessed its decline. But still the movement is on, with lesser pace, catering to the needs of the minorities of film buffs.



Bhuvan Shome

The film societies organized regular screenings of world classics; off-beat regional films and other films of educational, social and cultural values. National Film Archive of India in Pune was the major source of films. We will be ungrateful if we do not recognize the contribution of P.K.Nair, Director of National Film Archive of India, in this regard. He was the main personality behind the growth and sustenance of Film Society movement in India. He gave all supports to organize film societies in the nook and corner of India and supplied films directly or through the regional centres of the Archive. Various embassies, foreign archives and some production houses were also of immense help in offering films. FFSI, with their organizational set up and concerted labour, ensured that the network of film circulation is flawless.

It was true that Hollywood films found their way to Indian screen so easily since the beginning. But European films, especially from the

East European countries had no run in Indian theatres. And so was the case of films from Brazil, Cuba, Mexico, Argentina and other Latin American countries. Films from Egypt, Israel, Iran, Indonesia, Thailand, Taiwan, China, Japan and South Korea too demanded a serious viewing. Film societies could screen the films from these countries profusely, which enabled the viewer to have closer understanding of their films. With Mrinal Sen's *Bhuvan Shome* (1969), Indian 'New Wave' also emerged as a movement and a series of new films were made in regional languages, especially in West Bengal, Kerala and Karnataka. These films also had a reasonable unveiling through the film societies. Thus, the regular viewing of a different class of films naturally altered the response of the ordinary viewer to films and they imbibed a new film culture akin to a different cinema.



Jean- Luc Godard

Film societies made it a point to collect all information regarding the film, its historical, social and political backgrounds, all about the filmmaker and the main technicians and artistes and provide them to the members before screening, mostly in printed formats. Most of



the film societies had news bulletins, house magazines or special issues on film, which served the purpose of educating the spectator. Elaborate and fruitful discussions were held after each screening, sometimes in the presence of the director of the film himself or with some film experts. So, the audience could catch up the soul of the film, the context in which the film was made and the style of the filmmaker.



Women Collective in Cinema

Film societies also organised Film Appreciation courses, Meet the Director's program, seminars and conferences on cinema. This has enabled the members to acquire first-hand knowledge about the language of cinema and its syntax. The meticulous Film Appreciation Course conducted by National Film Archive of India annually could produce a bunch of experts on film appreciation, who, in turn, served as resource persons in the various film appreciation courses conducted by the film societies and other institutions.

There shall be a resolute attempt from the part of the reader to appreciate a good work of art.

One cannot appreciate art without having the awareness of its nature and structure. Look at poetry, novel or short story. The more you know about the nature and style of these media, the more you appreciate them. Or take the case of 'Kathakali', the celebrated classical art of Kerala. One should be well versed with the meaning of the lyrics, the 'mudras' (signs) performed by the dancers to understand and appreciate 'Kathakali' better. Cinema is ultimately an art form, even though technology makes a major contribution in its make-up, and so a thorough homework from the part of the spectator is essential to appreciate it fully. Thus, the awareness of the media could be achieved by cultivating a film culture. Film Society movement, in India, was undertaking this mission in divulging film awareness to the common audience.

Many factors led to the demer of the film society movement in India. The change in the socio-economic order and the passive attitude of the masses in the development issues were the major causes. The rotten political system and the lack of commitment to the causes aggravated the situation. The popularization of television and the availability of cheap and sub-standard entertainment materials affected serious cinema. The temperament of the people not to welcome anything serious and the paucity of strong bond to the society and life as a whole became the order of the day. 'Simplification of art' is a major challenge experienced towards the close of the last century, which perseveres. It is inspirational that the film culture, which was the direct outcome of

the film society movement in India, still exists, with the support of the film societies, film lovers, filmmakers and the handful of new films happening in the wilderness of meaningless extravaganza.



Amma Ariyan

### ***Writing on Cinema***

Serious writing on cinema were an area totally neglected. Apart from the conventional film reviews, mostly done by film journalists, films were not subjected to scientific analysis and assessment. The reviewers were not competent enough to follow the language of cinema and interpret them as per the demand of the medium. The film society movement had definitely changed the situation and gave a new insight to the writings on cinema. Here we may recall the case of 'Cahiers du Cinema', the French film magazine published under the leadership of Andre Bazin in Paris. In fact, this publication was responsible for the evolution of 'French New Wave'. The writers turned directors like Jean- Luc Godard, Francois Trauffaut, Jacques Rivette, Claude Chabrol and Eric Rhomer made the French New Wave possible. The Indian film society movement could also produce critics and

young filmmakers who recurrently engaged in serious writing on cinema. The film critics elatedly involved in 'journalistic, essayistic or academic criticism' according to their taste, training and expertise. Writers on film also did studies on various aspects of film like its history, genre, schools of filmmaking, styles and aesthetics.

Publications on cinema also gained momentum. Mainstream publishers got interested in publishing books on cinema, especially in regional languages. It was a welcome change that even the mainstream film magazines set apart some spaces for serious writings on cinema or for the news items pertaining to good cinema.

The acquaintance to good cinema and the new writings, in fact, enabled a minor sect of the viewers to whet his attitude to the medium. They could differentiate film from other arts and identify the independent nature of the medium. The so-called filmed theatre ceased to catch up their attention any more. They accepted film media as a means of self-expression as with every art. They could also approve of the supremacy of the director as the auteur of the film.

### ***Film Festivals***

The orientation strived by the film societies was, in fact, congenial to create an atmosphere of good cinema, thereby producing an aura of film culture hitherto unknown. Film Festivals of varied nature could be considered as the outcome of the toil of film societies and film enthusiasts. Film festivals were organized at

different levels varying from national to international. Members attended the festivals with new vigour and eagerness to know the Indian and World cinema. Film centres under state and central governments also began to organize International Film Festivals. International Film Festival of India (IFFI) and other regional International film festivals of Calcutta and Kerala, were, in a sense, the outcome of the efforts and support of film societies and FFSI in collaboration with the governments. Film societies were also responsible for the conduct of International film festivals organized in the private sector like MAMI (Mumbai), Bangalore (Suchitra Film Society), Hyderabad, Karim Nagar, Chennai, Delhi, Trichur (Kerala), Trivandrum (FILCA) and a number of others. Film festivals could also be deemed as an attempt to sustain the film culture. The incredible participation of film lovers in International Film Festival of Kerala (IFFK) truly supports this argument.

When we are in the last part of the second decade of the new century, situations have changed a lot. Film Festivals happen to be a regular event throughout the world irrespective of urban or rural area. The digital age enables the accessibility of any film made in any part of the world with ease. As a result, the selection of films and co-ordination of the festival has become an easy affair. It is surprising to note that in spite of the easy availability of films through internet, film enthusiasts flock to watch the screenings in film festivals. This is because the festival atmosphere is entirely different from the seclusive film viewing at

home. Here one gets the opportunity to interact with fellow spectators and enter into lively discussions, thereby enhancing the understanding and appreciation of the films.



Swayamvaram

### *Role of women*

The part of women in building up film culture may not be overlooked. It is true that in the early years of film society movement, participation of women was minimal. In the field of writing on cinema too women appeared less. Film festivals could not attract women audience initially. Women filmmakers were a rare species too. But everything has changed. The film festivals and film society screenings are no more a taboo to women now. They partake in all activities pertaining to film in large numbers. If one keenly observes, it is evident that the attendance of women spectators outnumbered those of men in all International film festivals. The organizations like 'Women Collective in Cinema' (WCC) in Kerala ascertain the fact that women are not behind men in de-

fending their rights in the film industry and assure their full involvement in all walks of cinema. It is to be emphasised at this crucial juncture that the major role of women in the present context is to safeguard our film culture acquired through the years with the blessings of good cinema and sensible audience. The singular hope lies in the new generation of film viewers, mostly women, who can dictate the mode of film culture apt for a society striving towards freedom and self-reliance in arts.

### ***New Horizons***

As some film societies started to impart training in filmmaking, they came forward to produce films too. The exertions made by Calcutta Film Society (*Portrait of a City*, *Durga Pooja*) and Film Forum (*A City by the Sea*) are to be referred to. The successful attempt by Odessa Film Society in Kerala to produce a feature film *Amma Ariyan* directed by the late John Abraham is also to be placed on record.

The new filmmakers, of course, the product of film culture cultivated by the aforesaid factors, worked closely in association with the film society movement. Film societies happened to be the maiden screening place of their products too. The labour put by 'Chitralekha' Film Society of Kerala under the captainship of Adoor Gopalakrishnan is to be mentioned. Chitralekha was founded in 1965 followed by film screenings throughout the length and breadth of Kerala. Apart from screenings, Chitralekha aimed at imparting film educa-

tion to the masses through literature on films, thereby building a fresh film culture. The new cinema movement in Kerala was solely possible because of the sweat of Chitralekha and the film societies organized later. Chitralekha film co-operative also provided a model by producing the films *Swayamvaram* and *Kodiyettam* both by Adoor Gopalakrishnan, which were contributory to earn unprecedented status to Malayalam cinema in the national as well as international showground.

The emergence of a bunch of film producers also was the outcome of the new film culture in the making. Film enthusiasts with good financial base came forward to produce artistically brilliant films, experimenting on novel themes and directors, proved to be successful. This was especially true in the case of producers from West Bengal, Kerala and Karnataka. In Kerala, Ravindranath of General Pictures was a beacon to parallel cinema. Many of the films of Adoor Gopalakrishnan, G.Aravindan and the film *Manje* by M.T.Vasudevan Nair would not have been possible if Ravindranath, the connoisseur of art, had not come with his timely intervention.

Digital era has revolutionised all aspects of film media. The whole film world is now at the fingertip of the spectator. He can watch any film anywhere at any time at his whims and fancy. Of course, a new film culture is evolving, but the pertinent question is whether it leads to a better one or not. Popular culture is always susceptible to transformation. It is to be comprehended that the 'expected' film cul-



ture for better cinema has nothing in parallel with the contemporary popular culture. If the newly acquired film culture merges with the popular culture, no doubt, it will be the end of good cinema. The untiring efforts of the film societies, film buffs, film litterateur and filmmakers to build up a different film culture hitherto would be an absolute waste.

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