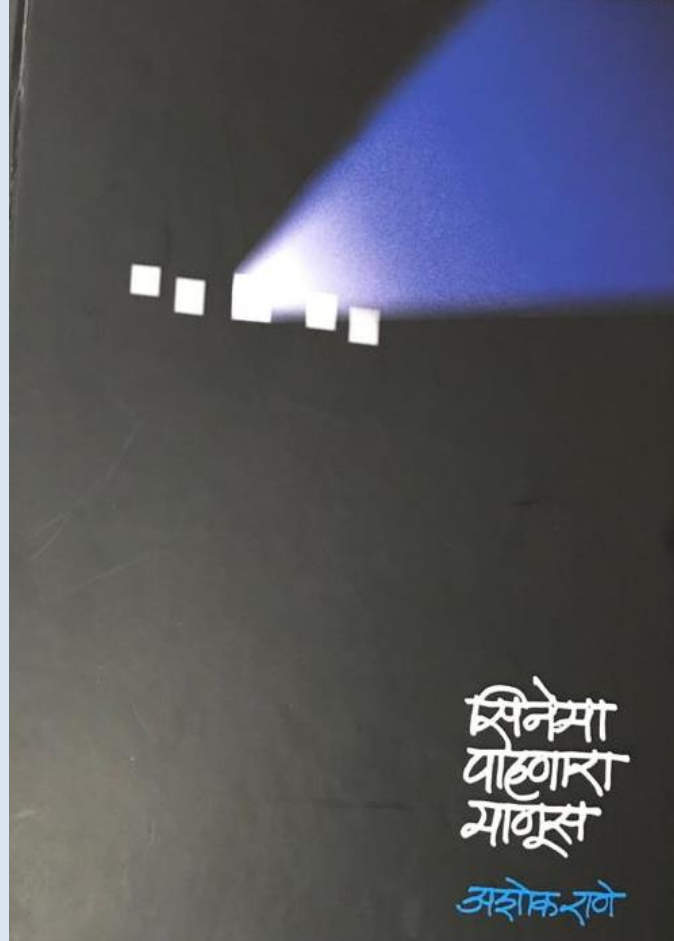


Excerpt

Ashok Rane

A Man Who Watches Movies



Who am I?

It is rare to come by anyone not fascinated with cinema. Often such fascination starts early on in childhood. I am no exception.

Though it feels like a lifetime of watching movies, I still yearn to watch more. I have lost count of the number of Indian and foreign films I have watched. This has given me a perspective on the past, present, and future of the world. Not only that, the world of cinema, wrapped me in its wings and took me to far-off lands where I met different kinds of people and got to experience several, multi-hued cultures.

Along with cinema I also got to watch a lot of theatre. From plays staged in the lanes of my neighbourhood to the ones staged at prestigious venues across the world, it has been a privilege to

watch the best in theatre. Also, ever since I was introduced to the written word, I have voraciously read everything I could lay my hands on, often going to astonishing lengths.

Similarly, my love for art has seen me traipsing up and down art galleries both here and abroad. Painting, sculpture, interesting architectural designs, folk art forms that carry the scent of the soil they spring from – all fascinate me equally. I have also imbibed a lot of music across genres and caught several dance performances, both folk and classical, Indian, and Western over the years. Along the way, I picked up favourites to listen or watch, making each such exposure an experience which added layers and became a part of me. So much so, that I now see myself as a distillation of these experiences.

But through this journey, my love for cinema never ebbed. How could that happen? It is after all my first love. From yet another obsessed cine-goer to a student of cinema, a Film Society Activist, a critic, a researcher, a teacher, a jury member of international film festivals, an organiser of film festivals, a consultant first and then founder-director of an international film festival, a writer of stories, scripts, and screenplay for several television series and films, a documentary filmmaker, a director of films and in this process ended up playing small parts in two films. Cinema has indeed given me so much!

Since I wear so many hats, I often ask myself: Who am I?

The answer that I hear my inner voice tell me is always unfailingly the same: A man who watches movies, crazy about cinema.

Of finding a new vision

The experimental theatre movement started by Sulabha Deshpande, Arvind Deshpande and Arun Kakade under the banner of their theatre group *Aavishkar* became our training ground. Chhabildas High School in Dadar, Mumbai was the centre of these theatre activities. Playwrights, directors, artists, technicians from Marathi, Hindi, English and Gujarati theatre used to be there in large numbers either to perform or watch plays. It used to be a famous *Adda* for cultural exchange among likeminded people. Long before *theatrewallas* used to gather at Bharatiy Vidya Bhavan and Bhulabai Terrace and later Prithwi Theatre in western suburb (Juhu) became their *Adda*.

I'm often baffled when I look back at the sheer scope and magnitude of how much I learned and imbibed there. I became familiar with the works of well-known theatre legends of the world like Romanian-French playwright and 'Father of the Anti-theatre' Eugène Ionesco, Irish playwright Samuel Beckett, American playwright and Nobel laureate Eugene Gladstone O'Neill, Italian dramatist-poet-novelist Luigi Pirandello, and Norwegian playwright Henrike Johan Ibsen who is known as the 'Father of Realism in Theatre.' Along with them we got to know of the works of Indian

greats like Bharatendu Harishchandra, Bhisham Sahni, Rambriksh Benipuri, Habib Tanvir, Vijay Tendulkar, Mohan Rakesh, Badal Sarkar, Girish Karnad.

Whether the works of established playwrights or novices experimenting with the genre, there was little we didn't get to watch here. In the process of learning how to watch plays, what to look for while watching them, how to take them apart, analyse everything one has watched, and weigh and measure it up for content and craft, I also gained a whole new vision for looking at not only all art forms but life itself!

If I enumerate all my learnings at *Aavishkar's* experimental theatre movement, it could fill up an entire tome by itself. I would love to tell you how this exposure created this '*Man who watches Cinema.*' It held my hand as I took on various roles in the cinema medium and gave me the vision for my life journey ahead.

I must have been 22. I had watched a one-act play at *Aavishkar*. I cannot recollect the name of the play, its writer, who presented it, or the director and yet the play is still fresh in my mind. In fact, I use it to teach my students the concept of time and space.

The protagonist is a middle-class unemployed, lives with his parents. The story takes place somewhere in late 60s and early 70s, when unemployment was a grave phenomenon. There are no jobs available. After trying desperately for one, he is fed up and stops trying. His head is brimming with other thoughts and ideas for income-generation but finds no encouragement or support from his parents who keep insisting on picking up any job instead of waiting for a good one. Having grown up in the societal grooves of childhood, education, employment, marriage, kids and continuing to make compromises and living only as much as your circumstances let you, the parents feel the son should also do the same. But he either spends all day idling or gallivanting around with friends. This angers his parents who keep nagging him, we raised you, fed you, clothed you, and educated you. He keeps his discomfort and anger or what they say to himself and bears it all quietly till he can take it no more. On that day, the moment one of them invokes

'giving birth to him' he asks: "Had I filled in an application form to be born to you?"

Complete silence ensues for a while as that sinks in. The parents are shocked and speechless for a while till the father asks him: "Aren't you ashamed to ask your parents like this?"

The mother wonders, "God! Why are we alive to hear these words?"

Without reacting to his parents' utterances he had already left.

When the play was over, some of my friends reacted strongly saying that how can a guy can say such nasty things to one's parents

"Why not?" I asked.

"So you are not shocked? Is it not an insult to one's parents?"

"If anyone's parents nag him all day and all night like this, why is it wrong if he confronts them?"

I tried explaining my stance but most of them did not seem interested in what I was saying.

I sensed the generation gap between the youth from the post-60s era and his parents, vagaries of changing times, the sheer bravado with which youth express themselves without bothering about who they are offending, and the devil-may-care attitude distilled in the hero of that one-act play. He was unwilling to put up with the unreasonable just because it was coming from his parents. I saw this feeling among the youth of that time. They wanted to decide the good or bad for themselves and were willing to face any subsequent consequences for the same. Parents from a generation which felt it had the right to decide for their children found this a tough pill to swallow. And that is where the vortex of all the friction lay. I never found the question that the young man asks his parents strange or even insulting in any way. Even as we were discussing this, one of the friends in the group asked me if I would ever ask something like this of my parents.

"If they nagged me all the time, I would!"

This was the same time I was reading Gyanpith Awardee, Bhalchandra Nemade's Marathi novel *Kosala* (1963). This modern classic of Marathi literature (it uses the autobiographical form to narrate the journey of a young man, Pandurang

Sangvikar, and his friends through his college years) is considered the first existentialist novel in Marathi literature. In the novel, Pandurang's wastrel friend from the village tells him: "We wear the clothes bought with our fathers' money so that they don't have to feel ashamed that their sons are not roaming naked in the village. This directly connected to Albert Camus's *The Outsider* and the Sinicism of its protagonist.

It was mind blowing to see how the novel reflected changing society, particularly how young minds work. We could identify in this hero the aspirations of all the young generation of the post-60s. It was like Bhalchandra Nemade's protagonist was the torch bearer of the modern times. In a way, he was appealing to our hearts strongly. At the same time he was also ruthlessly burying our collective innocence for good. There couldn't have been a better way of driving us towards rationality.

This was another lesson for me. I became aware of and understood the great social change we were going through.

Theatre thespian Vijay Bondrè ran a theatre group called *Gossip Group* in Vile Parle, Mumbai. I joined their three month-long theatre workshop. During the workshop Marathi Natya Parishad, the parent body of Marathi theatre, was celebrating World Theatre Day on June 14th. I had attended the celebration unfailingly for nearly three years. This day-long affair included seminars, discussions, lectures, interviews, award distribution and the re-enactment of famous scenes by famous actors from their famous plays. I wouldn't miss a single session through the day at Sahitya Sangh at Girgaum, Mumbai, another reputed centre of mainly professional theatre activities, because where else would I get to hear and watch so much about theatre. Though aware how driven this was by nostalgia in a way, I tried soaking in as much as possible. Many of my friends at *Aavishkar* would ask me, "Why do you go to listen to those old fogies?" These friends also had a problem with my watching mainstream plays. They would often question me, "how could you watch mainstream plays even while professing your love for experimental theatre. We are the new generation. We must only watch new plays and

negate the old,” they’d say but I’d counter it with: “Since we are newbies we need as much exposure as possible and should watch all kinds of plays.” But they flatly refused my views. I said to myself, I made my point and hence I must move on. I don’t see the sense in arguing beyond a point. Even today.

During those days I met many who believed strongly in this new caste system which compelled them to stick to either side of art. For them those who outright reject commercialism in art are purists. In the process they adopted a stubborn attitude that kept them away from the right approach towards the proper understanding of any art and its aesthetics. Being a student of theatre, literature and cinema, I was aware of this and hence I was trying to interact with my friends so that we all could take the right path towards the genuine understanding of art. But except a few, most of them disagreed with me. Some of them believed that they knew everything about theatre more than everybody else. I was of the opinion that one should not be that rigid during one’s formative years, because this works against one’s learning and growth. Later I met this kind of people in the Film Society movement as well. They thought they had a superior sense of film appreciation and understanding of cinema because they watched only world cinema. Lost in their lofty ivory towers, they looked down on mainstream Hindi films. It unfortunately blindsided them to some exceptional cinema from this genre.

As I mentioned above, I had once attended a Natya Parishad conference at Girgaum’s Sahitya Sangh. Bondrè Sir was present in one of the panel discussions. The next day I was back at the workshop. Bondrè Sir asked me how I found the entertainment section offerings of the last evening.

“That Daji Bhatavdekar is such a bore...!” I said instantly.

Sir almost grabbed me by neck and rained a volley of choicest abuses. “You’re calling Daji a bore? Do you even know what acting is?” Daji Bhatavdekar was a great actor belonging to the old school of Marathi theatre.

Later when he calmed down, he explained: “His acting style bored you since it belongs to an erstwhile generation. Not only the acting but

language employed too is not contemporary. Both these change with times. Now the theatre of your times will also evolve but as a serious student of theatre you should be able to contextualise an actor’s craft with the time he is trained in. Once you start becoming aware of this facet, nobody’s work will bore you and you will be able to pick up so much from each style and grow yourself.”

This was such an important lesson. Actors from a generation before mine would try to speak as much as possible in baritone. The dialogues were written with literary flourish and suffused with idioms, phrases, and proverbs. Everything would be done in a heavy, overbearing manner. I used to think of all this unnecessarily and even unintentionally theatrical.

These plays were operationally defining themselves newly while being firmly rooted in realism. Actors would speak and conduct themselves on stage just like we do in real life. In the earlier days there were either no mikes or when there were they were rudimentary. Actors had to, hence, speak and act in way that it reaches audiences right at the back. This was also one of the reasons why actors of that era sounded like they do. Whereas what we were doing was ‘Intimate Theatre.’ The line between audience and the stage was blurring as if the stage was growing straight into the audience and the audience were now part of the stage. There was no need for mikes here. Even if an actor so much as sighed on stage, the person sitting in the last row would also get it. It was as if theatre was getting rid of the ‘theatrical’ and giving audiences an experience of a taste of the ‘real.’ This theatre belonged to my generation which hungered for something new. This was perhaps why I found Daji Bhatavdekar’s acting so boring. Bondrè Sir was able to help me locate what was unfolding on stage in the matrix of time. I could now see what a time lapse can do to a theatrical piece of work. It was as if I was gifted a new vision to see not only theatre but also cinema and literature.

Many years later I had put together a feature for the Marathi daily broadsheet *Sakal* on whether media should be given autonomy. For this I went to interview veteran critic Madhav Manohar. Perhaps I

had fallen short in articulating what I wanted because he seemed at a loss of words for what to say. But the interview seemed to have reached a deadlock. I was trying my desperate best to explain what I was trying to say when I brought up Bondrë Sir's name and said something like, "... this is what he had told me." And a miracle unfolded. Madhav Manohar who was pacing about bare-torsoed in a dhoti draped till his knees, stopped. The man who seldom smiled was grinning. "I now know the point you're trying to make... But I am most delighted that someone spoke of Bondrë after so many years. Such a great theatre professional. He could have taken Marathi theatre light years ahead. I am awash with nostalgia for all his plays, thanks to you. Now ask whatever you want as part of your work, but I will be happy if you stay back just to chat..."

Madhav Manohar had personality - both in physique and because of the sheer sweep of the subjects he covered as a critic - that would intimidate. I could sense that when I called him and when I sat across him in his house. But invoking Bondrë Sir had changed all that. I could relax. Not only did the interview go well thereafter but we also enjoyed talking to each other. But the real bonus came in the end when I was leaving. Madhav

Manohar told me, "You are Bondrë's student. I am so proud you are working on understanding theatre for your feature. I have written an essay on Norwegian playwright Henrik Johan Ibsen which I want you to read. When done, come back with my notebook to give me feedback."

And he handed me his 200-page notebook, which contained his only handwritten copy of an essay he had put together with lots of research. I read the whole essay in two days like possessed and took it back to Madhav Manohar. What could I say to him about the essay? In many ways this essay had helped me decode not only Ibsen (the most frequently performed dramatist in the world after William Shakespeare), but also his works like *Brand*, *Peer Gynt*, *An Enemy of the People*, *Emperor* and *Galilean*, *A Doll's House*, *Hedda Gabler*, *Ghosts*, *The Wild Duck*, *When We Dead Awaken*, *Rosmersholm*, and *The Master Builder*. All this had happened thanks to Vijay Bondrë who had himself been trained at London's Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts. I distinctly recall how Bondrë's 'Gossip Group' had staged iconic plays like Ibsen's *Brand* and Jean-Paul Sartre's *Crime of Passion* and *The Wall*.

■ *This excerpt from the book titled 'Cinema Pahanara Manus' (A Man Who Watches Movies) by Ashok Rane, originally written in Marathi and now being translated in English. This is a kind of autobiography of a filmgoer which describes his journey with cinema from childhood days to present. Along with this 25th chapter (of total 90), there is also an introductory chapter that summarises the entire journey.*

▲ **Mr. Ashok Rane is an author who got the National Award for writing in cinema for three times. He is a veteran film critic, film society activist, film festival director, teacher of cinema and a documentary filmmaker. He is an Executive member of FIPRESCI-India, based in Mumbai.**