

Asian Corner | Gautaman Bhaskaran

INDIAN CINEMA DESERVES BETTER

India has an extraordinarily rich heritage. Created with precision and love, but often used callously and preserved preposterously, if at all. If some of the architecture looks neglected, the nation's rich repertoire of films has been decaying for decades. If the Taj Mahal, built by an emperor for his beloved, is vandalised by visitors and smoked out of its marble sheen by oil refineries, most of India's priceless movies are not conserved with care.

India is cinema rich, producing around 1,200 films each year and in many languages, with each one documenting a slice of society, the lives of different people and so on. But hundreds of movies have been destroyed, or are being lost every day. A mere two reels remain of the country's first ever feature, Dadasaheb Phalke's 1913 "Raja Harishchandra". There is no copy at all of the first talkie, "Alam Ara", directed by Ardeshir Irani in 1931. Many more recent works have also disappeared. The reasons are not hard to come by. Most producers believe they know how to preserve a movie, when, in fact, they don't. To top it all, they are possessive, and often in a destructive way.

Many years ago, the late Ismail Merchant (who had partnered with James Ivory and Ruth Praver Jhabvala to create some magnificent cinema) ran into a storm trying to save and restore some of Satyajit Ray's films. India's best-known cinema icon, Ray was on his deathbed when an Oscar for Lifetime Achievement was conferred on him. To the shock and dismay of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, it was found that there was no decent clip from Ray's early, ground-breaking works. Merchant and the Academy got the Ray restoration going, and the auteur's movies were salvaged and saved for posterity.

Ray's "Charulata" (The Lonely Wife) – poetry in celluloid, as I would describe it – was screened at the recent Abu Dhabi Film Festival. A restored print, it was a delight to watch and was presented to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the birth of Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore. The 1964

"Charulata" is based on Tagore's novella, *Nashtanir* (The Broken Nest).

As I pen this piece, there is more good news flowing in. The movies of another master Indian director, Adoor Gopalakrishnan, are now being digitised, the first step towards conservation, by the National Film Archive of India in Pune. This is



A scene from K Asif's classic "Mughal-e-Azam"

gladdening, given the fact that barring a few of his movies, the rest are not even available on disks.

London-based Second Run, which made a DVD out of one of Adoor's early films, "Elippathayam" (The Rat-Trap), some years ago, is all set to release his somewhat autobiographical "Kathapurushan" (The Man of the Story) soon. But for every Ray or Adoor, there are tens of other renowned Indian helmers whose films are lost forever. With each work lost, the nation loses a bit of its history and a chunk of its legacy. We cannot forget that the cinema that matters, or is made with sensitivity, is a cinema that is often a rich source of information. I would call such a movie a social document and nothing less.

I am now told that two government organisations, the Archive and the National Film Development Corporation of India, are trying to restore India's cinematic wealth. The Archive has partnered with Reliance MediaWorks to rebuild 1,000 movies, while the Corporation is working with three post-production companies - Pixion, Avitel and Prasad - to restore its library of 246 films. However, sometimes, it makes greater sense to preserve the original negative/print rather than rebuild them.

Moviemaker A K Bir once raised a pertinent question: will the audience want to see a film as it looked when it was first made or a version that has been digitally corrected and perfected with the help of current techniques?

K Asif's classic "Mughal-e-Azam", tracing the love story of Salim and Anarkali, forcefully brought home this view. First released in 1961 in black and white, except for a small colour portion, the movie was recently restored. The new full-colour version looked too glitzy.

Asif faced many obstacles, including a long disruption and a 10-year shoot, but "Mughal-e-Azam" transformed Anarkali from a mere myth in history to great cinematic make-believe. Did Salim's lover ever exist? The movie says she did, and so be it. But her new gloss did take away something from her black-and-white purity.

A FILM AGENDA

INDEPENDENT CINEMA NEEDS A CULTURAL REVOLUTION

MOHAMMED KHAN

In the mid-50s, James Dean surprised us with three rebellious movies before he was killed in a car accident. During the same period, a group of rebellious American television directors came up with an ambitious cinematic language. Among this group were John Frankenheimer and Sidney Lumet who presented films full of the spirit of a hobbyist and the confidence of a professional.

In 1963, during my studies in London, I joined one of the film associations and had the opportunity to attend a seminar by John Frankenheimer, who arrived from Paris, where he was working on his film "The Train". He told the audience about his experience shooting the movie and the number of cameras that were destroyed during the filming. In his book "Making Films", Lumet admits that he chose which films to direct instinctively and often after the first reading, resulting in both very good and bad films.

For me, being in London was a real film school. London was the heart of the arts, cinema, music, theatre and fashion world; there was a glow in all creative fields that you could feel on the streets. There, I discovered Jean-Luc Godard, François Truffaut, Antonioni, Fellini, Ingmar Bergman, Akira Kurosawa and Satyajit Ray. Of course, I got to know the cinema of Frankenheimer, Lumet, the king of independent cinema John Cassavetes and a long list of directors and writers from all corners of the world who had made London a meeting place and starting point for their creations.

Therefore, it was no surprise for me to see the French director Jean Renoir standing before us in a morning concert at the cinema academy on Oxford Street presenting his latest film, or to run into Alfred Hitchcock while climbing the stairs at a distribution company, or to see Antonioni in one of the libraries. It was normal to see Alec Guinness, Peter O'Toole, Richard Harris, Laurence Olivier or Albert Finney on stage. That was London. But things changed. The proliferation of satellite channels, piracy and globalisation came to the fore, shining with false hope.

Today, we rarely find a European movie touring Europe. Even the



distribution of films in the country where they were made is not easy. The same applies to Asian cinema and, of course, it is impossible to exclude Egyptian cinema from the same fate. The globalisation of cinema has passed by all films by small producers and distributors and opened the doors to major production and distribution companies (especially those from Hollywood) to show films that are based far from our communities and have nothing to do with our lives or concerns. The world, somehow, has become more receptive to the idea of accepting one dominant culture. To change this, we need a cultural revolution to restore the privacy of the soul to its owners. Hollywood has deceived viewers for a few dollars by inventing three-dimensional cinema to hide its cultural bankruptcy.

Usually, to escape from any despair that I may feel, I treat myself by reading a scene from a film I wrote 20 years ago but have not shot yet. I follow my main character Nesma while she is preparing a feast. The sound of several musical instruments is playing in the background, accompanied by stills and movie titles coming up on the screen as Nesma moves like a butterfly in the old kitchen. Egg yolk crumbles with the rhythm of a wooden spoon in her hand, the pieces of meat sink into the egg yolks like a ballet dancer. The pastrami is swimming in the hot oil and turns into pieces of soft gold. The knife in her hands, like a musical instrument she's playing, cutting onions, garlic, tomatoes, lettuce and parsley. Nesma controls things in that kitchen, accompanied by the sound of tomato sauce bubbling away like an opera chant.