



A PLEA FOR A FILM HISTORY



NOW that the Sangeet Natak Akadami has agreed to include the film as one of the arts and is taking active steps to improve its quality, I make below certain suggestions for the writing of a suitable history of the Indian film on somewhat the same lines as the "History of English Films" by Rachell and Low now being published by George Allen and Unwin.

But though the Indian film industry is now more than thirty years old it appears that no active steps are being taken in that direction with the result that not only will many important sources of information be lost but persons who could give us first-hand information about the beginnings would no more be available. I, therefore, state below some of the sources.

I. Persons : Even now both in Bengal and Bombay there are persons alive who would be able to give us direct and reliable information about Dadasaheb Phalke of Bombay or of the firm of the Madans of Calcutta who were among the first to have launched on the venture of film-making. Younger artistes and technicians working with these persons, and with the institutions which were responsible for the production of some of the earliest films, can be found even now and if a careful approach is made to them and all the facts suitably sifted and compared, it is almost certain that a good lot of authentic information would be available about them.

Similarly, some of the earliest film concerns have either gone into liquidation or have

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changed hands and therefore completely changed in shape. For instance, the Bombay

Talkies has unfortunately gone out of existence but members belonging to the first team, including the great Mrs. Devika Rani, are even now ready to tell us the basic facts. The same might be said of The Ranjit Movitone, a search into whose papers is sure to reveal many interesting facts of history.

In Bengal, too, the development of the film might as well be known with the development of the New Theatres and with a person like Mr. B. N. Sirkar, it should be easy to probe into facts and collect biographical, statistical and other material. We require information not only about the number of films produced and their names but the expenses that were actually incurred, the wages paid, the artistes (big or small) employed by them, the methods employed to secure theatres, the handbills that the distributors used and such like. The New Theatres has produced today more than 200 films and in its fold have been nurtured and trained several persons who are now ace men in the industry. But their work cannot be fully known and assessed until the history of the films they have made is known.

For this purpose it is absolutely essential that first, a list should be drawn up of all such persons who were or are there and then individually and sympathetically they should be approached for information which should be checked up for correctness of fact.

Incidentally during this process, we shall

get the materials for the preparation of a biographical and bibliographical dictionary of the film personnel to show what amount of resources we had drawn upon and what contribution these men made to the art and the industry. Many have meanwhile changed their vocation and it is necessary to know why they have done so.

II. Films : Since any film history cannot be complete without a library of films produced in the country, it is necessary to collect these also. The Film Enquiry Committee Report had made a recommendation to that effect and the Government of India must not only agree to this (as they have recently done) but should adopt effective measures to collect the films lying, most probably, in dirty cans in unknown quarters. The negatives of many would perhaps be available if searched for with care, and with the technical resources at our command we can rework them and restore them to their original conditions. Many of us would like to see over again, for instance, films like *Lanka Dahan*, *Kaliya Mardan*, *The Light of Asia* and *The love of a Moghul Prince* because, socially speaking too, they would tell us in what manner precisely our minds were working.

Here to establish a suitable correlation between the films and society we should examine these films to determine in what manner events and episodes of Indian life and history were re-interpreted for the purpose of making films, when the first travelogue was made, when we had the first completely comic film, which of them had made use of the song or the dance, when we made the first use of artificial lighting and of the Western orchestra, if and when we had the first children's film and if and when we had the first large-scale use of dialect in our films. To the casual visitor to the films, these might not be of much moment but to the sociologists and to the film-maker who choose to provide society with the most powerful instrument of entertainment, these facts are vitally important, for, we would not only be guided by our knowledge of history but also be aware of the pitfalls that were there.

For this purpose an exhaustive search has to be undertaken for films throughout the length and breadth of the country, for, with many of their original producers no more in the field, it is likely that these might have changed hands and might have gone astray. And it is also known that there are vested inte-

rests which would not easily part with their 'cans' until moral, and if necessary, legal pressure is brought on them.

To do all this and to make an effective collection of films, resources, funds and sympathy are very necessary but the most necessary thing is to take up the work as a whole-time occupation, to collect the films and then to relate them properly to their background.

III. Journals : Towards establishing this relationship efficiently it is necessary that a scrutinising search is made of the written sources available. How many of us know that the first film advertisement was published by *The Time of India* in its issue dated July 7, 1896, that many journals would not look at films not to speak of noticing them, that in Bengal for example, for many years it was difficult to get any film announcement published in any respectable journal, that it took time to make people understand that the film as a social entertainment deserved social mention, and that it was much later that journals given entirely to films were published.

The producers and the distributors had to use considerable ingenuity and resourcefulness and as their revenues increased, they could make payments for advertisements and then by an inverse process they could get write-ups published. Here again, it was left to some foreign-owned papers to give space to regular film criticism unbiased by write-ups till the time when all newspapers and some respectable journals started giving a prominent place to film announcements.

Incidentally, the methods of film advertisement and its subsequent development by itself would reveal very interesting factors. From the short, puritanically worded notices to the banners and placards and kiosks with an emphasis on the heroine was a marked departure, and for this there was not only a struggle with society but it also meant the cultivation of a certain taste.

To ransack into the files of the old journals would therefore be an immediate necessity: not merely to determine the precise dates when films were released but to know about public reaction, about advertisement methods and such like. The collection of the cinema bills and of small publications containing songs would certainly be very interesting: the former to the

distributors ; the latter to those who write songs for the films and set them to tune. Like the research on film-music made recently by Freize under the Ford Foundation, we have at some subsequent date to undertake some work to determine the place of the more primeval folk music in the hierarchy of the more complicated film values.

A study of the film journals along with an examination of the films would, besides providing material for Indian film history, reveal certain very significant truths. For example, we have yet to know precisely how and in what manner while the film versions of certain classics fail to click, others succeed at the box-office or we have to determine why producers try to copy the pattern of a film that has succeeded but then fail to do so. The measure of borrowing of the plot, theme and characterisation, and at a later point, of decor and costuming from the West and Hollywood should be more carefully determined, for, the time has come when it is necessary either to assimilate

these more completely or to give these up to set up our own norms and traditions.

A basic study in these three directions would further help us to verify and restate several facts that have now found mention in certain books on the Indian films. Apart from the two Government of India Reports which are more analytical of conditions and tendencies than historical in their approach, there is now a fairly well-written volume by Dr. (Miss) Panna Shah called "The Indian Film" but her approach, too, is not that of a chronicler. A few directories edited by Bharucha or Dharap or booklets like Fazalbhoy and Hirlekar show that time and again the necessity has been felt for a film history. But since the film production in this country has not been as in the U. K. in one language but in several languages it is necessary that work should be done also on the regional language films.

I only wish that the Akadami took up this work in right earnest before it is too late.

