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Editorial: Celebrating a century of Indian cinema - passions, pleasures & perceptions

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How does one celebrate the centenary of ‘a way of life’?

For a medium, you remember its greatest meaning makers. For a movement, you highlight the turning points in its journey. For an individual, the heights of success and impact. But what about an art form that started as an ‘alien’ wonder to end up not only as a way of life, but also a prodigious offspring, unimaginably mutated away from its now ‘foreign’ parent DNA, in a span of just 100 years. Today, it would not be an overstatement to celebrate Bollywood or popular Indian cinema in the national language, Hindi, as India’s most recognisable offering on the international culture platform. Its film industry is arguably one of ‘Shining India’s’ truly uncontested achievements in the new millennium.

As a film critic I have frequently come across star, journalist and fan anecdotes of fond introductions and interactions over shared Bollywood memories in foreign lands. These stories have always evoked a sceptic’s enthusiasm, until recently, when a Russian man approached me on a bus in Edinburgh, hesitant yet excited, upon seeing a song sequence featuring Raj Kapoor playing on my laptop. Two decades ago, as a teen he had queued up with his grandmother for an umpteenth showcase of *Brodigaya* (the Russian name for *Awara*, which was dubbed and released in 1954) on a snowy winter’s afternoon in Moscow in the 1990s. Nearly three decades after his death and six decades since the release of *Awara* (1951), Raj Kapoor had once again connected two strangers from two different nations, in a third foreign land. Raj Kapoor and *Awara* remain Indian cinema’s first major triumph with audiences beyond the Indian sub-continent. Rachel Dwyer’s opening article, ‘*Fire and Rain, The Tramp and The Trickster: Romance & the family in the early films of Raj Kapoor*,’ evaluates the birth of a filmmaker honed in the best traditions of filmmaking of his time and context, and anticipates why Kapoor would go on to become Indian cinema’s first and (for

many, still) greatest showman. Dwyer argues that the real popularity and universality of his work lay in his letting the ‘downtrodden’ articulate songs in his films and observes that the “blending of all the ingredients of the Hindi film and their musical expression, especially the way Hindi love songs have developed over the years owe much to RK and his legacy.”

Souraj Dutta’s *‘Shakespeare-Wallah: cultural negotiation of adaptation and appropriation’* explores what happens when that ‘legacy’ interacts with content and creativity from a radically different time and space. It looks at the Bollywoodisation of the Bard (Shakespeare) in the times of Bharadwaj (Vishal), another passionate, multi-talented filmmaker with a keen sense for good music and the dramatic potential of lyrical scenes like Raj Kapoor, albeit making his mark in the current millennium.

Joining the dots of commonality down the decades between the two filmmakers is that quintessential differential and attraction, which for some, also is a perceptual ‘bane’ of Indian cinema – its integral song and dance interludes that have often had its entire corpus erroneously dismissed as musicals. Senior Indian film-music critic, writer and commentator, Rajiv Vijayakar provides a valuable overview to ‘the role of a song in a Hindi film’. The article’s journalistic style, meticulous research and factual authority make it a valuable one-stop overview on the who’s who of eight decades of Hindi film music, collated by an unmitigated passion for the medium, evident in Vijayakar’s assertive conclusion, “The Hindi film song is still thriving with its classic elements quite intact but in a new contemporary form suited to the times. It is that rare example of a popular form of art that has always been loved by its fans, and so must be appreciated unreservedly for what it is.” It is not a suggestion or a plea, but an assertion that has increasingly been calling for evaluating India’s cinemas on their own terms in both the global academic and the local media space.

Think Indian cinema, and after song-and-dance, perhaps the next obvious association would be its colourful *mise-en-scène* and riot of costumes. With specific emphasis on the role of a woman as a spouse, Ranjani Krishnakumar in ‘Of Marriages and Families: Clothing the Marriageable Tamil Woman’, investigates how the nature of the clothing of a heroine and its attributes (especially jewellery and makeup) contribute to the marriage-worthiness of a Tamil woman, using examples from a century of Tamil cinema. The analysis situates itself within changing themes and periods in the growth of south India’s largest film industry with a discernible impact on society at all levels – social, cultural and political. The ‘political’,

especially the way Tamil cinema actors cultivate a culture of political devotion to make it an integral and acceptable way of Tamil Nadu's political life is critiqued by Amy Doffegnies in 'Cinema in the sculpting of the South Asian self' unravelling some fresh complexities to the experience and influence of cinematic aesthetics in the daily lives of an audience. The *uniqueness* of Indian cinema is as much in the way it is conceived as it is consumed – passions as well as pleasures! Kapil Sibal in his speech as Union Minister of Communications & IT in the Government of India, at the 60th Indian National Film Awards (4 May, 2013) said, "For us in India, the cinema is not only an art which represents life it is also something between art and life, the cinema both gives life and takes from it."

Documentary filmmaker Catarina Maurao captures that 'connect' in her photo essay that celebrates cinema's dynamic equations with the Indian audience. It tries to fathom cinema's great attraction for so many people in India's technology capital- Bangalore, especially at a time when back at her home in Europe, she has been witnessing the death of cinema as a communal experience with consistent closing down of cinema theatres to new technologies of screening and distribution. "And yet in India in the city of Bangalore, known for its thriving technology and new media, cinema theatres are still playing a strong dynamic role in people's daily lives," she notes, 'mesmerised'.

India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru said, "The influence in India of films is greater than newspapers and books combined". One Indian publication, *Stardust* could beg to differ, at least for the sheer extremes of passion it has been stirring amongst a certain committed readership – the star denizens of Mumbai's tinsel town and their fans – for nearly half the period of existence of the Hindi film industry. Loved and loathed by its star subjects, and consumed to addiction by its readers, it is no less a scoop for this issue to get the flamboyant yet famously media averting Nari Hira, founder editor of *Stardust* and pioneer of tabloid film journalism in India to share the inside drama behind some of the biggest Bollywood scoops of all time.

No less impactful are this journal issue's other interviewees. As India's software hubs emerge as a hot destination for CGI outsourcing, from Hollywood to Bollywood, Ram Mohan, the forgotten 'father of Indian animation' traces the excitement back to where it all began, making publicity shorts in the state owned Films Division's modest Cartoon Unit, in the 1950s.

‘Queen of humour’ Sai Paranjpye, undisputedly India’s first female auteur of reckon in another candid interview feature reveals her takes on humour, both as a sustaining way of life, and a successful genre for cinema. After a satisfying and rewarding five-decades old career in films and television, she may not be making movies anymore, but Bollywood is yet to tire of her entertaining oeuvre with one of her early classics *Chashme Baddoor* (1981) being remade earlier this year with the same name and idea. Paranjpye’s storytelling style also is significant for its contributions to the ‘fusion film experiments’ that swept Hindi cinema of the 1980s marrying traditional styles of storytelling with western narrative conventions to create a unique Indian genre known as ‘middle-of-the-road’ cinema.

Those experiments have only grown bigger (if not always better) and more daring, ever since. This assertion is reinforced by our ‘sign off’ triad of film reviews, from the best of regional and independent Indian cinema that also aim to challenge perceptions that equate the best of all Indian cinema with Bollywood. On showcase are Nirad Mohapatra’s path-breaking Odia film *Maya Miriga* (The Mirage of Life, 1984) – one of the most influential debut films from eastern India since Satyajit Ray’s *Pather Panchali* (Song of the Little Road, 1956) – and two contemporary classics, *Harud* (Autumn, 2010) – a rare cinematic triumph from the north Indian state of Jammu & Kashmir, and *Ship of Theseus* – the most loved, feted and inspiring ‘indie’ film of 2013.

As Indian cinema steps into its 101st year, it is indeed a far cry from its modest one-man helmed beginnings, when Dhundiraj Govind Phalke, the ‘father of Indian cinema’ used to cast, direct, produce, edit, develop and even distribute his first film *Raja Harishchandra* (1913) all by himself to an inspiring creative space for talent and enterprise, constantly bursting with new visions, possibilities and ideas, almost every Friday at the theatres in some Indian language cinema, or at an international film festival. If one looks at the content of the year gone by, when Indian cinema actually turned 100, one cannot ignore the fact that never before have so many critically acclaimed films and performances happened in a single year in the mainstream Hindi cinema space, after perhaps 1957 and 1975. Tamil cinema auteur Mani Ratnam called 2012 the actual golden age of Tamil cinema for the sheer experimentation that has come to define the varietal fare, shock, dare and empathy in its content. Young Bengali directors have been consistently pushing the narrative boundaries of experimentation in Bengali cinema for some years now. Malayalam cinema continues its leadership in bringing some never before seen story lines and their treatment. Telegu cinema has been achieving

new highs in technological brilliance led by the likes of S.S. Rajamouli, who happens to be the most adapted director in popular cinema today. Last, but not least is Marathi cinema, which starting with *Shwaas* (2004), has seen a cinematic revolution, particularly in its choice of unique stories, to emerge as one of the bravest regional cinemas to be consistently telling some truly path breaking tales in recent times.

If age is a state of mind, the 100-year-old Indian cinema is at an ambitious and assertive cusp of mature daring, fabulously balancing empathy and energy, tradition and modernity, style and individuality, and dreams and reality as embodied in the moods and *mise-en-scène* of the cover image of this special issue, a still from *Maya Miriga*. At a consistent record breaking output of 1000 plus films per year that Indian cinema is the world's most prolific film industry is an old story; the 'breaking' news is that now it is considered as the most influential global movie industry after Hollywood, with a matching number of ticket sales at the counters. Indian movies enjoy simultaneous official release in theatres from Australia to the USA, South Africa to Scotland. Every major Hollywood studio (20th Century Fox, Warner Brothers, Sony Pictures, Disney...) already has at least one Indian film in its production oeuvre. As the unbridled passions of an increasing tribe of young, enterprising and ever increasing meaning makers diversify the range of pleasures offered by the cinemas of India to audiences, old and new, across the globe, the time has come to renegotiate our perceptions of one of the most important world cinemas, integral to the shaping, success and survival of cinema as an influential and entertaining art form in the 21st century.

Over to the next 100 years... 🎬

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