

Essay

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From Trash to Shelves: Notes on the Importance of Satellite Archives on Indian Cinema Heritage



NFAI

Studies around film archives in India, their accessibility, and their overall sense of network to connect communities, histories and international ventures are still on-going processes. Some significant articles and recent books published by the Film Heritage Foundation, have accounted the importance of film restoration and preservation, documented significant Indian cinema restoration ventures, and overall located the importance of core sites to promote the preservation of film heritage in India. Other stories have accounted of disposed film reels in anonymous bags that were miraculously found, identified and now stored in the safe hands of the National Film Archive of India.

Along with the fairly new formed Film Heritage Foundation, the most significant conser-

vation site of films and their material culture in India, is the National Film Archive of India (NFAI) in Pune. The NFAI, is a site for cinephilia, and a place where the encounters with the rich universe of Indian cinema material culture takes place in multiple ways. There is a vast sense of fascination with archives, and overall, with the associations devoted to film preservation in India, but these sites are also testimonies of disconnected infrastructures of which their socio-historical and political values are to be uncovered.

NFAI is an extraordinary site, with the unique and yet dormant potential to effectively preserve survived reels, rich film memorabilia of several films of the vast Indian traditions, and throughout, the value of every single historical moment inherently concealed within the

physicality of the reels, posters, glass slides, photographs and press books to mention a few. These metaphorical ‘pixels’ of a vast canvas, are aural and photographic historical testimonies saturated by local, national and international expressions. NFAI, is also a dusty site, technologically challenging and yet immensely charming; where portions of valuable film histories can be found, to be stitched together coherently and bridge gaps of untold and disconnected pasts.



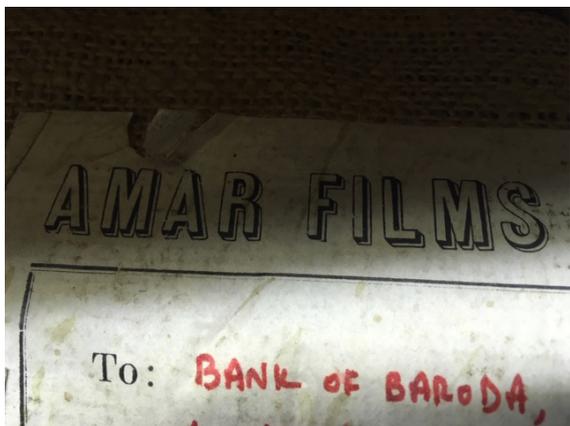
The delight in being at NFAI, is to be able to dig into otherwise unexplored narratives; delight which is also a challenge too. The archive in Pune, alike other film archives in India is a mixed bag of pleasure and pain, where also Walter Benjamin would not get too enthusiastic. The state of technology to facilitate the access to film heritage in India, challenges not only the *eternal value* inherent to films, but also the mobile value of goods and cultures across the world. NFAI, is a place where unquestionably materials are available, but navigating through these materials is not always plain-sailing. Disconnections are not only with the actual way we access materials, despite the drive to improve access to researchers, but there are also other forms of disconnections that affect the simple entrée into the Indian film heritage, and its global history. These disconnections and dislocations are

also bureaucratic, intellectual and ideological in nature; the local and international dimensions of Indian cinema, the dissemination of film art across the world and the overall role of diasporic journeys are unnoticed locally.



The missing connections of what is local with what is global at NFAI, and the rich foreign dimension of Indian cinema circulation history absent there, shape much like for other conservation sites in India (where visiting a castle is 3 times costlier if you are not an Indian national), a partial and biased access to art and its history. The complex dialectic local-transnational appears to support a nationalistic view of what needs to be preserved for posterity, placing the nature of foreignness at a disadvantage. Film archives in India, struggling to promote the culture of Indian cinema abroad, appear to neglect some sections of their own vast history, but capitalise purely on what is available inland. Can other histories of Indian cinema be told, and feed the current traditions available through the work of international archives and collections? Which are the sites that preserve Indian history abroad, and what can these sites tell us about these missing historiographies?

Travelling across India, made me realise that as I am a foreigner, the cost of my ticket was unequally proportional to the one of residents to access heritage sites; similarly, each cultural place owning a small or large collection on Indian cinema is affected by the same “disad-



vantaged position of a foreigner”, where the vast constellation of film culture across the country is localised and detached from the ‘mothership’ (NFAI). And every time, I felt that the unlinked and disseminated material were once again fruits of practices that encouraged to stay disconnected, silent, hidden and uncreative.

The state of film heritage and archives in India is problematic; much of the material available is conserved across multiple sites (not necessarily only archives) but in little sections of numerous local and regional libraries or conservational sites of various nature, that do not have a much-needed systemised connection. Similar, is the state of other small Indian film archives spread across the globe that hold their unique history of Indian cinema, for whom the ties are severed from the main mothership too. This is the case of the Indian Cinema archive owned by the Cinema Museum in London, and on loan at De Mont-

fort University (DMU), which I have started curating recently. This collection, which was destined to be trashed and forgotten following the demise of the cinema theatres screening Indian cinema in London, was salvaged by the curators of the museum.

It was just last year, that in one of my trips to another dusty and yet charming place of cinema in London, the Cinema Museum, chiselled within one of old Charlie Chaplin’s houses, I made my way into a very busy room; busy with every kind of artefact and film memorabilia that were disorderly shelved. And in there, there were about 20 shelves of untouched Indian cinema memorabilia from the 1950s onwards, intact and yet damaged mem-



ories of disconnected histories. The Indian Cinema Collection at DMU, is composed of a rich array of posters of diverse dimensions, coloured glass slides, hand painted posters, film scripts, printing blocks, photographs and song booklets, that were forgotten and have now been rescued once again.

Along with the broad material culture that testifies the circulation of films in London during the mentioned years, there still are unopened hessian sacks (PICS) with old postal addresses and stamps, and the names of unsuspect-

ed countries linked to the circulation of such material, unfolding the “privileged position of the foreigner”. It is the “foreigner’s position” that enables new pasts to exist, and de-nationalises Indian cinema histories as we know them. It is these untold and hidden narratives that are worth connecting to the core archive in India. By reframing the diaspora not only through the identity of “new homes”, but also by appreciating the centrality of their journey, we can reimagine the value of these satellite archives to shift national sovereignty over Indian Film Heritage.

The art of linking histories requires a network and a team of archivists, historians and dedicated researchers that care to disrupt the orthodoxy of some societal and creative positions, to boldly enable these connections to exist, and to stay. The effort here is to build an effective rhizomatic and “pragmatic connection” among international institutions and film archives in India, to effectively break the hegemony of some historical narratives.

When we meet with fragments of what is

forgotten, abandoned and uncared for in the vaults of some museums, and also when we collect and revamp old efforts of South Asian creative ventures abroad, how can we make sense of these collections within the tight texture of Indian cinema, in India? Similarly, it is necessary to comment on, how can we access what is available coherently? In the absence of a centralised database and a connected network of film archives, how do we choose what to preserve, and what to study? And more importantly, what is the value of an archive? Is it only to preserve known histories, or can we extend it as a creative space for new meanings? And in the process of setting up an archive that seeks to establish a link with the main Indian film archive, how do we choose what to keep and what not to?

When other archives exist, also disconnected histories exist, and the value of the constellations of archives on Indian cinema across the world, revamps the importance of “the foreigner”, placing them in the forefront of Indian film heritage.

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