Popular cinema and public culture in Bombay

MADHUSREE DUTTA

POPULAR cinema in India is a strange social animal. Hailed as the primary popular culture in the country, it is also considered the *filmi* villain that has killed several pre-cinema cultural practices, most of which were community based. It is assumed that reproducibility has multiplied the outreach of cinema to such an extent that by the mid-20th century, it had become the only source of visual and narrative rhetoric in the complex cultural trajectory of the subcontinent.

Cinema has gradually replaced the sayings and adages in social communication. It has shaped the behavioural pattern for love, aspiration, rights, identity, ideology and so on. It creates visual references or templates for opulence and poverty, success and failure, rural and urban, and the good citizen and bad citizen. Sushila, a thirty two year old woman who has lived all her life in this city, in an interview in 2010 said, 'Last year I went to town (colloquially means the southern end of the city) …saw the sea, the train lines, buildings, roads …they are exactly like in cinema. …I felt like I have seen them all.'[1] In her case, the live experience of the space can only be negotiated in reference to the images seen in films.

This phenomenal width of its outreach and thus its ability to create, preserve and circulate rhetoric has made popular cinema essentially an affair of the public. I use the word public here in the sense of groups of peoples who together make an overarching entity, the cinema viewer in this case, and yet may not ever meet each other, possibly not even otherwise share a common language, livelihood practices, eating and clothing customs, social and cultural heritage and so on.

In short, popular cinema in India binds together a public under a common referral system and yet completely bypasses, at times even destroys, the tenet of the communal. This essay aims to look at the public-popular configuration around cinema viewing – how the public got consolidated around the popular and when they became alienated from each other. Moreover, the role that the constructed site of cinema halls play in making and dismantling this configuration. For the sake of convenience, this essay concentrates only on the city of Bombay as a case study.

1. Interview with Sushila, a domestic worker; excerpt from Women's Viewing Cinema documentation for Project Cinema City, 2010-11, www.project cinemacity.com

The first public exhibition of moving images in India is recorded as a special show of French pioneers, the Lumière Brothers, at Watson Hotel in Bombay followed by regular public shows at Novelty Theatre in 1896. But in effect another two decades had to pass before cinema could attract enough public attention and thus draw finance to become a viable commercial enterprise. In 1923 for the first time an entertainment tax of 12.5% was levied on commercial exhibition of moving images. Even at that point revenues from entertainment tax on Bombay and Poona horse races far exceeded returns from cinema.

By the third decade of the 20th century, cinema halls became an essential part of the urban development scheme. Till then films were mainly shown intermittently in the drama houses or in informal shacks that were predominantly constructed and run by the film producers/studio owners. Construction of buildings that would be exclusively dedicated to cinema exhibition began in the middle of the two world wars, around the 1930s. The world wars and the interim years between them brought heavy traffic of people, skills, goods, capital, ideologies and technology to the port cities. The churning of all these diverse elements resulted in various hybrid urban enterprises and expressions that would be later known as urban culture – cinema was primary among them.

Since then the construction of cinema halls, in a way, outlined the expansion of the Bombay city limits. Studying maps of decade-wise construction of new cinema halls helps to comprehend the urbanization pattern of the pastoral and coastal land of the seven islands that made Bombay. The colonial island city, the native city of bazaars, and the port city during the first and second decades of the 20th century existed only in the South of the peninsula and so did the cinema establishments. Through the following decades the manufacturing industry expanded the city to the middle of the land and then in the last quarter of the century the service industry and media industry expanded it towards the North. The construction pattern of the cinema halls clearly traces that territorial expansion.

Sometimes, the cinema halls even preempted official urban development. Samrat, a 1500-seater cinema hall in the erstwhile pastoral land of Goregaon West was built in the 1970s. The old neighbours testified that looking at the large plinth, they thought that the government was building a night shelter for buffalos from the numerous *tabelas* in the area! The construction of the cinema hall was their first experience of urban infrastructural intervention, well before other attributes of urbanization reached them. At other times the inception of the cinema hall marked the economic and social history of the locality.

In the industrial precinct of Girangaon (literary translated, villages of textile mills) cinema halls were built around the 1920s to keep the workforce, who came from the agrarian hinterland, from escaping back to the *gaon*. Sometimes these halls ran shows round the clock with show timings adjusted to the end of the shifts at the textile mills. Despite the severe real estate onslaught on the area that was ushered in following the decline of the textile industry in the 1980s, one such theatre still exists with the Marathi speaking working class as its primary patron. This hall was built as Laxmi Theatre in the premises of India United Textile Mills in 1923, but changed its name to Bharatmata Cinema during the Quit India movement in 1942 when the industrialist class pledged its support to the independence movement.[2]

The cinema halls located on Falkland Road are part of the designated entertainment district – Play House (hybridized by the locals as Pila House). The area was carved out by the British government from a Muslim graveyard in 1850 and earmarked as an entertainment district, modelled on the Play House area of London. The remains of its past can be spotted in the numerous *dargahs* and *mazars* strewn in the area. The public entertainment centres in the area have metamorphosed from

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tents showcasing variety entertainment programmes, circus and wrestling matches, to drama houses for Parsi theatre companies and cinema halls during the period from 1870s to 1930s. Almost a dozen of such establishments still run three shows a day.

Many of these more than a century old halls that currently screen old Hindi films or adult films for migrant wage workers and low-end sex workers from the adjacent red light area, house a shrine or two in their premises. It is quite a common sight to find an eager audience paying obeisance at the *dargah* moments before rushing to catch an x-rated film. The dargahs are not hidden, nor are the explicit ingredients of the films.

Moreover, the urban neighbourhoods could be categorized by the specificities of the cinema exhibition centres in the area till the 1980s. Sleazy cinema at Falkland Road halls at the edge of the Bazaar city and the red light area for the mixed race and floating public, English and Hollywood cinema at the art deco halls at the former European precinct for the elites of South Bombay, South Indian cinema at Matunga-Chembur for the service class in the public sector, Marathi cinema at the Dadar-Parel area near the industrial town, Gujarati cinema at the sea facing the northern suburb of Juhu-Vile Parle and so on.

Cinema halls were (still are to a lesser extent) the landmarks for the neighbourhoods and cultural signifiers for the local population. So the halls not only showed films that were conducive to their distinct clientele, but facilities were also developed to cultivate the primary clientele. Parsi cuisine would be available at Grant Road-Lamington Road halls, and continental at South Bombay. Crèche facilities were available at theatres frequented by the upper middle class women; separate *zenana* quarters were marked in the halls in poorer neighbourhoods. Female patrons were specially cultivated through exclusive zenana shows in the afternoon. Lead actresses were made to attend the zenana shows and interact with the audience in order to build patron loyalty.[3]

The lanes outside the neighbourhood halls would be strewn with kiosks and carts selling cinema memorabilia (booklet of songs, audio cassette of songs and dialogue tracks, posters of matinee idols), fashion accessories, photo studios with cut-outs of the stars, tea and street food stalls. A substantial volume of livelihood would be generated through these ancillary

Advertisement for the opening of Metro courtesy Majlis archive.

enterprises along with the working population in the cinema halls – ushers, guards, projectionists, electricians, box office men, banner painters, announcers, gardeners etc. The area would be regularly visited by the locals even when they were not going to watch a film.

But despite the distinct local/neighbourhood flavour of the cinema halls, people would also travel the length and breadth of the city to avail the special experience of watching a particular film in a particular ambience. The Liberty cinema, opened in 1949, was the first 'A' grade establishment with air conditioning and push back seats to exclusively show Hindi cinema. People travelled across the city to watch its inaugural film *Andaz* (dir. Mehboob Khan, 1949). The film that centred on the lives of the urban super rich seemed to be appropriate to watch in the luxury of the newly constructed Liberty Cinema. It ran in Liberty for 28 weeks. *Sholay* (dir. Ramesh Sippy, 1975) was first released in 24 theatres across Bombay, yet people rushed to watch it at Minerva that screened the 70mm print. The queue for advanced tickets reached a bus stop three kilometres away from Minerva, rechristening it as Sholay Stop.

Mughal-e-Azam (dir. K. Asif, 1960) was premiered at Maratha Mandir. The print of the film was carried to the theatre on an elephant and a large crowd gathered to watch the spectacle. In later weeks the façade of the theatre was adorned like a palace and the elephants were kept tied at the entrance to create a *shahi* ambience. It ensured a continuous flow of audience for months to come. Hence, while the cinema halls reflected the neighbourhoods' specific cultures, they also

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facilitated movement of people across the city.

Thus the popularity of cinema was framed within a public mould as the near euphoric response to films was performed, collated and displayed at a public place – the cinema hall. The collective aspect of viewing films in a public hall in an era of single screen theatres made the reception end of cinema a public affair. A heterogeneous public gathered for a homogenous experience – viewing of cinema.

'I came to Bombay during the period of Emergency, in 1975. I got married and within a week I was in Bombay. When you get into a local train nobody recognises you... you stand at a *paan beedi* shop nobody recognises you; you can enjoy your freedom. For me Bombay is liberation from a lot of do's and don'ts and from unwanted ties. It is a city that lets you be. I suppose films in some way give you that platform of shared activity... Sometimes I saw three films in a day at Amber Oscar Minor, Gaiety Galaxy Gemini. One show after another and yet another… those were not the days of multiplexes, but I created my own multiplex. I was 23 when I came here and since then it has been one roller-coaster ride,'[4] said Farukkh Waris, a

self-confessed film buff who is a descendent of a royal family in Lucknow.

The cinema hall along with the railways brought in the first homogenized spatial experience across class, caste and gender in modern India. Though there were differently priced tickets and a hierarchy of seats, the consumption of the film happened in the same space and at the same time for a diverse people – something that I would like to argue, is an essential aspect of public culture. Waris' memoirs of her journey from the secluded life of an aristocrat in Lucknow to a member of the public in Bombay is complimented by Aqila's sense of longing for a more public life. As of 2010, Aqila lives in Mumbra, a distant suburb of Bombay.

'I always tell my friends who are from Bombay that they enjoy such a great life. They can watch films whenever they feel like or just go to the sea front. I think Bombay life is different from our life here and it is much better. Bombay is so big, people from different places go there and so it is easy to have a wide circle of friends. But in distant suburbs like Mumbra or Ambarnath there is no option. What-

ever small gateways of entertainment we have in our life keeps shrinking. If we go to a theatre close to our house… everyone knows everyone here, and so you will be reported or be taunted. There is no escape. But once you go to Bombay no one has a clue. Everybody is just part of the public.'[5]

Ironically, though, the state played a role in making Indian cinema such a volatile public culture. The trend of travelling across the city to catch a particular film or experience a particular theatre ambience is unique to Indian conditions, in contrast to other cinema cities. Despite the phenomenal volume of cinema productions, the number of exhibition centres even in 2007-08 for per one million people in India was only 12, whereas in China it was 31, Japan 25, UK 62 and in the USA 132 (Unesco Institute for Statistics – UIS Report, 2013). There were only 12000 theatres spread across the country, with Greater Bombay accounting for 110 screens catering to 18 million people in 2000.

Though by independence, Indian cinema, as a combination of Hindi, Tamil, Telegu, Marathi, Bengali and

2. For more on the timeline and tales around the theatres, see Paroma Sadhana, 'Bombay Movie Theatres: Expanding City Expanded Cinema, in Madhusree Dutta, Kaushik Bhaumik and Rohan Shivkumar (eds.), *Project Cinema City*. Tulika Books, Delhi, 2013.

3. *dates.sites*: *Bombay/Mumbai* by Madhusree Dutta. Designed by Shilpa Gupta and Madhusree Dutta. Tulika Books, Delhi, 2012.

4. Interview with Farrukh Waris, Principal, Burhani College of Arts and Commerce, Mumbai; excerpt from Women's Viewing Cinema documentation for Project Cinema City, 2010-11 www.project cinemacity.com

5. Interview with Aqila, member of a Muslim women's group, Awaz e Nishwan; excerpt from Women's Viewing Cinema documentation for Project Cinema City, 2010-11 www.project cinemacity.com

Migrant Wage Workers in a Shanty Cinema by Sameer Tawde.

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other language films, was already crowned as the pivotal popular culture of the 20th century, state policies continued to view this phenomenon with suspicion. The state control over cinema was primarily concerned with public exhibition and thus control was exercised through restrictions on the cinema halls – sometimes on the pretext of public health, at other times by invoking public morality, or in the guise of law and order.

It is important to note here that the censorship laws of both the colonial government and the national government bestow the power to stop the screening of any film on the police and other state agencies, notwithstanding its censorship status, as it may cause disturbance to public life. Hence, control is exercised on the exhibition of a film and not on its production. As long as the general public does not see it, the state has no objection to any film being made. Hence, the government never had a policy of encouraging the construction of cinema halls.

In 1950, the newly independent state imposed a freeze on new construction of cinema halls in response to a crisis in cement and other building materials. The restriction on construction was meant to cover all non-essential buildings, and cinema halls came under that category. While the number of films produced rose dramatically from profits made in the war, the lack of exhibition spaces created a forced scarcity. The freeze on new cinema halls was revoked only a decade later. Curiously this scarcity of exhibition infrastructure only increased the desirability of cinema for the Indian urban public. People waited longingly for a new release and endured any hardship to see the film – travelling long distances, standing in serpentine queues, braving familial restrictions, and buying tickets at a hugely inflated price, and then relived the experience through ancillary portals – radio programmes, audio reproductions, performances by duplicate artists and so on.

Another way of controlling cinema exhibition was through the exorbitant entertainment tax levied on tickets by the state government, and the sales tax on film prints by the central government. This was calculated at 4% of the cost of the film. As a result, many ordinary theatres could not afford to screen the big budget films. Thus, in effect, certain established theatres enjoyed a monopoly over the new and big budget films. Films that became block busters then ran in a theatre for several weeks. The exhibitors marketed them as 'silver jubilee' and 'golden jubilee', giving them an iconic status. This in turn resulted in repeat viewing, to the extent that people often boasted of watching a blockbuster 20-odd times at a single theatre. This iconicity further enhanced the status of cinema in public life and became part of urban lore.

This public character of popular cinema began to fade out from the late 1980s. As the manufacturing industry in the urban areas declined, the class composition of the city too began to change. In Greater Bombay, employment in manufacturing industry fell from 36% in 1981 to 28.5% in 1991, and employment in trade and services industry increased from 52% to 64% in the same period (census report 1991). The expansion of service industry and financial corporations in the city increased the consumption capacity of the middle class. At the same time the demise of the organized sector began to usher in unorganized migrant labour with an uncertain financial capacity. Simply put, the upper end of the middle class turned more solvent and the lower end of the class structure became poorer. So it became highly incongruous to expect that the two sectors could be entertained in the same place at the same time.

This phase of urban development coincided with some other historical turns – the emergence of video followed by digital technology which made cinema accessible to individuals in their domestic spaces. Second, following economic liberalization, the value of land in Bombay skyrocketed. All these parallel developments occurred in the last decade of the previous century and the beginning of the 21st century. The cumulative effect of this was a segregation of the act of viewing cinema by the different classes, resulting in the closure of single screen halls.

The multiplex era was initiated in 1997 when Samrat Cinema at Goregaon (mentioned earlier in the context of a night shelter for buffalos), was upgraded to Cinemax with two screens with its seating capacity reduced from 1500 at the single screen to 698 for both screens together. This was followed by a series of multiplex franchises – Cine Star, Cine Magic and Cine Planet – taking over the single screen cinemas in the western suburb of the city. This was welcomed by the film industry as a fresh lease of market investment in the ailing sector of cinema exhibition. In 1997-99 in only the western suburb, the seating capacity across four single screen halls reduced from 4500 to 2100 in the process of being converted into multiple screen theatres.

On the other hand, in 1992 the government liberalized the broadcast industry and foreign private channels such as BBC, Star TV, CNN, and domestic channels like Zee TV and Sun TV began satellite telecast. In 1993, Star TV acquired 49.9% shares in the domestic Hindi Zee TV network.[6] Besides, pirated VHS cassettes brought cinema closer to home. The first casualty of all these develop-

ments was women's access to public entertainment. Domestication of entertainment technology and avenues resulted in the closing down of the erstwhile popular convention of zenana shows in cinema halls. 'Now we have got everything at home... we watch whatever comes on TV, chew our food and sit at home. That is all we do now. There is nothing left to do now... Earlier I got to see pictures in nearby theatres – Kalpana Talkies, Sheetal Talkies, Bharat Talkies. I went to each and all of them. We used to go with friends, only we girls went in a gang. We used to carry the brooms on our heads and roam around the gullies. We sold brooms and with the extra profit we used to see pictures… you can't do such things now,' said 60 years old Pochutai.[7]

In the last one and a half decades the profit margins have increased manifold but the public nature of cinema viewing got severely curtailed. It has turned into a familial or peer activity. In later years, facilities such as downloadable cinema entered the computer screen and then the cell phone screen. As against this kind of personalised consumption of cinema, the public outlets metamorphosed in its next avatar. As more and more multiplexes take over the single screen cinemas and open new franchises, the audience profile goes through a fundamental alteration.

The multiplexes, mostly located inside the shopping malls, did not retain the specific characteristics of the earlier cinema halls. Hence, no patron loyalty developed on grounds of either being the pride of the neighbourhood or for having any special ambience. The landmarks of Bahar, Lotus,

6. Ibid., fn. 4.

7. Interview with Pochutai, former broom maker; excerpt from Women's Viewing Cinema documentation for Project Cinema City, 2010-11 www.project cinemacity.com

Darpan had to give way to the generic title and standardized architecture of the PVR, Fame, Cinemax outlets.

Now within the sprawling, brightly lit malls, the only gated zones are the cinema spaces. While the mall accommodates the hangers-on, the window shoppers and the urban escapists, the cinema spaces restrict entry only to ticket holders. The sensory experiences of the escalator, the shop windows, the gaming zone, and the food mall have proved to be more cinematic than the darker space of cinema exhibition, generally tucked away in the deepest corner of the highest floor. With so many screens and many more shows at each screen, the choice for the multiplex audience has increased dramatically. Yet, with an average occupancy of 80 per screening, the multiplexes have become sites for special facility and not sites of public culture with heterogeneous participation.

In Maharashtra, the revenue from the entertainment tax (ET) levied on cinema exhibition is 45% of the ticket price. The tax has been uniformly applied on tickets of all denomination, and no control over the price of the ticket is exercised. Moreover, in order to encourage investment in the entertainment sector, the Maharashtra government offers total tax exemption for the first three years, then a concession for the next four years for multiplexes with four or more screens and total seating capacity above 1200. Hence, while a single screen hall with tickets priced at Rs 20 would pay Rs 9 as ET, a multiplex with tickets priced at Rs 250 would pay nothing for the first three years, Rs 66.25 for the next two years, Rs 99.38 for another two years and only after that Rs 112.5 per ticket. In 2013, the tax slab was amended to consider the rates of tickets. This move was initiated to curb the random and unregulated escalation of

ticket prices that multiplexes charge before the release of big films.

In the new tax slab, tickets priced Rs 251-350 would pay 49.5% as ET, for tickets priced Rs 351-500 the tax is 51.75%, and for tickets priced above Rs 500 the tax levied is 54%. But this still does not protect the single screen halls as their ticket prices are never more than Rs 100. This tax structure too has become one of the prime reasons for single screen halls to shut down since 2000. As discussed earlier many of them got converted into multiplexes. But still there are some that completely changed land use and turned into an industrial complex or departmental store or residential building. Most cases of complete change of land use are in the area from the southern end up to Mahim, administratively called the Mumbai City District.

As per the Census report of 1981, the population of suburban district had surpassed the population of the city district. The newer entrants to the city crowd in the developing and expanding suburbs, making its demography swell up while the population of the older city in the south stagnates. Hence, it can be deduced that there has been a greater reduction in the cinema going public in the city district than in the suburban district and that has prompted the single screen halls there to go in for a complete change of land use. Between 1997 and 2011, 21% of single screen halls in the suburbs have converted either into multiplexes or into a mall with a multiplex in it; 34% of halls have simply shut down and are lying vacant, expecting more wild speculation on its real estate; and 45% are still functioning.

With the homogenization of the cinema exhibition centres, the specialized screenings of regional language cinema came to an end by the early years of the 21st century. Nobody paid

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any attention, as by then regional films could be seen on DVD or through television channels. But there is yet another side to the story, another kind of privatization of the public. The number of migrant workers from other language belts of the country continued to scale upwards. The workers are generally brought to the city by contractors to work on daily wages within an irregular work flow. Most of them live in language- and clan-based clusters across the suburban district which is where the cheap entertainment shops that show films in their native languages pop up – Tamil cinema at Dharavi, Telugu cinema at Orlem, Bhojpuri at Nalasopara, Punjabi at Sion Koliwada. Contrary to popular belief, this floating population does not subscribe to the overarching popularity of Hindi films. Their near exile existence makes them a diehard audience for flicks made in their native languages.

These shanty cinemas function with rudimentary infrastructure, sometimes using cheap video projectors, and often manage with a mere TV set. These makeshift structures are inserted within the unassuming rows of lottery ticket kiosks, tobacco shops, tender coconut stalls, tea vendor's carts, mobile phone repairers, and so on. For the rest of the public in the city, these camouflaged cinema exhibition centres remain hidden, if not completely invisible. Often they are demolished by the municipality only to mushroom at another location a few metres away.

The fluidity of these shanty cinemas corresponds with the transient status of their patrons. Availability of work for them depends on various external factors: weather, festive season, supply of raw material, transportation facility, and so on. So working days are punctuated with days of unemployment. Most often their accommodation arrangement only provides

them rights over a mat to sleep on for eight hours. The tenements are rented out in multiple shifts. Hence, on the days without work, the workers hang around the shanty cinemas until it is time for them to reassert their claim on the mats. The cinema establishments function as an entertainment house, temporary shelter, waiting zone to get work, and also as a community centre for people speaking the same language.

It is grey all the way – the workers are unorganized and outsiders, and thus their livelihood is not regulated; their accommodation is informal and temporary and thus they are not entitled for residents' rights; and their mode of entertainment is unaccredited and thus remains hidden. A little shift of balance in this precarious existence may push the wage workers and their entertainment shops from unauthorized to illegal and then may even, at a point of some heightened political manoeuvring, get termed as a site of criminality.

When cinema exhibition was a stand alone and homogenized phenomenon at the time of celluloid and large theatres, its audience profile at any given point was heterogeneous and composite. The site of cinema consumption, quite like the composition of the urban public, was a junction where identities made of different economic and cultural backgrounds could intersect. Currently cinema viewing, it is claimed, has been democratized, with diverse practices taking place in multiple sites across time. Yet, the audience profile at a given time and space is increasingly narrowing to a peer group defined by class congeniality or familial proximity or language and clan affinity. The cinema still reigns over the chart of popular culture, but with the fragmentation of its sites of consumption, it is slowly disengaging from the public domain.

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