

cinema

Crumbling history

Indians create exquisitely. Use carelessly. Preserve preposterously. For decades, India's best known icon, Taj Mahal, was vandalised by visitors and polluted by oil refineries, till the magnificent marble yellowed. Hundreds of lesser known archaeological wonders across the length and breadth of the country lie in a state of pathetic dereliction.

The state of Indian cinema is no different. The nation, which boasts of being the world's largest film producer with close to 1,300 pictures a year, is unconcerned about conservation, even of the most priceless among them.

The result, a huge chunk of India's cinematic heritage has been lost and is being lost every day.

Only 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 much more recent works have also disappeared.

"All big producers think that the prints are being maintained scientifically, but they're not," says Vijay Jadhav, Director of the National Film Archive of India at Pune.

Worse, these producers are possessive, and sadly in a destructive sort of way.

I remember the hullabaloo over the late Ismail Merchant's efforts to save some of Satyajit Ray's works. Ray is to cinema what the Taj is to archaeology, and yet much like Shahjahan's monument in marble, the master's innumerable movies would have degenerated beyond restoration had not Merchant helped salvage a couple of these cinematic treasures.

Yet, people in positions of power, men who knew what is what, called Merchant a thief when he got hold of the prints. But Ray would have been happy.

In 2005 (the year Merchant died from a ruptured ulcer in London), Ray's restored *Pather Panchali* was screened at Cannes to mark the masterpiece's 50th anniversary. It was digitally rebuilt and looked even better than what it had in the 1950s.

This year, Cannes showed two restored Indian classics, Ritwick Ghatak's *Titash Ekti Nodir Naam* and Mrinal Sen's *Khandar*. The first was redone by Martin Scorsese's World Cinema Foundation, established in 1990.

There are other masters, such as the late Aravindan and John Abraham, Girish Kasaravalli, Adoor

More should be done to preserve and archive India's celluloid heritage, writes **Gautaman Bhaskaran**



* Madhubala as the dancing girl Anarkali who captivates Prince Salim in K Asif's *Mughal-e-Azam*. Somehow the charm of the 1961 black and white original cannot be matched by its 2004 digitally colorised version (right). Below: Zubeida Begum in a still from India's first talkie *Alam Ara*, directed by Ardeshir Irani in 1931. There are no copies of the film to be found in any archive.

Gopalakrishnan, Shyam Benegal and the like whose creations deserve more attention.

Most of their works are not even available in formats like VCD and DVD. Only four or five of Kasaravalli's movies are available on disks. Only two of Adoor's. None at all of Aravindan's or Abraham's, if I am right.

The original negatives of these are either gone or in a terrible state. Yes, their prints are "preserved" at the Film Archive. But during my several visits there a couple of years ago for my research into Adoor's cinema, I found to my horror that movies were in various stages of disintegration. The prints of many Adoor's films were so bad that I found it difficult to follow the dialogues or music. Images were blurred.

However, Jadhav adds that the Archive now has the technical expertise to store negatives and prints in ideal conditions. This means that they can last a hundred years!

I am now told that two Indian government organisations with impressive catalogues, the Archive and the National Film Development Corporation in Mumbai, are trying to restore India's cinematic legacy.

The Archive has partnered with Reliance MediaWorks to restore 1,000 movies, while the Corporation is working with three

post-production companies — Pixion, Avitel and Prasad — to restore its library of 246 films. These were produced by the Corporation after 1975.

One of the first films to be restored by Reliance MediaWorks is the 1983 *Khandar*. The Corporation has so far reconditioned 15 titles — including Ray's *Ghare Baire* (1984), Ketan Mehta's *Mirch Masala* (1985) and Shyam Benegal's *Mammo* (1994) — and plans to complete another 60 over the coming year.

Sometimes, it makes greater sense to conserve the original negative/print rather than try rebuilding it after it has decayed.

Movie director A K Bir raises a valid point here: would 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?

When I saw *Khandar* at Cannes in May, it looked too pretty for my comfort.

I felt the same when I watched the restored version of *Mughal-e-Azam*, first released in 1961. Now in colour, it looked too glitzy for me.

Director K Asif started the movie project rolling in 1944 with Sapru, Chandramohan and Nargis. But financier Shiraz Ali's migration to Pakistan in 1947 put an end to Asif's dream. Chandramohan's death in 1949 seemed like a final blow.

But Asif was not one to say die. In 1951, he relaunched the film with Prithviraj Kapoor (as Akbar), Dilip Kumar (Salim) and Madhubala (Anarkali), and took nine years to get it into the theatres.

It was entirely in black and white. But as Asif was about to finish shooting, Technicolor came to India, and the helmer pictured the song, *Pyar kiya to darna kya* in the finest of hues.

The movie cost a whopping Rs15mn then, and Asif had to contend with an off-screen romance and split as well.



Dilip and Madhubala's love story peaked and then soured in 1957 — and Akbar was not the cause. However, the couple smiled before the camera, and set the screen on fire.

Interestingly, while history texts talk of Akbar and Salim, there is no mention of Anarkali. There is no authentic record of her life. Did she exist at all?

At Lahore (Anarkali was a slave girl from the city), a tomb lies on grounds of the Punjab Civil Secretariat (which now houses the Punjab Records Office), and folklore says she is interred there.

Her story of love and how she was buried alive (though in *Mughal-e-Azam*, she is allowed to escape through a tunnel, and is greeted by Akbar as she emerges from it) is cherished even today, and has been adapted into art, literature and cinema.

Undoubtedly, *Mughal-e-Azam* converted Anarkali from a mere myth to make-believe. Yet, her new gloss did take away something from the black-and-white purity of yore. Much in the same way, movies lose a bit of authenticity when a little sheen is added.

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