

Article

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**Two or Three Things I Know About FTII**

When a friend asked me to write an article about FTII, without any restriction of what it was to be about, frankly I was scared. Why? I have just edited a book on FTII, on the occasion of its sixtieth birthday, and now what more could I say? So, this article is an exploration, a series of notes. Of course, what follows are my views, and as they say in English ‘Nothing Official About It’.

**History:**

In 1951, the Patil Committee on the state of the film Industry in India had recommended the setting up of a film institute to train young people who would help to raise the standard of cinema in India. India then was a young country, with dreams in its eyes about creating a new future for itself. But not much happened to this idea, as at that time films didn't enjoy the ‘respectability’ of being an art form, hence were considered ‘unworthy’ of deserving a training institute. Indeed, All India Radio did not play film songs at all until 1956, and later only did so for a limited time each day, despite the enormous popularity of film songs in all languages. Cinema was already an ‘industry’, earning huge revenues to

the State and central governments, but the country had other priorities.

What changed between 1951 and 1960, when FTII was finally set up?

**Satyajit Ray:**

Satyajit Ray in the late 1950's demonstrated, to both India and the rest of the world, the virtues of cinema as an art form while telling uniquely Indian stories. It's my belief that the Government of India had him in mind when they decided to set up a film institute, they thought why not train more young filmmakers who could emulate Satyajit Ray and transform Indian Cinema. You could add the coming of Smt. Indira Gandhi as the Minister of Information &

Broadcasting to this, an event that surely provided the actual impetus to the setting up a film institute.

But the fact remained that at the time when the premises of the erstwhile Prabhat Studios were taken over and converted into the 'Film Institute of India', almost everyone opposed the idea, the cinema industry, especially in Mumbai, didn't want it as they had no control over this institute; Satyajit Ray and the talented people in Kolkata believed that filmmaking could not be taught.

Individuals from within the film industry and the Central Government's Films Division, were deputed/ hired to work at the FTII. Gajanan Jagirdar became the first Principal.

The Film Institute of India (now FTII) officially took off.

### **The Role Model:**

The question being asked all around was: how was FTII going to teach filmmaking?

The role models then were the Soviet style government run film schools, after all the first ever film school had been set up in Moscow, USSR. The American models of film schools were there, but learning there was considered much too expensive for an average Indian to afford in 1960, after all we were still a very 'poor' country economically.

Being a Soviet, 'socialist' influenced country then, for FTII India opted for the model of a Central Government run film school. But even here there were unresolved problems. India already made films in at least ten languages. Was FTII going to cater to all of them or dedicate itself to Hindi, the language of the largest cinema industry in India? Even today, no one has answers to these issues, neither at FTII nor in the Central Government that funds them. We kind of stumble along, finding answers as issues come up but nothing really in terms of a 'vision' kind of thing.

Later, a few states (Tamil Nadu, Kerala) started their own film schools, but none really catered to their own regions and languages only. This meant that FTII and other Indian film schools were always going to lack the cultural continuities of a Lodz (Poland) or Prague (Czech) film school. But this being India, a democracy, it wasn't as if FTII was going to encourage filmmaking in only one

language like the Soviets and the Moscow Film School.

What this did mean was that FTII was always going to be at a certain distance from the richness and diversity of Indian culture and art forms, as the arts always belong to a culture and language and in India there are far too many of both, and to which one could you link up FTII?

Those are tough issues to resolve even today, in a 'national' institution!

You can see that FTII was always destined for a certain amount of 'muddled' cultural thinking...

But as always, something was better than nothing, a film school was better than having none at all.

### **Film Appreciation:**

A man called Satish Bahadur in the 1960s began teaching FTII students how to 'appreciate' films. This was not film criticism, this was simply deconstructing films and understanding the underlying 'structure' of the individual film. So, you studied 'classic films' and learnt how they had been put together, how they conveyed their meaning.

Simultaneously, FTII began to screen 'foreign' films from across the globe for its students. Yes, these were almost always untouched by the infamous Indian Censor Board. These screenings started as once or twice a week initially, but soon progressed to two screenings every day, after class hours.

Looking back, it is the subject of 'Film Appreciation' and the screenings of international films that have over the years helped to broaden the horizon of each FTII students' mind and vision. This became one of the 'cores' of education at FTII, what gave FTII alumni an edge in the 'real' world.

### **The Big Change:**

'The Film Institute' (FTII's original name) actually took off faster than most people imagined. Acting students became 'stars' across India. Camera, sound and editing technicians started getting recognition for their skills and the directors began the Indian New Wave of the late 1960's and early 1970's.

In 1973, the playwright and filmmaker Girish Karnad was appointed as the Director of FTII (yes by then it was FTII). He initiated a process of revising the existing syllabi of all that was taught at FTII. This led to the formation of what came to be known as the 'Integrated Course', where every student learnt every aspect of filmmaking and worked in different capacities on student films, in the 'Common' part of the Course. After this process they went on study the specialization of their choice. Despite all the changes over the years, this 'Integrated Course' is the pattern of education that FTII and indeed most filmmaking teaching institutions in India still follow.

Of course, there were problems. The Acting Course almost stopped and FTII became 'less famous' than what it had been earlier as a direct consequence. Students who studied with this course loved it and defended it with strikes against anyone opposing the Integrated Course. That laid the foundation of FTII's reputation as a place of strikes and unrest.

But this 'Integrated Course' became another 'core' of the learning imparted by FTII: every student coming out of FTII knew about every aspect of filmmaking, and did develop a 'respect' for all the crafts that come together in filmmaking.

That's a thread that holds all of us from FTII together till today and will continue to do so in the future.

### **The Future:**

At a time when every mobile phone records video, everyone can post videos to YouTube/Facebook/ etc. for the world to see, what is the role of a 'classic'

film school like FTII? What does the future hold for FTII?

Let us look at some facts, FTII alumni today enjoy almost full employment, without FTII having any 'internship program', or 'industry interface' or indeed even a 'placement cell', all fashionable terms in any contemporary higher education campus. I am optimistic that this situation will continue to be like this in the foreseeable future.

Why?

Because just as more and more media are consumed by human beings, the appreciation of the art, craft and technology of moving images with sounds has increased exponentially. This means the extra filmmaking skills that an FTII alumni brings to the craft of filmmaking is appreciated even more today than earlier.

Yes, the student joining FTII today is far more 'cinema literate' and 'craft savvy', having experienced and created audio-visual moving images in various forms already. But the students at FTII are those that wish to learn more, those who want to go beyond creating social media videos on their phones and learn the art, craft and technology of filmmaking.

And this will continue to be so for a long time to come.

Yes, there will be more strikes, yes new 'stars' will emerge, yes Pune neighbours will continue to complain about 'noisy parties' at FTII hostels, yes students shall continue debating about the future of FTII with senior filmmakers and civil servants, but FTII shall live on.

I am dreaming, perhaps, but it's a dream that I don't want to see ending.