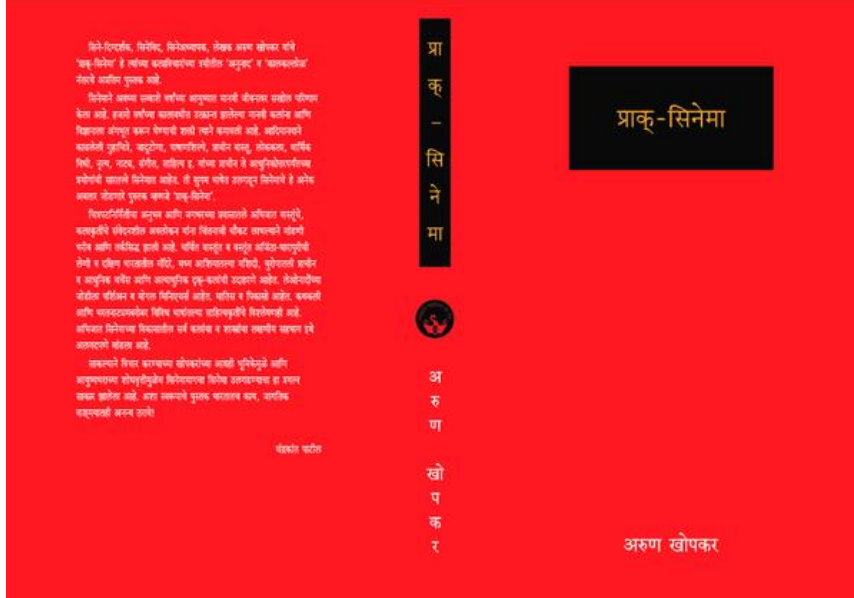


Book Review

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Prak-Cinema: A Revelation!



बहूनि मे व्यतीतानि जन्मानि तव चार्जुना
तान्यहं वेद सर्वाणि न त्वं वेत्थ परंतपः॥

I had many lives (births) in the past and you too. I know them all, but you do not. – Thus said Krishna to Arjun in *Bhagawadgeeta*

I had a similar experience translating Arun Khopkar’s latest Marathi book, *Prak-Cinema*, in Hindi. I was in the role of Arjun, and he was Krishna. He was revealing the same truth about cinema.

Where was cinema before it was born? Was it in various scientific experiments that explored the principles like persistence of vision and so on and on? In the minds of genius scientists-artists?

Where were we before we were born? The philosophical question has an answer in science, which says, ‘in the DNA of our ancestors’. Indian philosophy tells us, ‘Atma,

the soul is immortal, it just manifests itself emerging out of Brahman that is Paramatma and then immerses itself and becomes one with the Brahman. Thus, it is always there. It is *Ajanma, Amartya*- it neither has birth nor death. ’

Prak-Itihas, that is, Pre-history, is the history before the known history. History is documented; pre-history is not, but it does exist. Every moment has a pre-moment because Time has neither a beginning nor an ending. Likewise, we do have *Prak-Cinema*, which is pre-Cinema. *Prak-Cinema* existed even before 1895. Arun Khopkar, the writer-

filmmaker-teacher of Cinema, and, above all, a thinker on cinema, maintains, explores and proves that all the elements of cinema were prevalent in all the arts that were flourishing before the cinema in its manifest form was born.

A connoisseur of various arts and art forms, he explores those elements in painting, carving, sculpture, architecture, dance, music, and literature. While doing so, he looks for them in the festivities, religious events and rituals, myths and superstitions, science and crafts, magicians' performances and black magic, in the expressions of human beings on every stage of human civilisation.

Likewise, he says that Cinema is as if roaming in space till it gets made, produced and projected. It is just a thought in the maker's mind, like a metal in liquid form waiting to be poured into a mould. This cinema can also be called Pre-Cinema.

He maintains that though cinema was born in Paris in 1895, Pre-Cinema was born even before that historical moment, along with the carvings and paintings by the cavemen. It was in the various concepts of magic and rituals, ritualistic dances and music that the prehistoric tribes performed. It was in their myths, songs, musical instruments, and rhythms. It was in the experience of shapes and colours and their impacts on human psychology.

In the process, he takes the reader through the globe, the ages and the stages of civilisation.

Visual is one of the main elements of cinema. Hence, he begins to excavate the pre-cinema in the art of painting and explores how and why it took different forms, which elements were inherited by cinema, and how

and when they were adapted to create cinema. Every style of painting has emerged at a certain stage of history and is connected to a certain narrative style and a certain lifestyle. So, he takes into consideration the backgrounds and the motives of all these styles – on the one hand, the European and American caveman's violent paintings of their hunting expeditions and on the other, the peaceful Ajanta paintings in India with especially the Buddhist influence, *Warli* style of Maharashtra's *Warli* tribals, Realism in the European oil paintings and so on. He analyses the Last Supper by Leonardo da Vinci in a very vivid manner while discussing the emergence of perspective. He finds, after the Ajanta painting, no primary style was found in India till the *Mughal* miniature painting style, originally from Central Asia, made its way to *Mughal* India and flourished in *Akbar's* regime, becoming very Indian in nature with the depiction of *Ramayan*, *Mahabharat*, *Krishna's* life, *Panchtantra* and various Sanskrit scriptures and epics. Along with it changed the points of view of the painters, the styles of compositions and the use of colours.

Arun Khopkar elaborates on Emperor *Akbar's* tremendous contribution to the world of art and culture that had a lasting impact on the lifestyle of most of North India. He changed the face of not only the painting but that of Indian sculpture, architecture, costume, music, documentation of history and literature, just like a master film director brings out drastic changes in the language of cinema right from the theme and narrative style to every aspect of film making. That is what Khopkar maintains and calls *Akbar the 'Complete Director'* of the Indian lifestyle.

Further, he states that when Prak-Cinema gets inspiration from a certain art or artwork, it does not adopt the whole art or the work of art as it is but picks up a certain element from it. Khopkar tries to explore these elements of various arts, such as colour, light, perspective, focus, montage effect, devices of fade-out fade, etc., which were adopted and adapted by cinema. For this, he had to travel through various civilisations, cultures, arts, ages and regions.

Often, an indication of one element takes one beyond itself and spreads all through the global experience. This is often witnessed in Religious art, sometimes taking the form of a symbol like a *Shiv-Ling* as a sculpture or as a style of architecture in the form of a temple. So Arun Khopkar describes the concept of *Darshan* in three chapters – viz. *Cinemascope Close-Up*, *Vishwaroop Darpan* and *Sanchari-Pravahi*.

In *Cinemascope Close-Up*, Khopkar guides us through the *Gharapuri* caves near Mumbai opening as if a full-length film of *Shiva*'s life and then draws our attention to the climax in the form of the *Trimurti*- the three faces of *Shiva* - the biggest Close-up of the world.

In the second essay, he explains how two different worlds are established by utilising the element of gravity in *the Kathakali* dance. *Sanchari* and *Pravahi* are documentaries which he made on *Leela Samson* and *Alarmel Valli*, the two Bharatnatyam dancers of two different Bharatnatyam styles, and he describes the making of these films through which he continues his exploration of the elements of pre-cinema in dance forms. His experience of pre-cinema in the architecture of temples in

South India forms the base of his experience as a maker of these two films. He also cites the example of famous *Bharatnatyam* exponent *Balsaraswati* and her performance, quoting the excellent step-by-step description she presented in her speech on the relationship between temple architecture and *Bharatnatyam*.

Space, light, music, and rhythm are the elements active in this experience described in the three chapters. Khopkar further explains to the reader how these elements are transformed into the medium of cinema.

The chapter *Aakaranubhav* deals with the Shape – another element of pre-cinema, the experience of which is wordless. In cinema, the narration of space is critical. With its expanding or shrinking and with the lighting used for it, the emotional setting of the spectator keeps changing. To analyse the experience of *Aakar* or shape, he picks up the circular shape, the most crucial shape found in Nature, which he hopes would suggest to the reader-spectator the way the other space narratives in cinema work.

The last chapter is *Sahitya* – that is literature. Literature is the art connected to cinema more closely than any other art. Literature has inspired cinema in a great way. Arun Khopkar is known for his style in the field of Marathi literature. He does not write fiction, but his writing, is highly learned and hugely based on experience, his choice of expressions – delicate as a multi-colored dew drop on a petal of a rose, as also energetic and forceful as an axe when needed is unique and a subject of envy as far as the world of Marathi writers is concerned. Besides, it is very picturesque, so much so that every age, every place, every person, and every incident

that he describes comes alive in front of the reader's eyes. I travelled through the caves, the palaces, the temples, the churches and the mosques, and various museums all over the world and all through the ages; I attended the dance performances and was present at the location of Mani Kaul's films *Ashadh Ka Ek din* and *Uski Roti* with him while I was translating the book. I became a witness to his making of *Sanchari and Pravahi*. I accompanied him all through the textile mills when he was collecting more than 400 sounds of the various machines for his film on Marathi poet Narayan Surve. Along with all his unit members of the film *Rasik-Priya*, I too was scared to death when in the darkness of Gharapuri caves, he said, 'Full lights', and suddenly a host of bats took flight, reminding us of Hitchcock's *Birds*. That is a bonus for a translator! Above all, the experience of the book endowed me with a new perception and perspective of so many classic films of the world.

I found myself in a really enviable position as a translator when Arun Khopkar chose me and assigned me the Hindi translation of this amazing book. After reading the book, the first thing I took up was to 'explore' the book and try to go as deep as I could into it. For two months, I watched all the movies repeatedly, looking for the references and applications described in the book. Even though I had watched some of the films earlier, it was essential to watch them afresh, and the exercise did keep on giving me newer insights as far as those films were concerned and what an experience of learning cinema was! I also watched the dance

performances, listened to the music concerts, and searched for the paintings and pictures of architecture, which he had discussed in the book. I confess I have read only some of the verses of Dynaneshwari, the greatest creation of Marathi literature. But going through the verses cited by Arun Khopkar along with his analysis, interpretations, and describing their cinematic nature, I said to him, 'Now I feel the urge to read and learn the full *Dynaneshwari*.'

It was a challenging task to translate *Prak-Cinema* into Hindi, but it was a delightful challenge! I love the art of translating. I loved it more while I was translating *Prak-Cinema*. In Nov 2022, when I started reading Arun Khopkar's books (some of which I had already read but now I wanted to experience them chronologically, I found that *Prak-Cinema* is the culmination of all his thinking and contemplations all through his writing years, right from his celebrated book *Gurudutt: Teen Anki Shokantika* that is *Gurudutt: The three Act Tragedy*) and studying the book to be translated, to June 2023 when I submitted the translation to him, I was living with *Prak-cinema*, and I was in a state of trance! I didn't take up any other assignment during this period. *Prak-cinema* has made me more prosperous than I was as a student of cinema.

The exploration of pre-cinema in various arts and the inter-relation of all these arts is a unique content, and I feel proud that it has happened in my mother tongue, Marathi. And I also think ardently that it must cross the language barriers. It needs to.