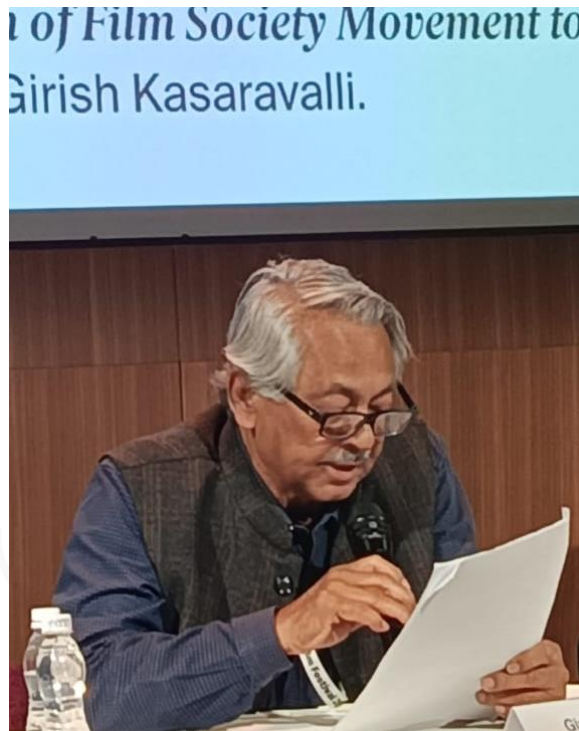


Sudhir Nandgaonkar Memorial Lecture 2023

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FILM SOCIETY MOVEMENT IN INDIA

I thank MAMI and the organisers for inviting me to inaugurate the 1st Sudhir Nandagaonkar Memorial Lecture. It is a fitting tribute by MAMI that this series is named after Sudhir Nandagoankar, a man of many talents and a devoted and committed Film society Activist. Sudhir, I believe, taught literature in the early days. Still, when the film bug bit him, he switched to journalism and became a prolific writer on cinema for many popular Marathi dailies and publications. Even this change in him, I believe, was brought about by a film society called *FILM FORUM*, which, according to many senior film society organisers, played a pivotal role in shaping the film sensibilities in this city. But for many of us unaware of his days as a lecturer, a film Journalist, or association with *Film Forum*, he was the strength behind Prabhat Chitra Mandal. He was inseparable from it till he breathed his last. He worked in various capacities in his five-decade-long association with Prabhaat Chitra Mandal and Four decades at FFSI. His contribution to the film society movement



was of immense importance. He started the film weekly *Roopavahini* in Marathi. In addition, he established state chapters of FFSI and started film festivals like MAMI and scores of others. Among Sudhir's significant

achievements, the following require special mention.

1. The establishment of Campus film societies.
2. Starting film appreciation courses in Marathi
3. Setting up Asian Film Foundation and Third Eye film festivals.

Let me explain why I consider his initiative to start the Campus Film Society

admirable. It was part of the Nehruvian dream to include cinema in academics. To work out the modalities, the Govt. of India constituted the S. K. Patil committee soon after Independence and the Dr. Shivarama Karanth committee in the 1960s. Both these committees recommended that cinema should be included in academic curricula. The reason is that If students are exposed to good cinema during the impressionable age, they develop good taste in cinema and other arts and

become good *Sahrudayas*. A good Sahrudaya can change the complexion of the film industry and the larger society itself. However, as is the case with many such reports, the enthusiasm shown by successive governments in appointing committees did not translate into action, and some of the crucial suggestions were left to gather dust. In that sense, Sudhir's initiative to start the Campus Film Society was a move in the right direction. We all know what role the campus film societies played in shaping the taste of young minds in the US and Europe. FFSI should take up Sudhir's unrealised dream and establish campus film societies nationwide. Some of us in the Kannada film fraternity attempted to screen sound films for high school students a few years ago. Still, it was met with opposition from the conservative minds in academic circles and even from parents. But FFSI, being a registered body, can dare to take it up, knowing pretty well that the conservatives who still have a condescending attitude towards cinema would oppose it.

The second thing I would like to dwell on is Sudhir's attempt to conduct Film appreciation courses in Marathi. I believe the Film Appreciation course he conducted in Pune was his first endeavour in Marathi. This will have a far-reaching impact because the film society movement, at least in certain parts of the country, is considered an elitist and urban-centric activity. Conducting film appreciation courses only in English would exclude a large section of the young minds, who would feel intimidated by that language, from participating. If the region's language becomes the language of communication, it would attract participants from the non-urban

centres. It would help erase this negative impression about these kinds of activities. The cascading effect would be that the Film society movements would spread to villages and small towns. I am more familiar with the film society movement in my home state, Karnataka, which has been limited to major cities.

To counter this, the late K.V.Subbanna, the Magsaysay award-winning cultural icon of Karnataka, started a film society in Heggodu, a small village of 20-25 houses in the Sahyadri belt. He screened film classics from all over the world and initiated the locals of the village into meaningful cinema. During 70-the 80s, when Prof. Satish Bahadur, P.K.Nair and NVK Murthy visited Heggodu to conduct a film appreciation course, they were surprised to see villagers in their typical attire of a banian and a lungi, sitting under the tree and discussing *Rashomon*, *Bicycle thieves*, *Pather Panchali*. Imagine what would happen if students were given a similar opportunity to watch meaningful cinema, which otherwise they would never be able to see in the commercial film circuit. Later, Subbanna extended that activity to other places like villages of farm labourers, Siddhi tribes, and fishermen's colonies of Karnataka. He entrusted this job to four of us. We had to carry the 16 mm projector and film reels and act as Benshis. During the early days of cinema in Japan, theatres would hire people called Benshis to translate the dialogues into Japanese for the audience's benefit. We had to translate the subtitles into Kannada while the film was running. We did it for three years. My own experience was astounding. I wish FFSI would continue such activities to spread film culture to those places which are sparsely

populated. Doing so not only spreads the film culture but also drives off the misconception that this is an urban-centric, elitist activity.

Third Eye Asian Film Festival and Asian Film Foundation are two other initiatives of Sudhir under the banner of Prabhat Chitra Mandal that need to be applauded. It is a festival of films from Asian countries. The Cinefan film festival in New Delhi, started by Aruna Vasudev much earlier, aimed to showcase films from Asian countries. Many film festivals outside India curate only Asian films. The Festival of Three Continents in Nantes once had a section which showcased only South Indian films. When I asked Alain Jalladeau, the festival director, the reason for limiting it exclusively to South Indian films, he said that the cinematic idiom, the emotional pitching and its graph, and the acting style in South Indian films are unique and quite different from the movie made in the north of India. The festival wanted it to be noticed. In an interview, Sudhir, too, had expressed one such concern, which motivated him to start this festival. In Indian film festivals, cineastes are expected to flock to see films from Europe and America but are not so enthusiastic to see movies from Asian countries. Except for the selected few, most delegates of the film festivals hardly go to see films from Latin America, Africa and Asia, with the sole exception of Iranian cinema. Sudhir stated in that interview that The Asian Film Festival gives an opportunity not just to see films made in the neighbouring countries where filmmaking conditions are not very different from ours but also makes us realise how shallow the claims of our film industry say that they are not able to make films of international standards because of

ensorship, political interference and lack of facilities. It is a lame excuse because the restrictions to filmmaking are much more severe in the neighbouring countries than in India, yet many of their films are appreciated worldwide. The screening of only Asian films can also be seen as a political act, resisting the cultural imperialism of European cinema and decolonising the minds of film-goers in India. One can see this happening in other parts of Asia where National Cinemas have carved out distinct styles and established their uniqueness. Here, I would like to recall an anecdote that Ousmane Sembene, an internationally known Senegalese director who passed away just a year back, narrated in one of his interviews. A young and bright visual artist trained in Paris returned to Senegal with the intent to paint the local cultures. He looked around for a suitable model with perfect, beautiful facial features, per the specifications taught in the French school. The ratio between the forehead and the lower part of the face should be $1/3^{\text{rd}}$ and $2/3^{\text{rd}}$ ratio, and the ratio between the width of the nose and the distance between two ears should be ... *blah blah blah*. Even after searching for many days, he could not find an ideal face that suited the French specification. It did not take much time for the painter to realise that the problem was not with the African face but with the French theories of aesthetics, and he decided to discard all that he had studied and started to look for the right face from the local milieu. Sembane says that should be our search- a search for African Aesthetics. So Sudhir is right in attempting to teach a new sense of cinema by having a festival designated only for Asian Films.

We all know that Calcutta Film Society, formed under the leadership of Satyajit Ray, Chidanand Dasgupta, Bansi Chandragupta and Harisadhan Dasgupta, is the first film society in India to familiarise Indian film-makers and the audience with the best of world cinema. None of them had entered the film fraternity yet, and they intended to watch films beyond mere storytelling and entertainment. Satyajit Ray writes in *Our Films, Their films* that they aimed to curate films wherein concepts were expressed in aesthetic terms, be it a film made as a tool for propaganda by a political body or by an avant-garde intellectual for the satisfaction of an aesthetic urge. The concerns, techniques and imagery of these films selected for screening in the film societies were new to the members and baffled them initially.

Contrary to the belief that the film society movement was started by the Calcutta Film Society, Google tells us that before the Calcutta Film Society, there existed a few film clubs in Mumbai that were formed with a limited vision. Stanley Japson, then the British editor of *Illustrated weekly of India* started a film club to make short films. It is believed that he formed a film club and screened films to expose aspiring filmmakers to good cinema. In 1942, a group of Indian documentary filmmakers started the Bombay Film Society to get accustomed to contemporary Western cinema trends. But both these film clubs had to be closed because of the Second World War. I am sharing this information to state that film clubs existed before the Calcutta Film Society was formed. Still, these film clubs existed only as a personal endeavour, whereas Calcutta Film

Society gave it a thrust to make it a movement. The other difference is that the Calcutta Film Society focused on feature films. They procured films that created flutters from across the globe. These films brought in a paradigm shift in thinking about cinema. Both filmmakers and viewers started looking for content that was relevant to the times they lived in. Cinema was given the status of an art form like literature, music, etc. It brought filmmakers and viewers together and transformed film viewing into a rigorous analytical and cultural activity. The Film Society Movement introduced not only world cinema but the world of cinema, says noted film critic C.S Venkitesvaran. He adds that the seventies also marked a turning point in Indian politics and cinema. The Film Society Movement and the so-called 'New Wave' reflect the times in their urge to challenge the status quo and to grasp the world. Elements of hope, guilt, exhilaration, anarchy and political adventurism constituted the heady mix of the period.

The idea of procuring and watching films of their choice motivated film enthusiasts from other cities, and soon, many film societies started emerging. It was also when new film movements gained ground in India, and content-oriented cinema was produced nationwide. There was a symbiotic relationship between the New Cinema Movement and the Film Society Movement. A few film societies screened their members, not just films from across the world but also films made in Indian languages. I am indebted to the Federation of Film Societies for giving my first film, *Ghatashraddha*, an all-India visibility. It won the Golden Lotus award in 1978 in the National Film Awards – at a time

when films made by all the stalwarts of Indian cinema such as Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, Shyam Benegal, Adoor Gopalakrishnan, Aravindan, John Abraham, B.V.Karant and Girish Karnad were also in the competition - FFSI brought a copy of the film and circulated it to all film societies across the country. Though it did not help us financially, it gave visibility to the film all over India. I was also invited to some screenings, and interactions between the filmmaker and members of the film societies were arranged. FFSI also organised such interactions with other filmmakers, which benefitted both the filmmaker and the cineaste. The filmmaker realised their strengths and weaknesses, and the viewer gained an insight to go beyond the plot.

Prof. Manu Chakravarthy writes that the film society movement was also a democratic one in the sense that it did not unilaterally privilege any linguistic tradition. Thus, it had a non-parochial attitude towards cinema.

Film Society is observing its GOLDEN jubilee this year. It is time for all of us who are actively involved in the film society movement to reflect upon the path we have traversed and to introspect about the strengths and weaknesses of this movement. Everyone would agree that the Film Society Movement, which played an active and vigorous role in the initial years to promote good cinema, has lost its initial momentum. It is now time for us to widen the scope of the movement so that it gets reinvigorated. I have some ideas, not something new, which I would like to share here.

The initial aura of the film society movement was why we saw films hitherto

unavailable in India, where only English-language films from the UK and the USA were screened in public forums. Film societies procured films from other film-making countries through embassies and filtered them for their members. However, the screenings of many film societies turned out to be just alternate screening venues without disseminating the art of cinema; the members did not deconstruct the artistic content of the film. The result is that many members are still not thinking about the movie beyond the plot. It is a bane in India where all the films are reduced to plots, and the discourse that the filmmaker is trying to evolve isn't noticed.

These days, such films are readily available on digital platforms, so the membership of film societies has dwindled. And many film societies have had to shut down. During the 80s, a big state like Karnataka had 12 film societies, and a small state like Kerala had 160 film societies. Now, after the digital revolution, Karnataka has only two active film societies and a few others showing films occasionally. In Kerala, I believe the numbers have dwindled to 80. I am not aware of the state of affairs in other states, but we can guess that it won't be any better. To make the film society movement active, we need to bring back the discussion on cinema and disseminate its concepts soon after the film screening. The passive consumers of films inadvertently created by this movement have to be reconverted to active participants.

Christian Metz, the film semiotician, says it is easy to experience a film but challenging to explain. It is so because the experience is multi-layered in films. The visual and aural images crystalise the

emotions, and so do the juxtapositions. All the sense organs are at work simultaneously. Hence, an uninitiated viewer would find it challenging to comprehend fully all the layers of experience the film generates. A discussion among the members would make them see the other side of the film. Contextualising the film enhances the understanding of the film. If *Bicycle Thieves* is discussed by contextualising it with the Second World War I, *Daniel Blake* with Margaret Thatcher's policies, *Mukhamukham* with the ideological rift in the left politics or *Samskara* with Lohia's analysis of the structure of the Indian society, the understanding of all these films becomes more profound.

An interaction with the filmmaker would also benefit the viewers. Nowadays, getting the filmmaker for a discussion through video conferencing is not difficult. From my experience, I can tell you that such an attempt increased the attendance at screenings. These days, hardly 15-20 people attend the screenings in a film society in Bangalore. Still, it would rise to 50 if there is an interaction with a Kannada filmmaker, up to 100 if the interaction is with an iconic filmmaker from Europe, and houseful if it is a famous filmmaker from Hindi, Tamil, or Telugu.

In the 70s and 80s, the film society screened mainly films from European countries. The prime reason was that the respective embassies were willing to lend the movie. Films from Latin America and Africa were sadly missed. Even amongst the Asian films, only the films of the masters from Japan, like Kurosawa and Mizuguchi, were screened. The unavailability of cinema was the main reason. They were not sourced even

when they procured films from the National Film Archives, which had many films from these three continents, i.e., Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Today, the scenario is quite different. Film Societies should somehow find a way to get films from these three continents, too.

More importantly, we should screen films made in various Indian languages. Today, the films made by younger filmmakers are breaking fresh ground. Their idioms, visual design and narrative styles are distinctly different. Screening such films would have twofold benefits: members of film societies would be made aware of the emerging trends in India, and young filmmakers would get much-needed visibility.

Many of the film societies prefer to screen only full-length feature films. Except for some stray attempts, one hardly finds documentaries, short films, or animation films. Many film societies ignored these genres. This overemphasis on feature films seriously affected the mind set of cineastes, opines C.S.Venkiteshwaran.

But these days, mixing genres and styles is a style. Filmmakers consciously infuse features hitherto considered the tenets of documentary filmmaking into their feature films and vice versa. Similarly, filmmakers deliberately bring in many filmmaking styles while subtly essaying the film to refer to various socio-political and historical incidents. Mrinal Sen did it quite often in his time. In an article on the film *Island City* by Ruchika Oberoi, Arun Khopkar explains how the director revisits the expressionistic style of the thirties in the film's first part. Such an understanding of it can enhance the

experience. I read a beautiful article by Dimitris Eleftheriotis on the physical movements, the technical and notional aspects and the politics in Samira Makhmalbaf's film *Black Board*. He writes that Blackboard is about a journey with no origin or destination. He also writes elaborately on the journey in Shri 420 Boot Polish Mera Joota Hai Japani. Such insights make the understanding of the film more profound.

As opposed to this diegetic mode of narration, let me refer to the film *Gulabi Talkies*, which has a mimetic mode. Here, you can see the mixing of narrative styles. The conventional analytical dramatic style is used for the tale of *Gulabi*, the protagonist, and the *verite* style for the story of fishermen, which forms the counter-narrative. Viewers didn't notice it earlier, but one of the cineastes noticed it and pointed it out, and soon others picked up the thread, which they had not noticed earlier, and furthered the discussion. It also made them understand how a filmmaker builds a narrative using cinematic elements like sound, editing, and visual elements.

But not all such expressions may be successful, but let us dismiss the films for the right reasons. And appreciate it for the right reasons.

In his book 'A Door To Adoor,' Goutaman Bhaskaran writes that in the West, Cinema is seen as an extension of Photography and other Visual arts. Still, in India, It is seen as an extension of theatre. However, in Karnataka, it is seen as an extension of literature. It is true that Cinema borrows elements from other arts but these elements do not get reflected in Cinema in

their original form. Like Sage Agastya, who utters *Vatapi jirno bhava*" after eating the demon *Vatapi* and digesting him, the film, too, assimilates all the elements into its system. We fail to notice such subtleties because we do not see cinema; we see only the plot. Again, Let me assert that understanding the Cinematic images is important to understanding the content. The elements of filmmaking are not chosen randomly. They are chosen for their political and philosophical significance. If we succeed in inculcating this knowledge in our viewers, we will create an authentic cinematic. I think it was Gerald Mast who used the term cinematic for the person initiated into the politics and philosophy of cinematic language. We call someone who can read and write literate. Similarly, a person who is initiated to cinema is a cinemate.

A cinemate can develop a critical approach to cinema in general and Indian Cinema in particular. She/He can also decipher and trace the evolution of Indian cinematic traditions from infancy to the present. This would give Indian Cinema an Identity which is there but sadly not recognised.

Popular Culture

Of late, popular culture is gaining importance all over the world. Attempts are being made to understand this culture's socio-political and sociological implications/significations. Popular Cinema, too, demands such a study. Such films need to be included in film society programmes, not to see and 'enjoy' them but to understand them with all seriousness. Popular Cinema does not use the cinematic idioms of 'serious' cinema, but that

does not mean these films lack idiom, grammar or syntax.

Academics

Film Societies need to build bridges with the academia, says Prof Manu Chakravarthy. Film societies need to develop a schedule to reach out to colleges and institutes that teach film as a part of their curriculum and use that knowledge to develop a creative and critical understanding of the medium. We must develop film theories that have symbiotic links with our visual culture and its tradition.

Before ending, I would like to quote a statement by Eugene Youngblood, who says in his essay Cinema and Entropy that it is not enough if we simply experience a film; we need to know how and what created that experience. In other words, if we do not try to

understand our experiences, we will likely remain merely consumers. Remember, a gullible consumer becomes a tool for manipulation by marketing establishments. This has become all the more important today when our medium is being used for manufacturing opinions. From Leni Riefenstahl to Rambo to the news footage of capturing Saddam Hussein to present-day Israel- - Hamas war, we have seen how the images are manufactured to convince viewers of their arguments/perspectives. So, it is not enough to make our viewers understand the politics of images; it is also important to make them understand the politics of imaging. Let us understand the Logos (what is said) and the lexis (how is it told).

That will be a true tribute to a visionary like Sudhir Nandagaonkar.

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