

Article

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Pazhampori, Popcorn & 2x

My interest in films dates back to my childhood as a young boy in rural Kerala in the 1970s. My father was a postmaster in a village. In those days, single screen theatres were the place one visited to watch a film. Film reels, which were reels of celluloid, used to be dispatched in tin trunks to every single theatre for the screening. These bulky boxes would arrive at the nearest railway station through the Railway Parcel Service and the theatres used to get a delivery challan from the distribution company. Theatre owners would rush to the railway station, show the delivery slip and collect their film boxes. Even then, as now, Friday was the day for the new film release. In most cases, these much awaited film reels would not arrive until Thursday evening. The elaborate process of printing and dispatching celluloid reels all over the state was a herculean task for the distribution companies. And that meant there was always a mad rush to collect these delivery letters from the post office. Inquiries at the post office for the delivery letter began from Tuesday itself!

The postmaster was an important link in this business of film distribution. To curry favour with him was seen as part of the trade. And so, he was courted with freebies at the local theatre. My father, himself a film buff, would take my mom, my brother and me

every single Friday for the opening show of that week. There were always reserved seats for us. Enjoying the privilege, I would take my seat, feeling on top of the world.

The experience of watching those films in a theatre was very intimate and very primal - primal in the sense that the audience willingly submitted themselves to the silver screen. Watching together, each viewer experienced the film alone, but felt at one with all. The audience laughed together and wept together, clapped and caught their breath at the same time. They gave vent to their feelings openly, without a trace of self-consciousness. It was a magical experience. Nothing could distract them from this total self-surrender unless these were films that were felt to be utterly boring! Unwilling to simply walk out of the film after having paid for a ticket with their hard-earned money, the audience would stay put and vent their ire on the film, running a parallel track of hoots, wisecracks and cheeky comments. Sometimes, the jokes were so sharp and clever that the whole hall ended up laughing together, forging a sense of camaraderie among total strangers. But when a film was captivating, there would be a hush, all eyes glued to the screen, breath almost stilled, hearts ticking the same beat. Any stray murmur among the invisible audience was

instantly shushed, a cough sounded like distant thunder and a child's cry seemed a trial of one's patience.

But there was one break that was eagerly awaited and that was for the freshly frying *Pazhamporis* in the theatre's foyer to which everyone flocked in the interval. The sizzling hot and tender fritters were made from a select raw banana variety called the 'Nenthra Pazham', the Royal Banana. Homegrown in every backyard of Kerala, they were simply delicious when fried in fresh gram flour batter. Biting into the squishy Pazampories, savouring the sweet and tangy banana slices, one did not dread the oil dripping from the drenched bhajis as one tends to do now. Rather, one relished it as a bonus serving! The film experience got inextricably mixed with the divinely steaming Pazhampories.

Many years later, I happened to be in a remote village near Madurai, working on a film as a crew member. One evening, being relatively free, some of us decided to go for a movie in the local theatre. It turned out to be a huge hall, accommodating nearly a thousand seats! Not the luxury cushioned ones seen in most theatre halls! These were really small, wooden chairs and their seats seemed just enough for snugly fitting human bottoms. The theatre had multiple doors for entry and exit. A film starring a Tamil superstar was playing. I was startled to find people drifting in and out throughout the unusually long film of three hours. Then I noticed that they lingered for some scenes, like a fight sequence or a song, then strolled out and wandered back in again. It took me a while before I realised that it was not their first viewing of the film - they had already

watched the film multiple times. These were revisits to watch their favourite moments from the film. The minimal ticket rates made it easy to do so, drawing in people from even the poor rural working class.

Multiplexes have transformed the movie watching scenario altogether - at least for my generation. Popcorn and coke are what the present generation seems to go to a theatre hall for. The crunching sound of the popcorn to a film buff like me is painfully distracting. My visits to the theatre with my children happily munching on these crunchy popcorn, get on my nerves and I invariably end up asking them how one could watch a movie if one was busy snacking ! I ache for total submission to the viewing experience for that barely - breathing silence, while my daughter, unruffled, shrugs my jealous query and pops in another handful of cheesy popcorn in her mouth, relishing the crunch as much as my strung nerves!

A friend of mine, a veteran sound mixing engineer from the celluloid era, tells me that in the earlier days while mixing film sound tracks, they used to take into consideration the noise of the ceiling fans in the theatres and adjust the mix to compensate. "These days", he quips, "I am certain the younger lot must be compensating for popcorn noise in the multiplexes." But he is more sore with the movie scene on the home front.

Having been married for over half a century and having had enough of each other in their lives, he and his wife have their own separate rooms with separate TV sets too. With his film background, he used to recommend her films, thinking she would enjoy them so much. To his surprise, his wife

would finish watching a two-hour film in 30 minutes flat! Suspicious, he once asked her the story to check if she had really seen the film. She triumphantly narrated the entire story. He was shocked when she revealed her secret to him. She had been watching the films with their run time compressed to half or even quarter by playing them at 2X speed or 4X speed! If that was not bad enough, she confessed that if she felt she had missed some link in the story, she would simply rewind the film to that particular scene!

Every film school worth its name starts by declaring that cinema is an art form made of two things - time & space. Filmmakers down the decades have pushed and pulled at these dimensions to tell their stories in fresh new ways. For instance, exploring the element of 'time' in cinema, Jean-Luc Godard, the *avante-garde* French New Wave director famously introduced the concept of 'jump cut' for the first time as a film aesthetic. The technique drew many masters to cut time with daring in their films. What no one foresaw was this - a day would come when the viewers would take film time in their hands too with their own version of 'jump over'!

At the local theatre, my friend's brother worked as a projectionist. He lived in a far away village and that meant he could not miss the last bus home. He solved the issue by editing the reels manually to cut short the screening time, fitting it neatly into his working hours and unfailingly caught the bus! Gaining confidence in his editing skills, he

would watch the film in the first show through the projection hall, check the reactions of the audience and edit the prints wherever there was a lag in the energy levels. Well, he probably saved many films from being commercial disasters in the process!

And now, he no longer worries about his last bus anymore. He now worries about the days ahead. Few movie goers visit a single theatre these days. A show may have just five to ten viewers. Even then the projector stands idle. The film is being digitally streamed. The old manager, once known to all the towns people, sits alone in his cabin. If no one shows up at the ticket counter today, the owner may finally sign the deal to sell the building for the new towers. He listens mournfully, yet expectantly, for the shuffle of footsteps that may still wander in.

I miss those days when a single laugh, gasp, or sigh rippled through the audience, binding us all in a shared emotional rhythm. Such moments left a deep imprint on our memory. Memories of togetherness in time. I wonder whether the new modes of viewing—such as VR headsets or other wearables—can match the experience brought to us by the theatres. It's hard to imagine a family drama or a pure comedy with its emotions of sorrow and laughter unfolding through a VR's solitary headset in the same way. I hope our big dark rooms, called theatres, remain for the sake of that great communion - where people not only watch together but feel together.

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