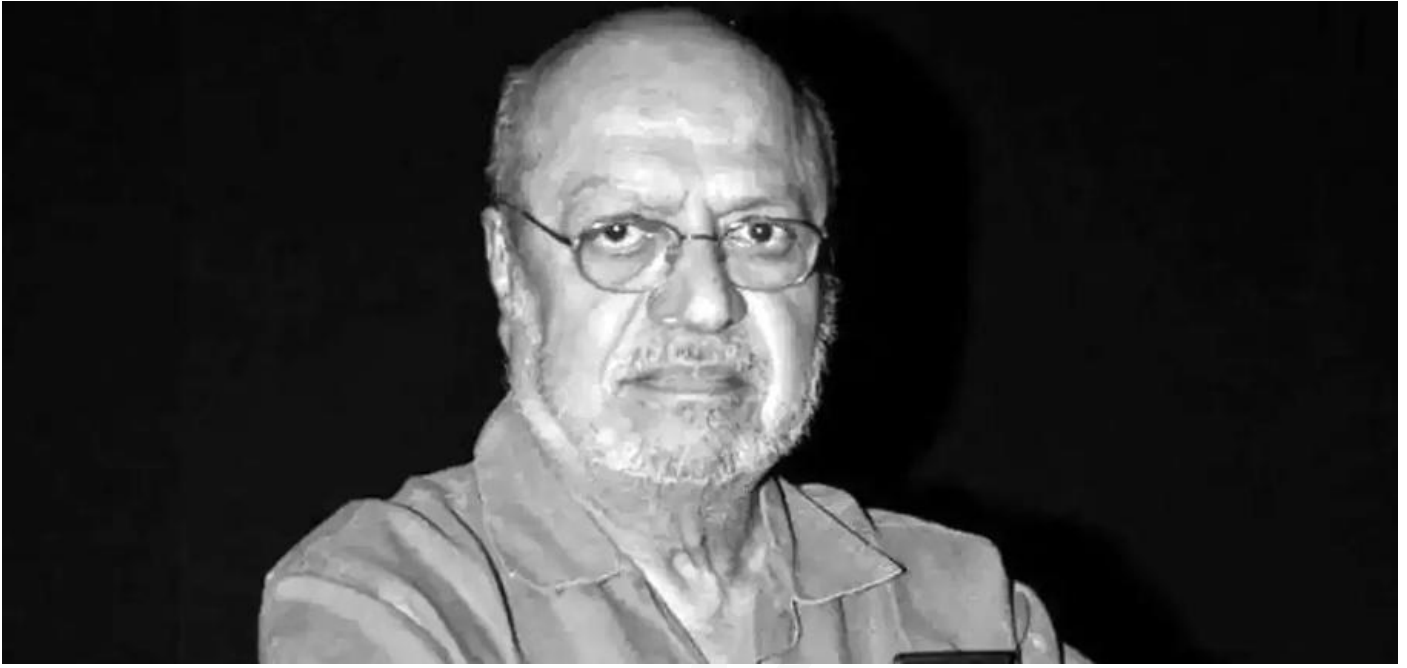


*Tribute to Shyam Benegal: Discussion*

**N. Manu Chakravarthy and N. Vidyashankar**

**An Interaction with Shyam Benegal**



*A couple of years ago, N. Manu Chakravarthy and N. Vidyashankar engaged in an online conversation with the esteemed filmmaker Shyam Benegal. The discussion focused on the Film Society Movement, exploring its contribution to cinema and, more specifically, in the realm of independent filmmaking in India. Following is the text of that discussion being published to pay tribute to Shyam Benegal on his birth anniversary (B. 14 Dec 1934)*

**N. Vidyashankar:** Mr. Benegal, welcome and thank you for giving us this opportunity to interact with you. At the outset, we would like to express our gratitude to you for your support of the Suchitra Film Society, Bengaluru, in all its endeavours in the past. Just to recollect, you inaugurated the first Bengaluru International Film Festival, an initiative of Suchitra, back in 2006, which has since grown into a significant event in the country, even earning international accreditation from the International

Federation of Film Producers Associations (FIAPF).

It is tempting to discuss all the significant texts you have created. However, we will restrict our discussion to the agenda, which is beyond your creative act. It would cover three segments. The nature of film culture in India, the Film Society movement in general, and to some extent, film education. Over the last seven decades, film societies have been at the forefront of promoting a healthy film culture and have also served as informal platforms for film education.

**N. Manu Chakravarthy:** I'm really interested in your response to my upcoming question, and I raise this only because of your significant position as a creator of Middle Cinema and your important role in shaping film societies.

There appears to be an irreconcilable antagonism between commercial mainstream cinema and non-commercial non-mainstream cinema. The proponents of the two groups seem to dismiss each other, thereby affecting the membership of film societies. That it seems to have become very exclusive has also polarised cinema viewership.

So, as a veteran who knows all these things, and who has gone into all these diverse traditions how do you think a negotiation can be established among them especially when we look at Amazon Prime Video, Netflix, and other OTT platforms where everything is available for viewers without any discrimination?

**Shyam Benegal:** Well, the position of film societies in India at one time was crucial because certain kinds of films were not available for you to go and see and make it available for yourself generally. Today, you can see anything you want from practically anywhere in the world. So you don't really need a film society in the traditional sense. One of the aspects of a film society was that people shared their views about cinema and audio-visual media within that forum. There were these two primary functions. We did not just gather together to see a film, but also to exchange views, information, and knowledge of the medium. In this sense, film societies continue to be relevant.

**NMC:** As members of Suchitra Film Society, we also want to learn from your experiences how this polarisation of different approaches can be negotiated. I think the future of film societies also depends on the kind of dynamics we establish, making film societies not only just accessible but also inclusive.

What role can film societies play in negotiating between these two opposing, antagonistic groups to make cinema non-exclusivist?

**SB:** You don't need to come together to see a film in a hall or whatever, but what is necessary is communication with each other on the idea of film appreciation, and film societies can facilitate that even now. There are so many levels of representation, and many of these levels are possible only if you can have an exchange of ideas about what you see. Our minds expand when we exchange views; a film society makes sense only in that context.

Nostalgically, I recall a time when film societies were very different, and people would discuss films and share opinions. I still remember when we suddenly discovered films from Central Europe, Eastern Europe—the films from Hungary, Poland, and so forth—and our lengthy discussions about them. We would have a screening at six o'clock in the evening, which would end at about eight but the discussion on the film would continue till midnight. I remember this very well because we used to have our screenings at the Films Division premises, and there were huge complaints against us. Somebody wrote to the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. They said that the Films Division was a Government

institution and it needed to close at a particular time; discussing films and closing at one in the morning was unacceptable to them. I'm mentioning this because the whole idea of a film society is not simply about seeing films. It's about discussing, analysing, and more importantly, connecting these with experiences in other arts. The whole range of things that connect us with culture-specific aesthetics also expands our consciousness, because the concept of aesthetics itself is different in different cultures.

**NV:** Could you provide us with a brief account of the context and status of film culture in this country when you entered this field in the 60s?

**SB:** Well, you know, my interest in cinema started very early. I was barely a schoolboy when I got seriously interested in cinema. But I got particularly focused on films ever since I saw Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali*. That goes back to the late 1950s when I saw that film in college. I used to see a lot of films because we had several film societies. One particular film society, which I started in Hyderabad, was called by a very pretentious name, 'Culture Group'. We used to have weekly screenings and discussions of the films screened. We then received support from the USIS (United States Information Service). They used to have a lot of films, old American classics, which they would loan out for us to see. They used to be in the 16mm format. That was the time Ray's *Pather Panchali* was released. We decided to screen his film because he had already received an international award.

At that time, filmmaking meant telling a story with songs and dances interspersed, so the idea of cinema was not cinema as much as it was like a variety show. You know that's how our films developed, particularly in the sound era, and it was not finding a form of its own. But cinema evolved with its own unique language and drama, and it was developed in a distinct way, especially with the introduction of sound to cinema. This allowed for speaking pictures and talking films. Suddenly, the act of telling a story visually took a backseat because sound became very critical.

Internationally, cinema was also developing in a particular way where the visual, the moving pictures, which started as just a record of external reality, began to narrate fictional stories. We had great masters like Pudovkin, Eisenstein, and others who created films and wrote books about the grammar of the art of cinema. But this was before sound made an appearance. When sound came to cinema, everyone was a bit confused because we had to return to traditional visual forms. Here again, cinema, instead of developing as a new visual medium, took a step back and reverted to the theatrical idiom. This meant that, on the one hand, the technology of film was developing and moving forward, while on the other, the art of narration had taken a step back. It took a long time before that started to change, and when I say 'long' time, I mean a really long time because it was not until the 1940s, which was a decade after the addition of sound. Social reality also contributed to this change.

With the onset of the Second World War, there was a significant crunch in all resources, including raw film. The realities of

daily life hit people particularly hard, especially in Europe and East Asia, and creative people started to say, “My God, if we're going to make a film, we must address real life”. And this sentiment gave rise to Italian Neorealism, followed by the emergence of French New Wave cinema. Additionally, there was Japanese cinema featuring directors like Kurosawa.

Cinema began to redesign and reinvent itself in many ways, and a new art of audio-visual language evolved to express feelings and ideas comprehensively, much like a person who writes; not only does one learn a language, but also creates a vocabulary. To that vocabulary were added certain new things, facilitating what you couldn't express earlier. With cinema, an inevitable evolution was taking place. Through this process, a new language of cinema emerged, with Neorealism in Italy, the New Wave in France, and New Japanese cinema.

In the mid-1950s, as movements emerged worldwide, particularly in America, Europe, and Japan, India's most successful films were primarily theatrical adaptations in celluloid rather than attempts to create a new language of cinema.

However, there were a couple of people, one of whom was Satyajit Ray, who was aware of the happenings outside India. He worked as an Art Director for an advertising agency and had the opportunity to travel to England for an official assignment. There, he discovered this ‘new’ cinema. He already had ideas before that, and it only strengthened his vision. He was passionate about cinema even earlier and had written scripts, among other things. However, he was groping to find a new form of expression, a

new idiom. When he started watching Neorealist films, they gave him a new impetus. So, when he came back to India, he was absolutely clear in his mind about the kind of film he wanted to make. And by making *Pather Panchali*, he suddenly changed the entire landscape of the future of Indian cinema. It did not necessarily follow that mainstream cinema would change. Still, the fact is that a new element was introduced into Indian cinema that had not existed before Ray's *Pather Panchali*. For those who watched it, it was a mini-revolution of sorts. It went on to win an international award, and then Ray decided to follow up by making *Aparajitho* and *Apur Sansar* based on the same story. This trilogy had a distinct character entirely of its own, which, of course, was unlike anything that had happened in Indian cinema before, and this trilogy became a classic example of what could be learnt in cinema. The achievement of Satyajit Ray became, in some ways, a kind of model for the future generations of Indian filmmakers.

These films became the basic texts for the Film Institute of India, which came into existence in 1961, at Pune. When they were developing their curriculum, these films served as models for curricular practice. I was involved with the Film Institute in the sixties, and we invited extraordinary people to the Institute in Pune. Just about that time, or a little before, one of the world's great filmmakers Jean Renoir, came to India to make a film called *The River*, which also became an inspiration for Ray. There was a need for a platform to inform young people interested in cinema about current developments in the film industry, including the groundbreaking films of Satyajit Ray.

This, of course, needed to be accomplished through film societies.

**NMC:** I would like to make a fairly extended statement. What was the temper, or spirit of the age, when film societies emerged? What changes do you recognise after the advent of globalisation, particularly keeping in mind the brutal powers of the nation-state, corporatisation, the loss of the sense of community, etc., during the last three decades? That's why it is fascinating for me to find out from you about that specific period. While I won't focus on films like *Ankur*, *Nishant*, *Bhumika*, or *Sardari Begum*, I will turn to *Manthan* and *Bharath Ek Khoj*.

These films offer significant lessons for us in political, economic, and cultural terms and regarding our past heritage, keeping us constantly in the stream of history. I'm continually amazed by how *Bharat Ek Khoj* integrates and weaves together the themes of tradition, religion, ancient India, modernity, and the Nehruvian era, and then moves into our cultural spaces, not just because of its content, but also because of a receptive audience. Was the *Zeitgeist* different then, or was it because of the values that integrated a society, which still had a sense of community, making these films important for individuals in particular and society in general? Today, would a viewing of *Manthan* or *Bharat Ek Khoj*—given the nature of our polity, our economy, and the kind of communal consciousness—yield a receptive audience?

**SB:** Nehruvian Discovery of India posed questions like “*Who are we*”? “*Where have we come from*”? “*What have we become*”? “*What is our consciousness*”? “*What does it*

*mean to be an Indian*”? “*What does it mean to be part of India*”?

We are such a diverse community with so many different languages, yet there is a sense that we are one. Whether it is just a notion or real is not of consequence. What is important is that India is also a nation—a political entity. You also have a serious border clash between Assam and Mizoram, which unfortunately renders our sense of unity a farce. You know what I mean. I just can't comprehend it. We are working together and simultaneously attempting to work at cross purposes. The vision is one of integration rather than disintegration, but the fact is that both forces function together forever. It means you must constantly see the nation as an organism, a living thing that does not necessarily remain the same. It keeps changing.

It depends on how we look at ourselves. Do we look at ourselves as people belonging to a particular region within our country, or do we see ourselves as a part of the totality? That's entirely our choice. Sometimes we behave like this, and again sometimes you become the other. But that's also natural. I can be from the South Canara district, where my parents come from, but I don't see myself as a person from only that part of the world. I treat myself as an Indian. When I'm in the city of Mumbai, I consider myself to be a person from that city. I have a choice of behaving in different ways, but the important thing that keeps me as a person of integrity is my primary identity. That's what being an Indian is, and that can never change, because whichever part of the world I might be in, I will still be an Indian. In my country, I can be just anyone—a Saraswath from the

South Canara District of Karnataka, a person from Hyderabad, Telangana, or a Mumbaikar. I am accepting of those identities as well. We all have multiple identities, but the important thing is that our primary identity is the moving force and that it is the motivating factor. How does one think about sports? How do you react to the Olympics? One reacts as an Indian. These things are automatic. We don't have to think much about it. That's how it works and that's how we must see ourselves.

**NMC:** What would you, as one of the pioneers of the film society movement and as an eminent filmmaker, say should be done now by people who care for communities, when all things seem to be collapsing? How do we correlate the values of those times with the spirit of the present age? Is it possible to revive that consciousness?

**SB:** What is the point of departure if you are a creative person making a film or writing a book? Where do you start from? How do you give yourself an identity? When I'm making a film, it depends on where I am and the vantage point from which I view the world. Here, also I have choices. I can tell a story based on my being at the centre of the universe, where I see everything. That's one way of subjectively doing it, or I can look at it from the outside in an objective manner. That's philosophy, but the fact of the matter is, it's a very simple thing. It's a simple matter of identity. Now, when you see films from different parts of the world and different cultures, you see them from the perspective of humanity in total. You arrive at those human values, whatever the origin of those values

may be because we all have a set of values common to humanity. There is a certain kind of basic humanity irrespective of the political, social, or economic situation and there is a basic position to all creative works derived from humane impulses.

**NMC:** To expand on this topic since we have been discussing cinema aesthetics and culture, I want to highlight a particular episode from *Bharat Ek Khoj*, which I think is a very brilliant creative leap. This episode depicts Gandhiji's entry into the villages inspired by Raja Rao's novel *Kanthapura*. The film, conveys this through the consciousness of ordinary people, particularly women. We cannot overlook the very significant, ethical, and creative intervention you achieved in that particular episode, which is also evident in your earlier films.

**SB:** That's the humane impulse I referred to earlier. When you say humane, there are many other aspects within its ambit. But what does it entail? Compassion and empathy are crucial elements. If you are not empathetic, you will never be able to understand another person. It's important to view situations from a shared point of view, and when you do this, you demonstrate a fundamental quality of humanity.

**NV:** You mentioned that in India, there were not many efforts to create a new cinematic language; instead, we were happy to use cinema to retell the stories of our past through theatrical narrative forms. You also mentioned how you connected with the Film Society movement in Hyderabad and discovered the 'new' cinema heralded in by

Bengali pioneers like Satyajit Ray. It is clear that the new Cinema in India was directly linked to the Film Society movement.

The first Society was established in Calcutta in 1947, spearheaded by Chidananda Dasgupta and Satyajit Ray, leading ultimately to the making of *Pather Panchali* in 1955. This led to a new awareness, a new cinema, which influenced you as well. However, you started working in Hindi cinema, which had a different heritage, within the industry. Your early films, seem to extend a certain kind of communication system that was already developed by filmmakers like Bimal Roy, Gurudutt, and other serious film makers. You have inherited two streams of influences in your filmmaking: the pan-Indian cinema prevalent in Hindi and the new wave of cinema initially created by Bengali pioneers like Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak, and Mrinal Sen, which eventually spread to other linguistic groups across India. How do you perceive this phenomenon and the convergence of the two streams you brought into Indian cinema?

**SB:** Well, you see, when I started my career, I didn't start as a filmmaker. I started my career in advertising as a copywriter. There was a reason why that happened. I didn't have the opportunity to make films, even though my primary passion has always cinema. The world of cinema, at least at that time, was very challenging to enter because it was—and still is—directly related to financial investment; the money spent has to be recovered. Film production is an expensive medium that demands significant technological resources, which in turn requires a lot of money. So, filmmaking has always faced two basic

problems. One is how I can make a film that aligns with my vision and the second is how to produce a film that satisfies the entertainment expectations of an audience accustomed to a different genre. This means you find yourself in a factory-like environment, yet you still wish to produce something new. The dilemma lies in creating your film, which conveys your creative vision and sets you apart from the assembly line. You keep hoping that people will still want to see your work and connect with it. It's a huge challenge and this will always remain a challenge.

This is where someone like Satyajit Ray becomes an inspiration, because he achieved success not only as an artist but also as a filmmaker; his films actually succeeded and he could recover the money for the people who funded the venture. The ability to blend artistic vision with commercial viability.

Film Societies also play a role here—that of developing an audience. Whenever someone attempts to make a new type of film, they often explain its language in relation to either the content or the form of the film. This helps some people become aware of the new style and learn to appreciate it. And that can only happen if you have like-minded people coming together and creating a film society where they can, from time to time, see films that are not normally thrown open commercially and are exploring new cinematic forms, cinematography, and new ways of telling stories, etc. That's how the film society movement began, aiming to create such a space.

Even in Bombay (Mumbai), the movement started early. There was one Bombay society, which didn't last too long.

Much later, after 10/15 years, another film society was started in Bombay called Anandam. And the Anandam Film Society became very popular. By that time, many significant developments had occurred in the world of cinema with notable figures like Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak, and Mrinal Sen—the triumvirate of Bengali cinema. And then it had beginnings in Kerala with Adoor Gopalkrishnan and others. In Karnataka also, the movement took off, and when you started Suchitra Film Society, it was a very similar kind of situation. With theatre people like Karanth and Karnad, a certain kind of development was taking place. Girish Kasaravalli emerged as a major filmmaker during this time. The evolution of New Cinema in India, therefore, is directly linked to the growth of film societies across the country. But there was a change when television came on the scene. And when television began, many films that couldn't be shown in cinema halls were available on it to view. So, in fact, television helped in spreading cinema culture much more than either cinemas, theatres, or film societies did. You now literally had a 'widespread' audience for films.

**NV:** Film societies have distinct characteristics—one of which is the ability to access art-house films, that are not available in the mainstream market. In a way this is to exercise the fundamental right to choose what to see, very much like the democratic right to read or to listen to whatever the individual prefers. This is a fundamental philosophical premise on which film societies rest.

Similarly, another characteristic is related to cultural identity. You narrated what

happened in Kolkata, Mumbai, Kerala, and Karnataka regarding the evolution of film societies. In all these places there emerged a resurgence of regional, linguistic cultural identities through cinema. Do you agree with that reading?

Additionally, there is a prevailing notion that film societies cater mostly to European art-house cinema. Would like you to respond to that?

**SB:** The important thing, of course, is that cinema reflects culture, and because it reflects culture, it presents specific cultural concerns. Stories are set in a specific geography, naturally reflecting that cultural space. The more accurately it is represented, the more credibility it has. One of the problems about the so-called 'mainstream' cinema, I'm using this word 'so-called' simply because it's popular cinema, which everybody watches across the country, and this mainstream cinema doesn't want to be representative only of the specific culture or place where the film was made. It aims to represent a pan Indian identity.

India, being a very diverse country, having a pan-identity is something that, in fact, dilutes the kind of films being made. Pan Indian identity was fine but for a lot of young filmmakers whose experience did not really coincide with this kind of broad identity wanted to make films about what they experienced in their individual lives. More specifically, if I live in the city of Mumbai, I may reside in the heart of the city or somewhere in the suburbs. The living experiences are different in these two places. My response will be to the culture of that specific place where I live in, and if I were to

make a film about this experience, capturing the truth and authenticity of the situation and circumstances is essential for genuine creative expression. So, this is really the problem with mainstream cinema. You see, otherwise, it would be like a commercial product. Say you produce soap, or a tastemaker, it tends to have a common identity rather than a specific one. In contrast, when an artist paints a picture or creates a film, he or she expresses a unique vision that is distinctly their own. If you analyse their work, you will start to see that it carries a deeper meaning. And the more honest and authentic the expression, the better the artwork tends to be.

**NV:** The second question pertains to film aesthetics or for that matter the development of the medium itself, which is largely associated with what happened in Europe. As you mentioned earlier, Italian Neo-Realism, French New Wave or even early Russian cinema, and German Expressionism all created a theoretical and technological background for this new art. Obviously, film societies, because they were seriously interested in the medium, were responding to what was happening in Europe. How does the new cinema movement and the selection of movies through film societies in India, manifest themselves in Indian film culture today? I would like you to respond.

**SB:** These were the problems at a given time and they are not necessarily the problems of today. Today many changes have taken place. First of all, cinema is no longer what it was. Secondly, the audio-visual media itself is not what it was twenty years ago. There has been

a continuous evolution both culturally and technologically.

Culturally, there are enormous diversities we have to live with but these diversities are not foreign anymore. They are related to one another in a way that they never were in the past. In the 19th century, if an explorer went to Central Africa and suddenly realised that the people were so different from himself that he had no connection with them, he would even start to believe that he had discovered something absolutely new. This situation no longer exists today. We are familiar with many things all around us that we see, know, and also those that we don't even see. There is nothing truly 'exotic' anymore. We are able to perceive the interconnectedness of all individuals and therefore, when we talk about cinema, we no longer think the way we used to in the past. Everything has changed dramatically, and it continues to evolve as the technology of audiovisual communication advances rapidly. Today, the world is a completely different place. At one point, you mentioned that you thought in terms of exploration. However, as time passes, some things change while others remain constant. The contradiction is in this: the more things change, the more they stay the same. This offers another valuable philosophical perspective to uphold the film society movement.

**NV:** I am returning to Manu Chakravarthy's question about reconciling the two separate streams of filmmaking practice, which work as though they are mutually exclusive. Is there a third option of Parallel Cinema acting as a bridge between these two streams of expression?

**SB:** The term 'Parallel cinema' emerged at one time because there was active hostility between different kinds of practitioners. The people on both sides developed fanatical attitudes—one feeling that the other had no reason or place to exist. This is absurd. Everybody has the right to exist, and it's a question of your own personal directions and choices.

**NV:** Accessibility to films is no longer an issue for people interested in cinema today. A considerable number of film societies have realised this. In addition to maintaining film societies for academic discussions and the exchange of views, which you clearly mentioned as their other purpose, they shifted their focus away from accessing films to curatorship.

Kolkata film societies took the lead in organising International Film Festivals. The Calcutta Film Society, founded by Ray in 1947, is the second oldest film society in our country.

You pioneered the event in Mumbai through MAMI (Mumbai Academy of Moving Images) with Sudhir Nandgaonkar of Prabhat Chitra Mandal. The Kerala government took the necessary steps with the intellectual resources provided by its film societies. Chennai has its festivals organised by the Madras Film Society, and the Indo Cine Appreciation Foundation organises the Chennai International Film Festival. Suchitra Film Society in Bengaluru initiated the Bengaluru International Film Festival.

Film societies took the responsibility of curating the films. This was inevitable because although the films are accessible,

most people find it challenging to choose the right film to watch among the numerous films streamed on multiple platforms. That brings us to film education, where film societies played a major role. In the absence of sufficient well-equipped film schools with a proper curriculum, there are no platforms for film education. Our generation learnt about cinema through watching films and talking about them in film societies. The kind of discussions and exchange of views you talked about was a learning experience for many of us. Beyond this informal platform of film societies, has there been any progress in film education?

**SB:** There is nothing in that area. One of the things that was very important to me when I became Chairman of the Film and Television Institute of India, Pune, was introducing a Cinema Appreciation Course in schools. I'm not talking about college-level education; I believe that just as you encourage students to read books, at the school level, we should also encourage them to watch films.

A lot has been accomplished in the teaching of literature, particularly in the areas of narrative styles, evolution of language and forms, criticism, etc. Of course, there are books you must read and books you don't need to read. The same applies to cinema as well. Educating children about what is happening in cinema, television, and other visual media is crucial, as they are now omnipresent and powerful. Film education, not in bits and pieces, but systematically starting early enough. If they start young, they get to understand what to accept and what to reject in life. It's similar to how we learn to read. Initially, we read anything, and after a

while, we develop preferences for what we want to read and what we don't like. This principle applies to anything you want to learn, including new visual media. Appreciation of cinema can thus be taught in schools. While some schools do offer such courses, the broader educational system has often regarded them as expensive and unnecessary. But today it's no longer expensive because you can create a library of films on a pen drive. You need even less physical space than books, and the films can be viewed anywhere—in schools or at home.

**NMC:** Your approach is multi-disciplinary, encompassing aesthetics, ethics, culture, and politics, going beyond just film aesthetics and criticism. Isn't it time for us to turn to these texts and their multi-disciplinary approaches to re-situate the nature of film societies?

**SB:** Whether you are a writer or a filmmaker, whatever you do, the humane impulses are the most important. You don't need religion to be ethical; ethics apply universally, and it's the same for you and me. Kurosawa's movies illustrate this. When you need to comment or confront an issue, you either express your thoughts or exercise control; otherwise, it goes against basic ethical behaviour.

Yes, film societies can turn to texts with a multi-disciplinary approach.

**NV:** What could be the role of Film Societies in the evolving formal film education? Suchitra has tried collaborating with numerous institutions and film forums to incorporate Film Studies in their curriculum. What else can it do?

**SB:** As I said earlier, you can have an entire package of films on a pen drive. It makes sense for a film society to have an extensive collection of films. Their members, or the students or persons who have a serious interest in cinema, can simply come and see what they wish to see, and if they want to discuss, the society can facilitate that. They can invite eminent filmmakers from all parts of the world for formal meetings and initiate lectures, discussions, and conferences, particularly if they are from lesser-known film cultures. That becomes another forum for film education.

What is now possible is that apart from the choices one gets through television and OTT platforms, you have the additional option of films that you may not get otherwise on these forums. Say, for instance, if I want to see something from Tunisia, Morocco, or a country in South America such as Peru, Chile, Mexico, or Colombia, they are not readily available now. Those are the different things that film societies should explore. They should create their collections of unique but not so readily available films from different cultures. Thus, film societies have become, in fact, an archival library of world cinema. It can happen because it is no longer expensive. It's possible.

**NV:** We have seen that the film society movement in India complemented the new creative cinema, starting with the Bengal Pioneers, alternative filmmakers like you in Mumbai, Adoor Gopalakrishnan and others in Kerala, and Girish Kasaravalli in Karnataka. However, as you have said, things have changed dramatically. Although a whole new generation of bright and creative filmmakers

are producing diverse kinds of films, they are not part of the film society movement or featured in discussions on happenings in global cinema, except for their being interested in the technological aspects or the economics of filmmaking. Would you like to comment on this?

**SB:** It is essential to realise that film societies cannot exist in the conventional sense like they used to. A certain amount of pedagogical area has opened up for the new generation. That's why my emphasis is on film societies evolving as a library-like structure or resource centre. That area will become increasingly important in the future as it becomes interesting, necessary, and probably useful. For instance, we have the National Library in Kolkata and the Asiatic Library in Mumbai. If I want to study something from the 18th century, where do I go to find resources? I can go to these libraries, look for material, research, and seek their guidance to locate a subject specialist for consultation. When I did *Bharat Ek Khoj*, I did research on the Freedom Movement, the concept of patriotism and so on. My research was not limited to information from universities and their libraries; I explored various sources. I believe that the film society movement can evolve like the library movement.

**NV:** That brings us to the question of film academics and the choices that film societies have to make. In today's film education, there are two dominant streams. The first is the study of film as art, which includes exploring the history of cinema, film theories, and technical aspects. The second stream is the study of cinema as part of cultural studies,

focusing on its social, psychological, political, and cultural impacts on society. Suchitra is currently experimenting in these areas. However, there is a temptation to shift towards cultural studies, which is a departure from the traditional focus of film societies on film art and heritage. What do you suggest, and how can we effectively balance these two approaches?

**SB:** There's no need to balance. Do everything; because this also becomes an area in which more people can participate and work with film societies. It's something a film society can offer, which is very important. That's how it can extend the scope of activity and, therefore, become more valuable for people when they become members.

**NV:** But even in film criticism there is this division between 'parallel' and 'mainstream' cinema. Film journalism more or less excludes the study of the form and content of serious cinema. Though there are a number of cultural studies attempted within the framework of film studies, the intellectual discourse on cinema has still not fully developed in India.

**SB:** No. It is there. Critics who analysed films didn't worry too much about this division. They also did not become exclusivists. Take for example Mr. Chidananda Dasgupta. He did not categorise. There was no caste system like: this is commercial and this is non-commercial, which is why there was so much value to his analysis, where every filmmaker has a place because Cinema in its entirety is most important in an analysis. The fact is, every

filmmaker has a place, and one has to carefully study the aesthetics of each one. Only then will each aesthetic perspective gain a value of its own, and what they are based upon will have greater value. Some may be just cosmetic, lacking true depth, yet they can still represent a genuine cultural response. It is essential to remain open to all possibilities.

**NV:** Thank you. We would have loved to continue our discussion through your texts, but we are concluding this interaction due to paucity of time. Just a last word from you as to what film societies should be doing now in the current changed scenario of new media platforms through which independent cinema is gaining exposure.

**NMC:** Yes, what do you think should be the role of a film society in bringing very important cinematic and fundamental ethical texts to our present context?

**SB:** Well, basically, continue to provide access to films which are not easily available. I remember Suchitra and other film societies being mobile, showing films at different locations, and even showing them to village audiences. Now that's a very interesting practice because it is important to show various kinds of films for those who have no access to such films. Though we have gone digital in India, and although television is everywhere, there's a certain thing called affordability. Not everyone can afford Internet platforms or other social media. I think film societies can step in here to help and that probably would be very useful in community participation.

**NV:** Thanks a lot Mr. Benegal, for joining us today and sparing time specifically for this discussion. Thank you once again.

*The transcript of the interview was recast and edited by Parvathi Venkatraman Koelliker.*

*The interaction was facilitated by B. Suresha, former President of Suchitra Film Society.*

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