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TANIA DAS GUPTA

COVER VISUAL
Film set studio photographed with fish eye lens
Photo by Brands&People on Unsplash
https://unsplash.com/s/photos/movie-set
INDIAN CINEMA
Today and Tomorrow
INFRASTRUCTURE, AESTHETICS, AUDIENCES

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It was forty years ago that the *IIC Quarterly* published a special issue on a similar subject—*Indian Popular Cinema: Myth, Meaning and Metaphor* (guest edited by Pradip Krishen). It was a simple time, one of watching films in movie halls. The choice available was determined by distributors and theatre owners—the latest films in the local language and the occasional Hollywood film. True, around 700 films were produced annually in India and viewed by over 12.5 million people per day. Cinema was a source of recreation and an opportunity to socialise. The film industry provided employment to thousands, yet it was a financially ailing industry. How much has changed in the intervening years!

Developments in the 1990s, including liberalisation, changed this loss-making industry into one that wielded soft power globally and was a financial and economic asset for the country. The political importance of cinema was of course always well known and has continued to evolve and grow. Cinema has been, and is, a powerful tool for social mobilisation. Alongside cinema there has been the exponential growth of television, with content made especially for TV, as well as social media. The last decade has seen such a range of technologies, from the camera phone to the most sophisticated digital equipment; such an avalanche of talent, from trained to completely untrained actors and a volume of content impossible to document and categorise. However, cinema survived it all—the onslaught of home entertainment with changing formats over the years, from TV to satellite, to VCRs and DVDs, serials to OTT streaming platforms.

One must also make a mention of Film Studies, an important, if unanticipated, area that has evolved since the last decades of the 20th century. Film studies is now an accepted academic discipline, one that makes a serious study of films, cinematic history and film culture, one that is informed by film theory. Film studies analyses film content, its form, technique and stylistic elements and socio-political, historical and economic aspects.
This issue of the Quarterly, Indian Cinema Today and Tomorrow: Infrastructure, Aesthetics, Audiences attempts to understand where cinema is today. The Covid pandemic has, in the last two years, brought matters to a head for the film industry. The OTT platforms have made the most of this time of lockdowns and restrictions to provide entertainment in unprecedented volumes and a number of languages—original and dubbed. Content similar to full-length films is now being developed for these platforms, with a concomitant demand that it be recognised as such by the Oscars and festivals. What does this herald for the film industry? Is there a future for the industry as we knew it?

In the words of the guest editors, ‘Do the pandemic, and serial lockdowns which began in March 2020 mark a clean break with the pasts of cinema? Or is it more like the interval in our films, which heightens the drama but eventually leads us to predictable endings?’

The pandemic continues to dominate our lives in so many ways. There has been some respite recently but even the experts do not know how long it will last and what awaits us after that.

OMITA GOYAL
In our cultural life films have played a significant role over the last century. I am not a serious student of the cinema, so I will begin with my own personal experience over the decades. I recall seeing the earlier mythological films—Ram Rajya, Bharat Milap and Shakuntala—in the early 1940s. Since then many significant and memorable films have been made. Do Bigha Zameen, with Balraj Sahni and Nirupama Roy, was a major statement against the cruel exploitation of poor farmers by ruthless capitalists. Then there was a genre of patriotic films by Manoj Kumar and others; then again there were human interest stories such as Bandini, Pyaasa and Dosti. Again, we come to a historical masterpiece like Mughal-e-Azam with stellar performances by Prithviraj Kapoor, Dilip Kumar and Madhubala. With changing socio-economic conditions, the content of our cinema has also changed and an alternate cinema emerged in 1970, to be followed by ‘New Cinema’.

This volume has brought together a number of thoughtful essays on the various aspects of Indian cinema. In particular, the assertion of woman power is significant in that the endemic mistreatment of women is no longer acceptable and has to be opposed boldly at all levels. Also, the growing acceptance of alternate sexuality is at last beginning to feature, although still rather tentatively, in our cinema. Another trend is the dubbing of south Indian films into Hindi, which has brought a new flavour into Bollywood.

I have two personal remarks to make which, although not directly connected with these essays, nonetheless deserve some attention. The first is a comment, and the second a suggestion. It has always astonished and pained me that, despite having first-rate Bharatanatyam dancers like Vyjayanthimala Bali and Hema Malini, not a single director in Bollywood has thought it fit to present even a three-minute scene of them performing a classical dance. Instead, they are obliged to hang around the hero while 20 girls and 20 boys
are dancing behind them, indulging in what can only be called lewd gestures. Do they have such a low opinion of our audiences to believe that they cannot appreciate even a small scene of classical dance which is so evocative?

My second point is that apart from films for the film theatre we are also beginning to make some interesting serials for television. I can mention two excellent ones. The first is Made in Heaven, which is a candid view of the corruption and greed behind our vulgar affluence in Delhi. The second is an excellent musical called Bandish Bandits, which has some of the best classical singing I have heard in many years, including superlative acting by Naseeruddin Shah and others. Perhaps in a future issue we could have a couple of essays on this new and growing phenomenon of television serials.

This double issue of the IIC Quarterly represents an interesting perspective of new trends in cinema. Our double issues are very popular and become collectors’ choices. They frequently come out later as books, as is sure to be the case with this issue too. I commend the Editors for their achievement in coming up with this double issue, despite the raging COVID–19 pandemic.

KARAN SINGH