
Mumbai's Most Adored Public Institution

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Dates.sites: *Project Cinema City: Bombay/Mumbai*, in the words of its authors, is a graphic “timeline of the city of Bombay/Mumbai in the 20th Century, anchored to its most adored public institution-cinema”. A useful compendium of facts, dates and significant moments compiled and designed by Madhusree Dutta and Shilpa Gupta, the book emerges out of Cinema City, a collaborative arts and archival project involving artists, architects, filmmakers, commentators, cityphiles and cinephiles. As Dutta describes in the introduction the “parental project” is one of “collating, reading, manufacturing, archiving, recycling, re-reading...in the realms of art making, documentary practices and discursive exercises.” Comprising an exhibition of multidisciplinary artworks, commissioned films and this book, the project commemorates 100 years of cinema since Dadasaheb Phalke’s *Raja Harishchandra* (1913).

First hosted in Bombay the city of its origins, the Project Cinema City exhibition curated by Dutta and Archana Hande is a lively display of installations, photographs, paintings, sculpture and memorabilia that celebrate and chronicle the city of Bombay and the cinema that originated there. As Dutta writes: “They are the twin products of the 20th century, reared and developed through its wars, migrant peoples and moving goods and technologies of reproduction.” At the time of writing, the exhibition has travelled through different cities and has been widely viewed and discussed. I first saw the exhibition at the National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA), Bombay and was so riveted by what it had to offer that I went back the next day and enjoyed the experience just as much. When I saw it again at the NGMA in Delhi, the space in which the

BOOK REVIEW

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artworks were displayed had changed and so had the energy and sensorium around them. Artworks I had paid lesser attention to in Bombay had suddenly acquired a new life in Delhi. When artworks travel through multiple sites they are transfigured in time and space. What animates our “revisitation” to the same exhibition in a different location, among other things, is the discovery of the “new” amidst that which is familiar. In our revisits to the cinema and the city, it is the unpredictable frisson between the familiar and the unfamiliar that carries the exhilaration of new insights.

Micro-Narratives

Interestingly, *dates.sites* is a book that also invites revisitations. It follows a chronological timeline offering fragments of dates, facts, information, graphics and images that playfully allow readers to surf and explore the book in whatever order they like. Gupta imaginatively incorporates fragments and slices of photos, letters, notes, scribbles, calendars and reproductions of other material into the design of the book thereby adding yet another layer of narrative onto the timeline. Apart from material culled from history, the book incorporates calendars commissioned to and created by contemporary artists both veterans and debutants. Using found images, artists use the vantage point of the contemporary to create works that both reflect and speculate about the past. However, notwithstanding their excellence as artworks, the calendars – some more than others – could well appear to the less

attentive reader to be actual relics of the past leading us to reflect further on how the past can be invoked and “materialised” through the language and tools of the contemporary.

The quirky and polysemic style of presenting the timeline considerably “lightens” the weight of the written word while allowing for a number of connections to be made through the multiple juxtapositions of laterally connected information. Therefore, the history of the film industry, illuminated by histories of technology, migration and labour, provides a series of interesting networks through which to view cinema and the city. What emerges out of this seemingly playful but substantive timeline is not only a history of Bombay cinema but innumerable micro-narratives – factoids, anecdotes, observations and comments – that shape and texture the larger story. The spine of the timeline and therefore the book unfolds chronologically through each decade, which in turn is unpacked through a densely layered yet playfully quirky *mise en scène*. Therefore, we get to know that when in 1913 *Raja Harishchandra* “is made with funding from a textile mill baron” it is immediately preceded by two years that inaugurate the “registration for motor cars” and the Cricket Quadrangle Tournament played by “English vs Parsis vs Hindus vs Muslims” and a playful scribble that observes “the rest don’t play cricket”! The arrival of film and its evolution becomes embedded in a landscape of many histories. 1929 is a year of several simultaneous developments related to Indian cinema. It witnesses the founding of the Prabhat Film Company in Kohlapur, Ranjit Movietone Studio in Dadar, the launch of film magazines *Chitrapat* (Gujarati) and *Moving Picture Monthly* (English). In the same year, the Hollywood film *Melody of Love* is screened at Elphinstone Picture Palace, Calcutta and is the first talkie to be ever screened in India.

Cinema of the Time

What emerges through this juxtaposition is also a complex notion of what constitutes the history of Indian cinema

and while the project is primarily anchored in the city of Bombay, it is significantly shaped by developments in other regions and indeed other countries. About this period (1925-33) we are also told that “though creatively prolific, this period marks a restless phase for the industry – with film companies and studios shutting down, some reopening, some realigning, a few branching into and forming breakaways: as well instances of desertion, poaching legal fights, scandals, bankruptcies, etc.” During this phase “textile workers launch a six-month long strike”, “maternity benefits in mills are introduced” just as job openings for women are reduced thereby pushing them into the “informal sector” while the “Communist Party mobilises large-scale support among workers”. Multiple histories coalesce to paint a complex landscape against which emerges the cinema of the time.

If the book is a pleasurable journey through history, it is because play and whimsy create a delightful “lightness”. Readers will find their own ways of navigating the book and take the liberty to surf and pause over whatever detail or anecdote that catches their fancy. In my case, I was happy to be reminded that the launch issue of *Cine Blitz* (1974) had a picture of Protima Bedi streaking across the beach and that Dev Anand (1975) stood up against the Emergency to form the National Party of India. As someone who has never lived in Bombay, I was intrigued to learn that the queue for *Sholay* (1975) at Minerva theatre was so long that it extended to the bus stop three kms away and was promptly christened “Sholay Stop”. I have found innumerable bits of information that are new and enlightening. One of my favourite entries is from 1960: “Popular director Nanabhai Bhatt, father of Mahesh Bhatt, directs seven films simultaneously over the phone”.

Inevitably, readers will also find their own omissions and absences. As someone who works on the 1990s, I detected at least two significant “omissions”. The first is any mention of the treaty signed between the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-Shiv Sena and the Film Makers Combine (FMC) which was preceded by

the attacks on allegedly “pro-Pakistan” actors like A K Hangal and Dilip Kumar and subsequently followed by a spiral of Hindu right-sponsored attacks on sexually transgressive images including the Tuff Shoes advertisement that the book mentions. During this phase, the attacks in Bombay were spearheaded by Pramod Navalkar’s “clean-up culture” drive. The second omission is any mention of Riyad Wadias’ *BomGay*. Based on poems written by the gay poet B Raj Rao, this bold and pioneering gay film is usually considered a “first”, notwithstanding the slipperiness of this category. The film is significant for a number of reasons not the least of which is Rahul Bose’s admirably courageous role in a risqué and sexually explicit episode. The inclusion of *BomGay* would have usefully queered both the city (as that is what the film is about) and Project Cinema.

An Online Presence?

While the conception and vocabulary of *dates.sites* is academically inflected, there appears to be an implicit disavowal of scholarly contribution. I feel that the book would have gained considerably had it imaginatively incorporated the innumerable insights that we have gained from scholarship on Bombay cinema over the last two decades. Not only would this have allowed the history of cinema and cinematic texts to acquire both nuance and thickness but it would have also thrown open the timeline contents to multiple interpretations thereby displacing sweeping generalisations like, for instance, describing Ekta Kapoor’s soap operas as “regressive”. Kapoor’s soap operas have been the subject of much lively debate among feminists and are watched and enjoyed by many of us who call ourselves feminist.

More importantly, the inclusion of insights gained from film scholarship would have helped unmoor the project from being entirely sociological and allowed an investigation into the idea of the cinematic. I say this particularly because the idea of the cinematic city has critically transformed our ideas about the relationship between cinema and the city. The city of Bombay is not just a place that is home to the film industry

but also a space invoked in innumerable films that is in excess of the sociological city. In her book *Bombay Cinema: An Archive of the City*, Ranjani Mazumdar describes the cinematic city (of Bombay) as an “archive that is deeply saturated with urban dreams, desires and fears”. The cinematic city transfigures the sociological city by imploding the borders between the landscape and the mindscape.

No project is ever all-encompassing and complete just as we are aware that no encyclopaedia is truly encyclopaedic. Timelines and databases are bound to have gaps and absences and it is precisely this incompleteness that carries the promise of new discoveries. Only recently, Lawrence Liang, scholar of law and culture, has accomplished the arduous task of making available online *The Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema* compiled by Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Paul Willemen. This is of immense benefit to scholars, students, cineastes, cinephiles and practically everyone who is interested in what is broadly understood as “Indian cinema”. Not only is the Encyclopaedia virtually available to every reader with internet access but open to contribution from cinephiles and scholars. I hope *dates.sites* too will one day acquire an online presence thereby acquiring even greater density and thickness. There is no doubt that this excellent book, a must-have for all film and city lovers, deserves to have many lives and incarnations.

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EPW Index

An author-title index for *EPW* has been prepared for the years from 1968 to 2010. The PDFs of the Index have been uploaded, year-wise, on the *EPW* web site. Visitors can download the Index for all the years from the site. (The Index for a few years is yet to be prepared and will be uploaded when ready.)

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