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A still from *Kalpana*

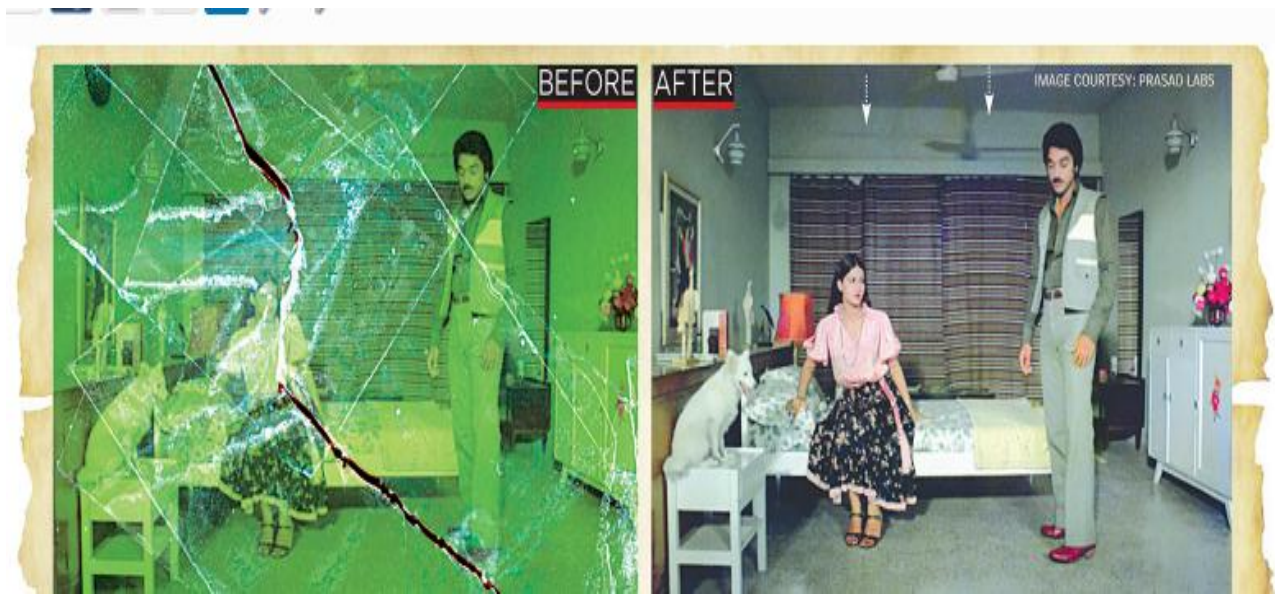
PRESERVING FOR POSTERITY

WHILE INDIA IS THE LARGEST PRODUCER OF FILMS IN THE WORLD, THERE IS VERY LITTLE AWARENESS ABOUT THE NATION'S DWINDLING CINEMATIC LEGACY

● **SAYONI SINHA**

In 2008, when noted filmmaker Martin Scorsese was researching for a documentary on The Beatles star George Harrison's life, he met with Pandit Ravi Shankar. Harrison was introduced to the finer nuances of the sitar by Shankar in the late sixties. It is then that the noted sitarist had casually mentioned his brother Uday Shankar's magnum opus *Kalpana*. Released in 1948, the film directed by and starring the dance maestro, narrated the story of a young dancer who aspired to set up his own academy. Intrigued by the plot, Scorsese couldn't resist watching the film and called it "a great work of hallucinatory, homemade expressionism". A fervent proponent of preserving films, he had even considered restoring it for the World Cinema Foundation (WCF), an outfit he established to support the restoration, preservation, and dissemination of neglected films around the world. But since *Kalpana* had a limited release even in India, it wasn't easy to source the film. When filmmaker Shivendra Singh Dungarpur learnt of WCF's interest in *Kalpana*, he felt compelled to help out. "I had watched the film at a private screening and felt it would do a world of good to have it restored. In India, old films, like monuments, are given a heritage tag but left to rot," says Dungarpur.

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—Kavita Prasad, Director, Prasad Corporation Pvt Ltd

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Following his numerous trips to the National Film Archive in Pune, *Kalpana* made it to a lab in Bologna for restoration. Four years and 4000 hours of intensive labour later, the film premiered at Cannes Classics in 2012.

While *Kalpana* got a timely shot in the arm, most of our cinematic heritage prior to 1960s has dwindled. In fact, more than 98 percent of our silent films have been destroyed, while the first talkies, *Alam Ara* (1931) has been missing from India's archives. And in a country that annually produces over 2000 films in 36 languages, the lack of effort extended towards preservation is appalling. In the silent era, the Madras film industry made 124 silent films and 38 documentaries, none of which have survived except *Marthanda Verma* (1931), the second silent film in Malayalam. Also, most notably, nothing remains of the first Tamil silent film *Keechaka Vadham* (1918) or the first Tamil talkies *Kalidasa* (1931). Even the first Telugu talkies *Bhakta Prahlada* (1932) and the first Kannada talkies *Sati Sulochana* (1934) have been removed from physical history.

LOSS OF HERITAGE

In the 1990s, the advent of digital film-making allowed for tremendous possibilities as costs shrunk drastically. Expensive film, which was tedious to preserve, was replaced by digital formats that lasted longer and were distinctly more affordable. Film is fragile in nature and with age, is susceptible to nitrate deterioration, colour fading and vinegar syndrome, a form of decay. Before 1951, most films were shot on cellulose nitrate base, the same material from which gunpowder is made. Many early nitrate films were destroyed when fires broke out in vaults, studios and even during projection. This was until the advent of cellulose acetate, a comparatively durable alternative. India's first feature film, *Raja Harishchandra* was lost to fire, forcing Phalke to reshoot the film in 1917. Another reason for this cinematic loss is that the nitrate films were often sold by producers for commercial gains. "One could extract silver from the nitrate films. Even acetate films were used to manufacture bangles," explains Prakash Magdum, director at the National Film Archive of India (NFAI).

In order to be preserved, films need to be stored in a temperature and humidity-controlled environment. Unsurprisingly, the climatic conditions in India have never

A LOST HERITAGE

- Out of 1700 silent films, only 5-6 complete films and about 20 incomplete films remain.
- The 1919 film *Billwamangal*, which was the first Bengali silent film, and *Jamal Babu* (1931) have survived.
- Madras film industry made 124 silent films and 38 documentaries, none of which survive except for the Malayalam film *Marthanda Verma* (1931), the second silent film in Malayalam.
- After the arrival of sound, 250 films were made between 1931 and 1941. Only 15 exist today.
- As far as the South Indian film industry is concerned, nothing remains of the first Tamil silent film *Keechaka Vadham*(1918) or the first Tamil talkie *Kalidasa* (1931). First Telugu talkie *Bhakta Prahlada* (1932) and the first Kannada talkie *Sati Sulochana* (1934) are also lost.
- By 1950, India had lost 70 to 80 per cent of our films. No copies of the first Indian talkie *Alam Ara* survive.

Courtesy: Film Heritage Foundation

been conducive for preserving films. The major Indian film industries were centered around the three major colonial port cities of [erstwhile] Bombay, Madras and Calcutta where high humidity levels endangered the film reels. Most filmmakers were compelled to rely on labs or warehouses to store them. "Producers would pay an annual deposit fee to a lab to store the original negative of the film. However, if the film was not very successful, the producer would stop paying the deposit fee, resulting in the labs dispatching the prints to old warehouses," says Durgapur, citing the instance of the first Konkani film *Mogacho Auncho* directed by Al Jerry Braganza. In 2015, Durgapur's Film Heritage Foundation received the last surviving reel of the 1950 film wrapped in a newspaper. Following a "rescue operation" at the film restoration lab L'Immagine Ritrovata in Bologna, Italy, the Konkani film was scanned on 4K in 2017. Efforts to retrieve the soundtrack are still in process. Even Guru Dutt's 1957 timeless classic *Pyasa* fell prey to neglect and the original negative had completely melted, with parts damaged or lost. "It took a team of 45 experts who toiled over a period of four months," says Sushil Kumar Agrawal, CEO of Ultra Media, adding that the team scanned both the 35 mm print as well as the original camera negative, using as much as was possible from the latter. *Pyasa* was sent to the 72nd Venice International Film Festival to compete with 20 other restored films for the coveted 'Venice Classics Award' in 2015.

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It took a team of 45 experts and four months to restore Guru Dutt's *Pyasa*

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BRINGING BACK GLORY

In 2009, a mini-retrospective of Mrinal Sen's films at Cannes fell through when the noted director realised that all his negatives, including his Kolkata trilogy — *Interviu*, *Calcutta 71* and *Padatik* — were damaged. Amidst the national outcry, the then Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh asked the I&B Ministry to chalk out an immediate plan of action and 17 films were nominated for restoration at the NFAI. The restored version of Sen's *Khandahar* was screened at Cannes the following year.

Until a decade ago, India's relationship with film preservation and restoration was largely transactional. When a film was required to be screened or aired, the makers would bother themselves with investing in its restoration. "The state of film restoration in India is still very nascent. Most labs that restored films have shut down. So, they either got rid of the negatives in their custody or handed them out to whoever claimed them. The rest is history waiting to be restored," says film historian Amrit Gangar, who was instrumental in bringing back German filmmaker Paul Zill's 1946 corporate documentary *India's Struggle for National Shipping* back into the public domain. The process of restoring film entails returning a film format to its original state. It involves not just repairing physical damage, but also accounts

NFAI'S RECENT ACQUISITIONS

- 21 negatives of six films
- Negatives of V Shantaram
- Unfinished films of Ritwik Ghatak
- About 30 hours of footage of World War 2 that features Indian Soldiers in action on foreign land.
- Personal collection of G Aravindan family
- Acquired a nitrate-based Telugu classic film 'Palanati Vudibhan' (1947) directed by Gudavalli Ramabrahmam and L.V. Prasad
- Digitised 505 films right from the 'Silent Era' of which 325 have been restored.
- 50 Telugu films of 1950-60s
- Acquired surviving footage of the Indian silent film *Bilvamangal* (1919) from the Cinematheque Francaise, France.

the budgets shooting up. In India, most restoration is for broadcast and hence, the preferred choice of resolution is HD or 2K. A combination of automated and manual restoration is adapted to meet the budgets," says Prasad.

One of the biggest challenges in India is that films tend to be viewed purely through the prism of commerce and not as an art form. "There is reluctance to



for the creator's original intent, artistic integrity, accuracy and completeness of the film. "After physical inspection, manual cleaning and digitisation, it involves a detailed analysis of the scanned image, understanding and documenting the defects and rectifying them frame-by-frame. Common defects include dust, scratches, vertical lines, colour fading, chemical stains, stabilisation of frames and damaged portions such as cuts and tears," explains Kavita Prasad, the Director of Prasad Corporation Pvt Ltd (previously Prasad Labs). The 60-year-old company has been engaged in film restoration since 2006 and has refurbished over 2500 features including Hollywood, French and films from around the world. Their portfolio of restored classics includes over 50 Academy Award-winning films and classics such as *My Fair Lady*, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *North by Northwest*, *Gone With The Wind* and *How The West Was Won*.

ART VS COMMERCE

Film restoration in India is a complex process and despite world-class resources, the final product doesn't size up. "International work for restoration from studios or archives, to a large extent, is for archival purpose. So, they need a higher resolution output (4K and 8K) and the restoration is manually done to retain its originality. This results in

spend money on restoring films as producers cease to value them once they are outdated and fail to see a reason in spending money to resurrect them," says Durgapur, adding that a full-fledged restoration by world-class standards can be an expensive and time-consuming exercise — sometimes even exceeding the film's production budget. "India is currently not doing full-fledged restorations that begin with photochemical restoration process for celluloid. Digitisation and basic digital image and sound clean-up passes for restoration. Most are happy with this as the cost is low and they consider the quality good enough for telecast or Internet streaming," he adds.

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Clockwise from the left: Udayar Pathe (1944), Aparoopa (1982), Chemmeen Ramu (1965), Manasa (1939) and Aurat (1940) have been restored by NFAI

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-Shivendra Singh Durgapur, Founder, Film Heritage Foundation.





Restored version of Charulata (1964) was screened at Cannes in 2018

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When we visited the Cannes market, we learnt that our film will find audiences and distributors only if the quality of the film is top notch. That's when we thought of investing in restoration."

—Varsha Bansal on restoring six Satyajit Ray titles

We have seen

Another obstacle in accomplishing film preservation is its prohibitive cost. A frame-to-frame picture and sound restoration costs about ₹20 lakh in India for a 2K restoration from a 35mm print. Evidently, the quality of restoration is often directly proportional to the budget allocated. "We have seen both kinds of situations: work getting done in bulk for the sake of getting the title back where quality isn't a chief concern, and those where detailed research work is undertaken. I worked on MS Sathyu's *Garm Hava* where a lot of research went into restoration and the film was corrected in consultation with Sathyu," says Purab Gujar of Cameo Media Labs. Gujar's lab along with its French partner Lobster Films has restored more than 100 National Award-winning films (mostly audio restoration jobs) including Richard Attenborough's *Gandhi* and 11 Satyajit Ray titles, out of which six are owned by The RDB Organisation, the company set up by Ray's long-time producer R.D. Bansal. In 2011, Bansal's



NFAI director Prakash Magdum at the film archive

der the responsibility of safeguarding India's vast film heritage alone. Like other countries, we should have had several film archives preserving films and film artefacts and documents," says Dungarpur. The foundation has been organising workshops on film preservation in India for the past five years and its 2018 edition saw participation from Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar and Malaysia. "I attended a film restoration course and thought there would be no better way of creating awareness about our cause or start a movement to develop an indigenous resource of film archivists and restorers than to have workshops like this in India," he says. In the last few years, even NFAI has managed to reach out to a larger audience. "Apart from preservation, another major objective of the archive is public access. To that direction, NFAI now has a presence on social media platforms. We have been using these

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owned by The RDB Organisation, the company set up by Ray's long-time producer R.D. Bansal. In 2011, Bansal's granddaughter, Varsha took up the arduous task of restoring their Ray catalogue, funding it herself. "We had preserved them in analog. But with advancement in technology, humidity and heat, preservation is becoming a difficult proposition. No matter how you preserve it, some amount of deterioration takes place every year," she regrets. Bansal assigned Mumbai-based studio Pixion to help clean and restore the films. "We scanned out negatives in 2K resolution and each and every frame was worked on, the audio was cleaned and the scratches were removed. It is a very labourious process that consumed a year-and-a-half." The end result was applauded when *Charulata* was presented at Cannes as a part of the 100th anniversary of Indian cinema in 2013. "When we visited the Cannes market, we learnt that our film will find audiences and distributors only if the quality of



NFAI director Prakash Magdum at the film archive

the film is top notch. That's when we thought of investing in this." While the market for restored films still needs to open up in India, internationally, exhibition and public access of restored films has its own niche. Major film festivals such as Cannes, Berlin and Venice have classic film sections that showcase prestigious restoration projects. "There is even a classic film market in Lyon and festivals devoted to classic cinema such as Il Cinema Ritrovato in Bologna, the San Francisco Silent Film Festival to name a few. Some restored films have also got a theatrical release as was the case when Janus Films released Satyajit Ray's *Apu Trilogy* after it was restored," says Dungarpur adding that the restored films are also finding their way to streaming platforms like The Criterion Collection. "Companies such as Criterion and Curzon only focus on classics and if they are convinced about your film, they spend on research and restoration. They also take care of the packing so that it appeals to the film connoisseur," points out Bansal.

WINDS OF CHANGE

In 2014, when veteran lyricist and filmmaker Gulzar received the Dadasaheb Phalke Award, people started looking for prints of his iconic movie, *Maachis*. None could be found till Dungarpur located one from a small town in Madhya Pradesh. Before his foundation came into existence, the National Film Archive of India (NFAI) was the only film archive in the country for the largest film industry in the world. "It was impossible to expect them to shoul-

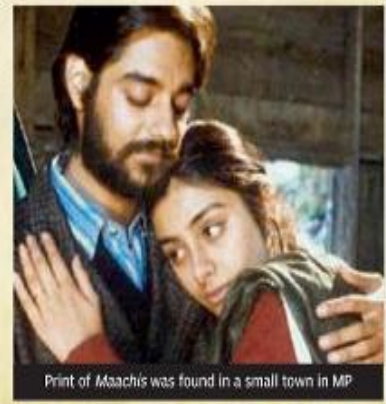
NFAI now has a presence on social media platforms.

We have been using these platforms to share trivia and information from our huge database so that film lovers can access it," says Magdum. The organisation has also restarted the NFAI Research Project in 2015 where studies and monographs on the importance of Indian Cinema have been conducted. Film preservation is a highly specialized field and India, till date, had no diploma or degree course in its curriculum. The archive has also initiated the idea of a year-long PG Diploma in Indian Film Studies at University of Pune and has started a number of film appreciation courses across the country along with FTII.

While steps are being taken to revive our lost glory, there's a long way ahead. "If we don't preserve our cinematic heritage now, there will be nothing left to restore," concludes Dungarpur.



Film restoration work in progress



Print of Maachis was found in a small town in MP