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Where the city ends, where cinema begins...

S.R. Praveen



Great relic: A poster of India's first talkie 'Alam Ara' is part of an installation in 'Project Cinema City'.

"I came to Bombay during the period of Emergency after getting married. Bombay symbolised freedom. You get in a local train or stand at a paan-beedi shop, nobody recognises you. For me, Bombay is liberation from a lot of dos and don'ts and unwanted ties. It is a city that lets you be. I suppose films in some way give you that platform of shared activity, because you suddenly feel an integral part of what you are watching. You are not a passive audience, you are active, and Bombay gives you that chance," says 59-year-old Farrukh Waris in the 'Women viewing cinema' section of Project Cinema City, an ambitious project that makes use of installations, films, research papers, artwork, demographic mapping, and a myriad other media to understand Mumbai through its film industry.

The ongoing project, organised by Mumbai's National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA) and the Ministry of Culture with ample support from Majlis, an arts collective, to mark 100 years of Indian cinema, started around two years ago. The various documentations from the research were published as a book 'dates.sites' in 2012.

A second book to emerge out of the project 'Project Cinema City: Documents' is set to be released at this year's International Film Festival of Kerala (IFFK) to be held here from December 6 to 13. Just like the project, the book too will make use of various media to explore the social, historical, and cultural engagements that have played a part in the evolution of the city and its cinema.

One of the interesting sections of the project is made of various maps. A collection of demographic maps shows us the distribution of locations of directors, cinematographers, editing rooms, and even animal suppliers for films.

Quick glance

A quick glance is enough to tell you which specific street is the nerve centre of which trade. Another set of maps traces the spread by decade of cinemas in Mumbai from 1900 to 2000. Eight odd dots at the southern tip of the city in 1900 exploding to innumerable dots in every corner by 1990 give one an immediate picture of how cinemas have spread. Maybe, a present-day map would see some of those dots disappearing.

Even serious studies of cinema beyond those seen on the screen often forget to mention the thousands of faceless people who toil as extras, light boys, hairdressers, tailors, and labourers on the sets. But this project has a whole section dedicated to the sweatshops behind the arc lights and various workers' unions. A short video of all their ID cards with stringent conditions printed on it, set to the monotonous soundtrack from these shops, conveys much more than a long essay on the topic.

The installations and art works spread over various parts of the city also talk about viewing habits and other interesting trends such as tent cinema and non-metropolitan cinema. The project includes a three-month course on city narratives in cinema and literature for interested candidates.

As the project's curator, Madhusree Dutta says the only way to exhibit or disseminate a research art project on popular culture is by making it conducive to foyers, corridors, and classrooms, and then invading the museums.

Though Mumbai which breathes cinema makes itself conducive to such a project, it would not be a bad idea to

replicate some of it in other cities, including the home city of the IFFK.

'Project Cinema City: Documents' set for release at the IFFK uses various media to explore Mumbai through its cinema.