

THE HINDU

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MINERVA TALKIES

Five short of a centenary

Stephen Putnam Hughes

In our era of flashy multiplexes there does not seem to be much recognition of the early film history that still remains, scattered across our urban landscapes. As a case in point, the Batcha Theatre lies tucked away on a quiet side street off Broadway in a congested commercial part of George Town in Chennai. There located on the first floor above a rice warehouse, the small and unassuming theatre continues to screen films to its local clientele as it has since 1916. Against all odds, Batcha Theatre holds the honour of being the city's longest running cinema hall; the last survivor of the first generation of cinemas in the city. With the long serving Gaiety and Crown Theatres being pulled down in recent years, the unheralded Batcha (which for many years ran as the Minerva) still has a chance to reach its centenary in another five years' time.

The Batcha originally opened under the name of the National Cinema Theatre. The original proprietor, W.H. Murch, repurposed the first floor of a warehouse building into a small theatre seating 650 with a spacious open-air roof garden. This unusual layout continues to this day and is a telling remnant from the earliest years of film exhibition.

The coolest theatre

In the days, before purpose-built cinema theatres became the norm, exhibitors inventively made the most of what space they could. Yet even located above a grain warehouse, Murch proudly claimed the theatre to be “The most up-to-date, coolest and comfortable Theatre in the Presidency” in an advertisement in *The Hindu*, from July 12, 1916. Murch was well justified in claiming the title of coolest Theatre in the Presidency since the unusual roof top location gave the theatre excellent ventilation.

Murch's National Cinema Theatre started with a promise to the Madras public from the same advertisement: “Civility and attention to your needs, expert operator, latest pictures. Two hours solid amusement, instruction and comfort.” In this respect, the National was offering a similar package of attractions to the other competing Madras cinemas at the time, such as the Elphinstone Picture Palace, the Gaiety Theatre located on Anna Salai (then Mount Road) and the Crown nearby on Mint Street.

Political message

However, what distinguished the National was the well-advertised aim of “appealing to all classes of audiences.” During its first few months of operation advertisements for the National used the distinctive tag line “rendezvous for all classes” as a way to reinforce the public identity of the establishment (*The Hindu*, July 8, 1916, 5). This conspicuous effort to promote the National as a kind of democratic space carried a pointed political message that matched the name of the theatre. The choice of the name, National Theatre, was in itself a provocation.

With respect to all other cinema theatres that had operated in Madras up to that point, the name ‘National’ marked an important shift away from names more closely associated with British rule. Compared to cinemas like the Elphinstone, the Crown or the Empire, Murch's National was making a new statement. Even though he was likely to have been European, Murch's choice of the name “National” immediately aligned his establishment with the cause of Indian nationalism and democratic reform.

With the launch of the Home Rule League a few months prior to the opening of the National, the local political scene in Madras had suddenly been transformed by a great deal of energy and enthusiasm for political change. Advertisements in the Home Rule newspaper, *New India*, show how Murch hoped to mobilise the energy of this political movement for selling tickets at the National. Instead of mentioning the all-class appeal as he had in *The Hindu*, in *New India* Murch advertised the theatre as a “rendezvous for ‘New Indians’”— calling out specifically to those sympathetic with the Home Rule movement. This political dimension of Murch's commercial appeal opens up the possibility of understanding early film exhibition as being something more than mindless escapism. Instead, Murch was clearly trying to pitch his film screenings as a socially inclusive form of high minded entertainment for mobilising like-minded people as part of a common political cause questioning British rule in India.

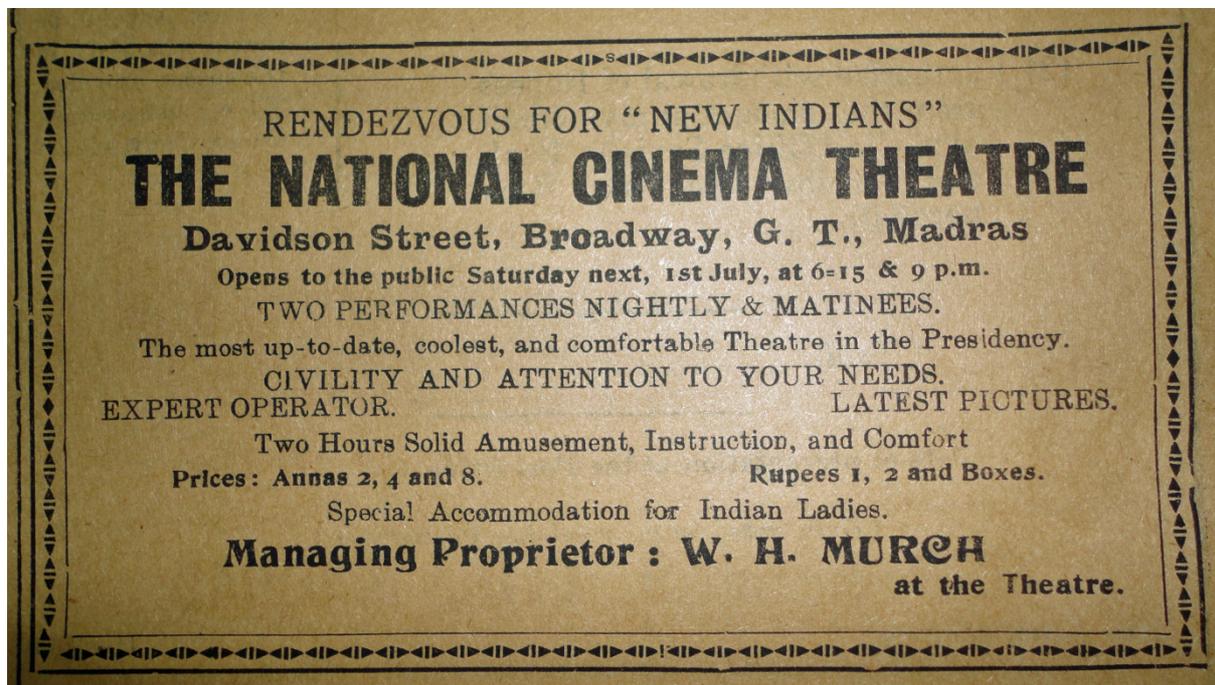
Beyond these tantalising clues we may never really to know why or even who attended the National Theatre. Nevertheless, we do know that it was well-located in the main commercial hub of the city. It was near Kotwal Chavudi, the main wholesale grain, fruit and vegetable market in Madras. It was also near tramlines and so easily could have drawn cinema-goers from across the city. Although the National enjoyed initial success, this was only short-lived.

Final goodbye

Less than a year after it opened, at the end of February 1917, the National Cinema Theatre announced in *The Hindu* of February 28 that it was closing for a few days in order to make certain structural alterations and improvements. The National Theatre never reopened. Instead, after a gap of one year the National was replaced by a new theatre under the name of the Empire Cinema in March 1918.

I have yet to find any evidence that there was anything more to this change over than a simple story of commercial failure. Yet, there is no way that given the turbulent local political situation of 1918 that the Madras film-going public would have failed to recognise the symbolic political implications of the Empire prevailing over the failed National Theatre. So just as the Home Rule Movement in Madras was beginning to unravel, the new establishment effectively rebranded the cinema space in the name of the Empire and publicly realigned itself with loyalty and service to the British regime. The Empire managed to have a much more successful run throughout the silent era until 1934 when it was rewired for sound and renamed the Sri Jagan Mohan Gopalkrishna Cinema. This new talkie cinema only lasted a year before being taken over by the management of Chammria Talkies Distributors and reopened as the Minerva Talkies in 1935.

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