

Date: 14/02/2010 URL:

<http://www.thehindu.com/thehindu/mag/2010/02/14/stories/2010021450230500.htm>

In search of beginnings

DR.STEPHEN HUGHES

On the trail of the first films that were shown in Chennai, Dr. Stephen Hughes discovers the magic of those early days....

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Venue of the first screening: A view of Victoria Hall to the right of Ripon Buildings in Chennai.

The beginnings of cinema in India remain poorly understood. Given how important cinema is in India, this is surprising. Beyond the first film screening in India at the Watson Hotel in Bombay during July 1896, very little is reliably known about the beginnings of the cinema here. This curious lack of reliable information served as my initial motivation for tracking down how film was introduced in south India.

The search begins

What about Madras? I wondered. One story commonly repeated was that an American named M. Edwards arranged the first cinema screening at the Victoria Public Hall during 1897. As I was in London, I was able to begin my search with the aid of microfilmed copies of newspapers held at the British Library in London to confirm the story. I scrutinised both dailies available there — the Madras Mail and the Madras Times for the entire year of 1897 and found absolutely no reference to Edwards. I widened my search to the years 1896 and 1898 and still no Edwards. I may not have found what I thought that I was looking for, but instead I found new and surprising evidence for how film shows began in Madras. In Bombay, cinema was launched with great fanfare. In contrast the surprisingly early first appearance of projected film in Madras just five months later was overshadowed—both by the weather and by other events in the city. Madras's first cinema shows in December 1896 were low key events put on by someone who had already been living and working in the city. T. Stevenson, the proprietor of the Madras Photographic Store (167 Mount Road) offered the first “cinematograph or animated photograph” shows over three nights at the beginning of

December 1896. Specialising in the import and supply of dark room equipment and photographic papers, Stevenson's photograph business first appeared in Madras during 1895.

His venture into film was clearly an extension of previous experience in staging magic lantern shows. His premiere started at 9:30 at the Victoria Public Hall and consisted of ten short films and many magic lantern slides, many of which were of local interest depicting views of Madras such as the Guindy horse races and a Mowbray's Road street scene. Madras audiences would have already been well acquainted with magic lantern lecture demonstrations, which had been regularly held in the city over the previous decades. But in the context of Stevenson's first film exhibition the juxtaposition of the static magic lantern photographic views with film would have undoubtedly heightened the novel effect of moving pictures.

Let down

While the show was hailed as the "latest development of photographic science," a "present London sensation", a "marvellous invention" and a first for Madras, the shows were not heralded as the triumph they were. The introduction of cinema to Madras was more of a damp squib, literally. The first film shows coincided with a cyclonic storm, which dumped over five inches of rain on the evening of the first show. It was reported that only "a few adventurous ones went forth to see his show" (Madras Mail, 8 December 1896). On top of the bad weather, the long anticipated opening ceremony of the newly constructed museum building in nearby Egmore was held on the same evening and diverted the leading citizens of Madras away from Stevenson's show. And with cinema admission prices at Rs. 3, 2 and 1, he was certainly pitching his entertainment at the high end of Madras society. Though perhaps, it was better that the turnout was so low, since this was Stevenson's first public show and he was yet to perfect his projection technique. One reviewer complained many of the pictures were "not distinct enough and in some cases seemed too rapidly worked" (Madras Mail, 9 December 1896).

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THE CINEMOTOGRAPH.—Last night's exhibition of the Cinematograph at the Victoria Public Hall was very poorly attended, perhaps on account of the inclemency of the weather. Some of the scenes and objects exhibited were really fine. "The Empress of Russia in Paris," "Yoking the mule" "the parade," "Discussing the cab-fare and its result," these and many others were realistic to a degree. We would suggest to the enterprising proprietor, that the exhibition should be given in each suburb of Madras, as the Indian public is generally averse to going long distances at nights.

What they said: A short review published in The Hindu, December 9, 1896

The Madras newspaper reviewers obviously felt sorry for Stevenson's less than successful first run of shows. One reviewer offered helpful encouragement by imploring him "not to be disheartened by the unfortunate circumstances he has had to contend with" and hoped that he would "give some further exhibitions in Madras with the weather in his favour" (Madras Mail, 8 December 1896).

The newspaper accounts of Stevenson's shows do not give much detail on the films screened and are themselves somewhat inconsistent. For example the Madras Times claimed that "More than a half a dozen moving photographs or cinematographs [sic] were exhibited, which elicited the admiration of the audience. Some of these were excellent, such as the harnessing of a donkey and a sailing ship, while others were not very distinct" (7 December 1896). Yet even though contemporary newspaper accounts were rather vague, it is still possible to decisively identify several films from Stevenson's first shows. From the descriptions of a film representing "the Czar's recent entry into Paris," and the 'donkey riding' film (mentioned above), we can trace these films to the work of an obscure English filmmaker. Stevenson sourced some of his from Esmé Collings, a portrait photographer working in Brighton, England who made a small number of films in 1896.

Significant figure

After this less than triumphant start Stevenson went on to be a very important though now largely forgotten early figure in promoting the cinema throughout British India. Further, we can now see that from his start in Madras, Stevenson was a much more pivotal figure for the early history of cinema in India than Sestier, who had initially grabbed the headlines but never ventured beyond Bombay during his brief stay in India. In contrast Stevens using Madras as his base of operations extensively toured south India during 1897 introducing projected motion pictures for the first time in Hyderabad, Bangalore and countless as yet undocumented other places. During his first year, Stevenson returned to Madras on two other occasions to collect imported projection equipment and a new supply of films, and of course to stage more film shows.

Stevenson's success at film exhibition led him to quit his position at the Madras Photographic Store in 1898 and shift his base of operations to Calcutta. With this move he completed his transformation from a photographic equipment dealer to a travelling showman and focused on bringing film shows to new audiences throughout eastern India.

Madras

FRIDAY EVENING, DECEMBER 4, 1896.

<p style="text-align: center;">VICTORIA PUBLIC HALL CINEMATOGRAPH or ANIMATED PHOTOGRAPHS.</p> <p>Saturday, Monday & Tuesday, 5th, 7th & 8th.</p> <p>ADMISSION Rs. 3, 2 and 1.</p> <p>Soldiers' in uniform half price to Second and Back Seats.</p> <p>Doors open at 8-45 P. M. Performance at 9-30 "</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Plan at VEST & Co.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">SHYTRA FIGS. SHYTRA FIGS. FINEST QUALITY, per box Rs. 1-4. SPENCER & Co., MOUNT ROAD.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Bishop Cotton Schools and College, Bangalore.</p> <p>BOARDERS received. Boys by Rev. A. E. Buxton, M. A., Oxon. Warden; Girls by Miss TEMPEST.</p> <hr/> <p style="text-align: center;">Just Received.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">A TREATISE ON CATARACT In the Madras Presidency, Southern India, with a Tabular Statement of Five Hundred Cases, By T. H. POPE, M.D., C.M., F.R.C.S., Ed., B. Sc., Superintendent, Ophthalmic Hospital, Madras. Price Rs. 1-4; postage 1 Ad.; V.P.F., Rs. 1-3. HUGHES & Co.—Madras.</p> <hr/> <p style="text-align: center;">Compendium of Games</p> <p>SPENCER & CO. beg to invite attention to their range of COMPENDIUMS OF GAMES, containing all the newest games. From Rs. 3-3 to Rs. 37-6.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">T on 5 F. sign</p> <hr/> <p style="text-align: center;">A Dist and on Circ stat A</p>
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Novelty beckons: An advertisement in the Madras Times.

Some sources have even credited Stevenson with introducing the first-ever film show in both Calcutta and Dhaka during 1898 and with assisting the Bengali film pioneer Hiralal Sen to make his first films.

From this research it is clear that Madras played a much more important part in establishing early film throughout India than has been previously acknowledged.

The author is an UK based scholar who specialises in the cultural and social history of south India