

Urban Mobility and the History of Cinema-Going in Chennai

STEPHEN HUGHES

From the early years of the 20th century the introduction of new forms of transportation coincided with the beginnings of cinema in Chennai. The emergent transportation networks helped to set the coordinates for film-going within the urban geography of Chennai and, in so doing, directly linked the experience of cinema with that of the city around it. This essay addresses a series of questions about how urban mobility relates to the early history of cinema-going. How did early audiences get to the cinema theatre? To what extent did cinema halls rely upon public transportation to bring in their audiences? In what ways did new forms of transport contribute to the history of film-going?

The cinema created a common movement of people through urban space. As cinema houses became conspicuous destinations within the urban geography, they ordered the movement of people to and from their specific locations, through regular schedules of opening and closing times and through ticket sales. As cinema audiences came and went they created directional flows as one crowd gathered and another dispersed, creating a kind of physical mingling, a jostling of bodies moving at cross-purposes. The sites of cinema exhibition provided a focal point of urban action, around which there was steady movement of people and crowds coming, going, congregating, lingering, and loitering. Cinema halls were dense transfer points within the urban landscape. They programmed the movement of people and traffic wherever and whenever film shows were screened.

Cinema theatres linked up with the wider city through transport. Transport allowed for the physical movement of audiences to and from the cinema. There were many different ways to go to the cinema and all of these would have varied in terms of duration, distance, mode of transport, and itinerary. Depending on whether one travelled on foot, by rickshaw, riding in a horse cart, tram, bus, or car, going to the cinema also meant having to navigate one's way through the city. In this sense, the very movement through the urban landscape of Chennai and the experience of streets, buildings, crowds, traffic, and sounds that went with it, merged as part of a trip to the cinema. From the perspective of someone going to the cinema, the urban journeys before and after the event inevitably framed the experience of films within the everyday rhythms of urban life.



Esplanade, Madras (no publisher identification). This photograph, dating to about 1910, shows how tramlines dominated even the widest of Chennai streets. Author's personal collection.

PARALLEL TRACKS

The development of public transportation roughly coincided with the growth and success of cinema exhibition. This relationship can be traced back to the end of the 19th century when cinema and tramways were introduced within years of each other. Both appeared in the public spaces of Madras as conspicuous signs of a colonial modernity. Both were based on new mechanical and electric technologies of movement, involved considerable capital investment, and were run through ticket sales as a commercial enterprise. Further, public transportation and cinema halls both opened up and institutionalized new kinds of public space, which allowed for greater mixing at close proximity among those of different castes, classes, and religious communities that would otherwise not normally interact.¹ As such, both created, shaped, and sustained movement through the city; they opened new pathways and also worked the already well-trodden routes in the complex networks of spatial order imposed by the colonial administration, commerce, labour, residence, religion, education, and leisure.

The history of transportation in Chennai is, of course, much older than that of the cinema and cannot be fully addressed in this essay. The point I want to stress here is that, well before the cinema, transportation played an important part in the making of Chennai as a single place. With the old colonial seat of power, Fort St George, at the centre, Madras was built up in the 1800s around three main concentrations – George Town, Triplicane (including Chindatripet), and then to the west with New Town, Vepery, and Purasawakkam. It also expanded geographically by incorporating surrounding villages into a sprawling decentralized, low-density conglomeration of suburbs. The overall effect was the development of three congested and distinctly urban areas within a city that was a somewhat random, fortuitous collection of villages rather than an integrated and centralized whole. The spread outwards was to a great extent encouraged by the movement of Europeans into garden homes in the periphery on previously cultivated land. These areas were generally interspersed

between and cut off from the older Indian villages. By the turn of the century most of the British residents were widely scattered in spacious residential garden suburbs (Egmore, Chetpet, Kilpauk, Nungambakkam, Teynampet, and Adyar). This left the most congested urban areas of the city for Indian residents. In 1900 two-thirds of the population lived in one-fifth of the total land area.² Outside of these congested areas the rest of the city seemed almost rural.

With its history of decentralized urban growth, transportation has always been of particular importance in Chennai. Prior to the development of mechanized forms of transport, Chennai residents mainly relied upon the rickshaw, the *jutka*, and the horse carriage. The rickshaws were small hand-pulled, two-wheeled carts fitted with a seat. Many families owned private rickshaws, but the vast majority of rickshaws were available for public hire. The *jutka* was also a two-wheeled, covered cart fitted with a bench or benches but was usually pulled by a pony (or sometimes by bullocks). Four-wheeled horse carriages (landau type) were the most common form of transport of the colonial elite until the early decades of the 20th century.³ In Madras, the private ownership of a means of transportation was always a privilege of the wealthy elite, especially for those living in the suburbs. The majority of Indian residents who lived closer to the urban centres would have been less likely to own transport, but would have probably been able to walk to most places. Owning or having easy access to transportation held the possibility of experiencing Madras as a spacious city of great distances.⁴ In the words of one British visitor, who described Madras as a city of suburbs, "You can drive out six miles one way for a garden party and three the other way to dinner."⁵

Into this social hierarchy of transport practices on the streets of Madras, the electric tramway introduced the first mechanized form of public transportation. The Madras Electric Tramway Company Limited received official authorization from the Madras Government in 1892. Tracks were laid in 1894 and, though there are conflicting accounts on this, trams were probably also opened for at least some limited public use the same year. The trams were a matter of considerable civic pride as they were the first of their kind in all of British India and only the second in Asia after Bangkok's trams started in 1893. The first tramline in Madras used an underground conduit system to supply electricity – which proved too vulnerable to flooding during a destructive monsoon season in 1895 when the fledgling tramline was destroyed. The electric tram reopened on May 7, 1895 with a single line powered by an overhead wire system.⁶ New tracks were laid and operations expanded in 1904 when the business was reorganized as part of a new company called the Madras Electric Tramways (1904) Ltd., which ran until 1953 when bankruptcy forced its closure.

The tramway gained an immediate presence in the urban landscape. Already in 1900 a British traveller described the popularity of the trams in strong terms: "The native enjoys cheap, rather rapid and very crowded transport, such as he loves, in electric tramcars."⁷ Over the first decade of the 20th century, the tramway consolidated its place in Madras by continuing to add new tramcars and to extend its lines into the suburban periphery. Tramlines not only connected the three main urban centres, but also linked them with the dispersed suburban residential sprawl. By connecting up its constituent parts with a common and habitual movement of people, the tram helped to articulate the city as one publicly shared place like never before. By 1914 Madras electric tramway cars ran at frequent intervals to nearly every part of the city. There was a ten-minute service between Egmore station and the Custom House on Beach Road, which passed through some of the busiest commercial streets of George Town. There were also branch lines, which conveyed

passengers to and from all of the most important urban neighbourhoods – Royapuram, Chindatripet, Mount Road, Royapettah, San Thome, Triplicane, Purasawakkam, Washermanpet, Mylapore, and other suburban areas.⁸

Trams not only helped physically to integrate the city through networks of movement, they also brought the people of Madras together in new ways. As a mode of public transport trams opened up a new kind of public space that allowed for new social relations across race, caste, class, and religious lines. The tramcar was a new, shared experience, which challenged established social boundaries while creating its own particular form of public space. The introduction of the railway and trams thus created contentious sites of interaction and confrontation between brahmins, non-brahmins and Adi-Dravidas. One such early conflict flared up around the appointment of several Pariah conductors during 1908. This met with protest from orthodox communities, who managed to convince the Company to sack their low-caste conductors and replace them with employees from other castes.⁹

As the Madras tram continued to carve out and expand the pathways of urban movement, the social experience of this form of transport also became normalized as part of urban living. A 1933 article, which offered a series of lighthearted and humorous reflections about tramcars in Madras, described more amicable and self-consciously democratic social relations. “We, the residents of Madras, who use the tram are conscious democrats and we glory in our democratic sense.”¹⁰ This



Salt Cotaurs (formerly the tram shed), Elephant Gate Bridge Road, Choolai.

