

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.

