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[Arts & Culture](#) » [Cinema](#)

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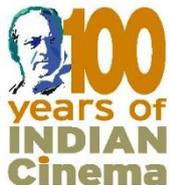
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## Show time

By Stephen Putnam Hughes



**The year 1913 marks an important new development in the creation of a permanent home for film in specialised cinema theatres, which is every bit as momentous as Phalke's films. By STEPHEN PUTNAM HUGHES**



THE widely celebrated centenary of Indian cinema presents us with the opportunity to pause and reflect on what exactly the year 1913 represents. Most obviously, 1913 marks the date of Dadasaheb Phalke's first feature film. This serves as the convenient starting point in the conventional story of how cinema became Indian. Yet, in some ways, this is a curious date to memorialise. It does not mark an absolute beginning since moving pictures were introduced in India by Europeans as part of a

global event in 1896. It does not even mark the beginning of Indian cinema since there were at least a handful of other Indians who had also successfully been making films before Phalke. Nonetheless, we are all queuing up to commemorate the 1913 achievement as the beginning of the Indian cinema century. So what exactly are we celebrating and why might 1913 be a date worth remembering?

With all due respect to Phalke, I would like to use this occasion to do something more than celebrate the great man theory of film history. Going beyond Phalke's well-publicised film-making efforts, I want to use the occasion to reconsider the otherwise greatly neglected year of 1913. A myopic focus on his early efforts at film production runs the risk of obscuring other, perhaps more important, historical developments that laid the foundation for the Indian cinema century. In particular, I refer to the major shift in the business of film exhibition that accompanied and enabled Phalke's film-making success. Though it will go ignored in the centenary celebrations, the year 1913 also marks an important new development in the creation of a permanent home for film in specialised cinema theatres that was every bit as momentous as Phalke's films. This was not an isolated event limited to one film studio in Nashik, but was a wave of collective action that rapidly swept across British India in and around the year 1913 and set the pattern that has enabled films to exert an everyday presence in the lives of people in India ever since.

At this point after about 100 years, it is difficult not to take cinema theatres for granted as if they have always been there. However, the first emergence of permanently dedicated venues for the cinema was once upon a time an important innovation that created the possibility of regular, habitual film-going habits where there had been none before. This shift to a new exhibition model represented the first physical foothold that cinema claimed for itself in India. The first generation of cinema theatres transcribed what had been a touring and transitory show into a fixed architectural presence and social space within the urban landscape. They effectively rewrote the cinema's contract with its audience offering new comforts, an ever-changing film programme and better musical accompaniments. Exhibition at dedicated theatres provided the necessary material and social infrastructure that has sustained the century of Indian cinema.

### **Touring cinema shows**

To understand the significance of this revolution in the presentation of films, we must first briefly return to the years before 1913. One of the unique features of the earliest period of cinema in India was that film exhibitions were exclusively provided by touring cinema companies. For example, in south India the city formerly known as Madras was the most important stopover for the early touring cinema shows. These shows also visited, to a lesser extent, all major cities, hill stations and cantonments in the south as part of a circuit that extended through British India and beyond. Itinerant showmen visited the city sporadically for short engagements ranging from one night to a week. These companies were independent, small-scale concerns with low overheads, designed to make a quick profit with a few shows and then move on. The standard practice was for the travelling cinema companies to bring along a limited stock of short films, which they owned outright (the system of film rental through distribution offices and local dealers only developed later during the 1910s). When exhibitors exhausted their film repertoire or their audiences dwindled, they left for a new city. This obligatory itinerancy meant that while in Madras touring companies most commonly found temporary accommodation in rented halls or set up in tents pitched on open ground. The wide range of different temporary venues helped to distinctively mark early film shows as a more heterogeneous experience embedded within a greater variety of different institutional settings and performative practices than what would emerge as a more standardised and permanent, purpose-built cinema theatre experience of later years. This pattern was common for all of South Asia where

a United States trade representative estimated that in 1910 there were about a total of 70 touring cinema companies operating throughout British India, Burma (Myanmar) and Ceylon (Sri Lanka).

After about a decade of operating on an exclusively touring basis, entrepreneurs in India began to experiment with establishing more permanent theatres to host film shows. The first purpose-built theatres to become associated with film shows in India were in fact built primarily to host live entertainment. The British/American theatrical impresario Maurice Bandmann built the Empire Theatre during 1908 (still surviving as the Roxy cinema theatre) in Kolkata to host his own numerous touring companies, which specialised in musical comedies and variety performances. Working on this same model, Bandmann went on to build and operate the Opera House in Bombay, which was completed in 1911. Though both of these theatres would eventually be converted into cinema-only venues during the late 1910s, they were not conceived or built primarily for the sake of staging film shows. Rather than being permanent cinema theatres as we understand them today, these venues were initially regarded as places to host touring entertainment companies of which cinema was only one amongst many.

When the film trade started to explicitly use the category of “permanent” to mark its theatres, it was doing so as part of an attempt to present something different from touring cinemas and live entertainment shows. For example, in Madras there were three attempts to start specialist cinema theatres between 1911 and 1913, all of which used the new and improved label of “permanent”.

### **‘Permanent theatres’**

A woman, who went by the name of Mrs Klug, was the first film exhibitor to establish a permanent cinema theatre in Madras. At the beginning of April 1911, Mrs Klug established what she advertised as a “cinematograph theatre”, which eventually became known as “The Broadway Bioscope” or simply “The Bioscope”. This was not a purpose-built theatre for film shows but was an already existing space modified and redecorated for use as a theatre. It must have started out well since after a few weeks Mrs Klug started to advertise that the Bioscope had been “opened permanently in Madras” (*Madras Times*, April 17, 1911: 1). In the end Mrs Klug’s Bioscope managed a run of six months.

Considering that before Mrs Klug film shows had only stayed in Madras for a maximum of one or two weeks before moving on, the Bioscope represented a major change in the availability of cinema as a potentially everyday activity. Mrs Klug’s Bioscope set a new standard of daily access and a constant stream of new films the likes of which Madras cinema-goers had never seen before.

After Mrs Klug’s interrupted effort, the next “permanent” cinema theatres in Madras started in 1913 on the north-east end of Mount Road. The Empire Cinema opened in early 1913 in what had been a part-time music hall known as the Lyric Theatre. The owner and manager of the Empire Cinema Company, D.E.D. Cohen, was already known in Madras as a Calcutta-based agent for European performance companies who booked and directed tours throughout India, Ceylon, Burma and the Far East. Cohen, who was part of a prominent family in the Baghdadi Jewish community of Calcutta, rented the Lyric from a Madras-based Anglo-Indian musical dealer, Wallace Misquith.

The first floor theatre space had been used to help promote Misquith’s music business, which was located on the ground floor of the same building. The Lyric was outfitted as one of the most comfortable theatres in Madras at the time, featuring the novelties of “electric lighting and new tip-up seats”. With these up-to-date facilities, the theatre quickly became a popular venue for touring entertainment companies.

## **Important innovation**

Even though Cohen gave his new commercial entertainment the label of a cinema company, he started out with an ambitious schedule incorporating a steady stream of live theatrical acts along with films as part of a variety programme. This marked an important innovation where cinema theatres in Madras started to serve as the preferred local venue that hosted other less frequent itinerant entertainment companies. Yet, the Empire had been running successfully for about five months before Cohen began to advertise its “permanent” status. With great fanfare, the Empire announced in July 1913 that it was permanently established at the Lyric Theatre (*Madras Times*, July 10, 1913).

Despite a minor fire incident that forced a temporary closure for repairs, the Empire Cinema Company provided entertainment intermittently for about a total of seven or eight months over the course of 1913. Like Mrs Klug’s Bioscope, this may seem to be a very temporary existence for a so-called permanent institution, but Cohen’s Empire Cinema marks the moment from which daily film shows have run continuously in Madras. In this most auspicious centenary year, the cinema has had a permanent everyday presence in the city’s cinema theatres ever since.

## **‘Picture Palaces’**

In addition to the Electric Theatre, 1913 also saw the first purpose-built permanent cinema theatre in Madras. The Electric Theatre was the first cinema hall in Madras to project itself as a picture palace, or as they put it, “The Premier Picture Palace”. In 1913, picture palaces were still a new concept in film exhibition. The strategy behind this new designation was to upgrade the image of the cinema hall through architectural and decorative means. Even though the Electric Theatre was a rather simple construction consisting of a large corrugated iron shed with a brick facade, it tried to enhance the experience and comfort of theatre experience with the trappings of wealth and refinement (not unlike today’s multiplexes).

Compared with the on-and-off-again record of Cohen’s Empire Cinema, the Electric Theatre provided a much more regular and stable new home for film shows in the city. Over a period of 21 months the Electric Theatre was a highly successful venue for a mixed entertainment format that combined film and live variety performance. The construction of the Electric Theatre was the initiative of Warwick Major, an ambitious plan to promote a theatrical circuit that encompassed India, Ceylon and Burma. In this regard the Empire Cinema and the Electric Theatre were similar in that they were conceived as important new pieces of an integrated commercial entertainment strategy in a much larger circuit that stretched well beyond the local context.

Both Cohen and Major followed the same commercial entertainment strategy that moved seamlessly from the stage to the film screen, from touring variety acts to permanent venues. It was this balancing act that created a new commercial equation where film shows were the stable and fixed attraction at permanent theatrical venues while the variety artists came and went on their wide-ranging tours through Asia. Though the touring entertainment circuit would have been Cohen and Major’s main priority at the time, their investment in local cinema theatres was a movement that was sweeping across British India and laid an important part of the foundation for a century of cinema.

The shift to permanent and fixed cinema theatres was an important moment, albeit uneven and not immediately successful, that provided local focal points that created a social life around the cinema. The emergence of permanent cinema theatres was the decisive intervention that allowed film-going

habits to develop as part of the everyday life of Indians. Unlike touring cinema companies that targeted a narrower elite clientele for short engagements, the new permanent cinema theatres explicitly sought to broaden their local patronage as part of a shifting business model. Permanent exhibitors were trying to fill their theatres on an everyday basis and keep satisfied audiences coming back for more. And to do this they were trying to sell their entertainment as something for everyone. Thus, the shift to permanent cinema theatres also helped to mark a decisive reorientation that helped to rebrand film shows as a public entertainment space that was open to all and could be shared by all classes. This was as much a social experiment as a business venture in that exhibitors were attempting to accommodate diverse social groups that would not otherwise have had the occasion to mix. The first permanent cinema theatres introduced a new kind of public social space characterised by a shared experience of watching films and a kind of intermingling of class, gender, caste, religion, race and language communities that had no equivalent within the highly segregated and complex colonial sociology of British India.

To return to the question I posed about why we are celebrating 1913, Phalke certainly deserves his due recognition for his efforts in giving cinema an Indian identity that has grown and prospered ever since. However, insofar as the centenary of cinema in India focusses our attention on Phalke's first feature film, we are at risk of privileging a film production over everything else that was happening in and around 1913. I argue that the eventual success of Phalke's films was directly related to changes in film exhibition that led to the first generation of specialist cinema theatres. While Phalke was figuring out what kind of films Indians would pay to watch, a small army of entrepreneurs-turned-exhibitors started the Indian cinema century from the ground up with a basic bricks, mortar and corrugated iron approach. By creating local theatre spaces for cinema, these exhibitors created a widely dispersed, even grass-roots, social movement of film-going and film fans that has served Indian cinema very well over the 100 years.

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