Indian Cinema in Durban: Urban Segregation, Business and Visions of Identity from the 1950s to the 1970s

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The need for cheap labour on the sugar cane plantations of Natal led to the importation of indentured labour from India: Between 1860 and 1911 one hundred and fifty thousand indentured workers arrived in Natal from India. Mainly they arrived from areas in the north west of India, the south eastern coast of India where Tamil and Telegu is mainly spoken and from the north eastern areas of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh.

In spite of the low wages, long hours and strenuous working conditions the majority of them had to live with at the outset, the Indian community of modern South Africa managed to develop a very rich culture. It is a unique culture in many ways due to the many different influences coming together in it – each with their own ideas of what it means to be Indian and of India itself.

An important influence on the development of Indian identity as well as ideas and imaginings of India itself was the Indian film. It is usually an overlooked contribution to Indian culture in South Africa, but a vital one which played an important role not only in the field of visual expression, but in music as well.

In my research, I have looked at the influence of Indian film on the lives of a particular group of Indians settled in Durban and Natal, but the people I have interviewed come from different language, religious and class backgrounds. The idea has been to gain insight into the significance of film in the lives of these different people. The time frame of my study is very specific, and the findings relate to the period between 1955 and 1975.

Visual entertainment has being a part of the South African Indian community for most of their history. It has taken many different forms from dance to drama. Hence, the advent of Indian cinema industry was quick to make an impact on South African Indians. It was not long after India started producing its own films than they made their appearance in South Africa. This was mainly in the form of short silent films, usually shown on a projector set-up in a particular area, and the entire community would turn up to see the moving pictures.

The projector was usually set up in the building that was known as the temple, but was actually a school during the day and a place were community meetings were held. There seems to have been two early cinemas operating catering to Indian audiences during the days of silent films before 1940, but the first proper cinema to be opened by non-whites in Durban was the Avalon theatre, owned by Kajee and Moosa (Moosa, 2001).[1]

Although mainly Indians frequented the early cinemas, people of other races also patronized them, but mostlyly when English films were screened. The owners of the new cinemas were keen to open them up to other races and made formal proposals to the government to allow for African and Coloured people to attend the their film shows. South African segregation policies, however, meant that Indian film did not gain the appeal across race boundaries that it has in other parts of the world where there is an Indian diaspora

The importation of movies was difficult. As early as 1936, the Indian government tried to export films to South Africa. There was much correspondence between the government of India and the government of South Africa, between parliamentary officials, immigration and customs officers of the two countries. The Indian government requested the lowering of duties on the importation of Indian films. They argued that due to the small population of Indians in South Africa, high import taxes would mean that films could not be imported.[2]

Another argument was that South African Indians were as a whole very poor before 1960. "A survey as late as 1943/44 estimated that 70,6 per cent of Indians lived below the established Poverty Datum Line" (Freund, 1995:40). On the 29 September 1939 the Immigration and Asiatic Affairs office provided these statistics of the number of Indians residing in South Africa as of 1936 who were either first generation Indians or Indian that were born here (Immigration and Asiatic Affairs, 1939):

[1] There seems to be conflicting reports on the dates of the first cinema opened and whether it was actually Avalon cinema or the silent movie cinema. The other issue is whether the silent movie cinemas were cinemas in the conventional sense or were they just rooms that were used to show movies. From my interview with A.B. Moosa he seems to think that the Avalon cinema was the first non-white owned cinema in South Africa. I will try to investigate further.

[2] Several references made in reply to the Indian government on the duty taxes and the progression made in getting the Indian governments request being heard.

Cape	10.508
Orange Free State	29
Transvaal	25.493
Natal	183.661
Total Population	219.691

Although the South African government recognized the low population of Indians, it did not agree to the request from the Indian government. The main reason given was that it would give preference to one community over others - the South African government would then have to reduce taxes on all imported films (Secretary Board of trade and Industries of South Africa, 1940). The other reason was that "Indian films appear to be purely a money-making matter and not for the education of the Indian community"[3]. This, however, did not mean the end of Indian film imports into South Africa as the opening of the Avalon cinema in 1940 indicates.A further complication arose in 1948, with the coming to power of the National Party government in South Africa and the introduction of formal apartheid, following which the Indian government introduced sanctions, including a prohibition of the export of Indian films to South Africa.

The ways in which Indian films managed to travel to South Africa in spite of all are both interesting and complicated. They are also steeped in controversy as they were by seen as some to have been illegal, but were in most cases mainly a matter of finding a loophole in the system. In my interview with Mr. A.B. Moosa, he shunned any idea of the importation of Indian films into South Africa having been illegal. He claimed that the importing of film was "perfectly legal."

The actual process of importing worked as follows. The Indian government as far as it was concerned exported films all across the world except to South Africa, Rhodesia and the Portuguese territories[4]. Therefore the films would go to distributors in London, Singapore, Hong Kong, Beirut and the Fiji Islands, and South African cinemas would buy the films from any of these sources.

There were several problems with this way of acquiring films. One was that the South African distributors ended up paying twice as much for the films than they would have if acquired directly form India. A distributor interviewed by the *Graphic* newspaper is quoted as saying, "We are paying through our noses for second rate stuff" (The Graphic, 1969).

A second problem was that once a South African distributor had bought a film he could not be assured of exclusive rights over the film in South Africa. If one distributor bought a film from an agency in London, a different South African distributor might buy the same film from a distributor in Singapore, and there was no

[3] Interview with Board of Censors 28. August 1939.
[4] The trade sanctions on Rhodesia (present-day Zimbabwe) and Portuguese territories are probably because they were still colonies.

agency in South Africa to protect the rights of the distributor. A third problem was the irregularity of delivery due to this system of importation, which meant that distributors often had no idea what film they would receive when.

The 1950s witnessed a rise in the opening of cinemas not only in Durban but also in other parts of South Africa. The Kajee-Moosa group did not have a monopoly in the film market, and different people opened many other cinemas. Ramnikal Goshalia opened the Naaz Cinema in 1953 when the Victoria Picture Palace's lease expired. The Rajab Brothers established the Shah Jehan Cinema - named after the emperor responsible for the building of the Taj Mahal in India - in 1956.

The Rajab brothers opened their second cinema on 26 April 1968, the Shiraz that was housed in the new Rajab Centre in Victoria Street[5]. Twenty years after the Rajab Brothers had established the Shah Jehan they embarked on the launch of a new movie theatre, the Isfahan. It was opened on 4 November 1976. The Isfahan seated a maximum of 700 people. This cinema has recently regained its popularity, and many people frequent it to watch Indian films.

Although all of the cinemas mentioned above have been based in the centre of Durban, many cinemas sprang up also in the other parts of Durban such as the Mayville cinemas and the Avalon cinema in Pietermaritzburg. Mr. Valli Mohammed was the 'man behind this scheme'(The Graphic, 1969). He was also the director of the company that ran the Avalon cinema in Johannesburg.

The cinema complexes themselves were large and grand. They came to be a very important part of the architecture of their areas at the time as spaces where people would come together. The grandness of each cinema became something of a marvel and would be featured prominently in advertisements (The Graphic, 1969)[6]. The Avalon cinema in Pietermaritzburg boasted that its ladies' powder room would have music relayed into it during show time (The Graphic, 1969).

The cinemas were often large and would seat up to one thousand people. Names were inn keeping with the grandeur and splendour of the cinemas - Shah Jehan, Isfahan, Raj, and Shiraz. They all aimed at to linking themselves with an Indian past royal dynasties Mughal extravagance, and the luxurious interiors of the cinema houses would be made out to resemble the rich halls of the Mughal palaces. The walls were adorned with rich carpetry - usually in colours if deep red and royal blue. There were little kiosks within the cinemas that provided sweets and chocolates.

This linkage with the Mughal past was probably made stronger by the fact that South Africans Muslims owned many of the cinemas, but it also has to do with the cultivation of a very particular idea of the past. In orientalist representations, the Mughal era has been developed into the general idea of India's history, and it is

[5] See, http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/specialprojects/greyStreet/cinemas.htm, Title: Grey Street, Durban: Cinemas- the "Silver Screen"

[6] In this issue of The Graphic an article describes the grandness of the cinema as well as providing an artist impression of the cinema.

interesting that not only in the diaspora, but also in India itself there is has been an urge to cling to the orientalist vision of the past (Said, 1978).

An instance of this can seen in the development of nationalist discourse in India from the 1920s onwards – a discourse which made its way to South Africa and became part of the life world of South African Indians and which would include it prominently orientalised notions India (Prakash, 1995). Another, more down-to-earth reason for the dynastic naming of the cinemas could be that they seen and meant to be seen as palaces of excess and enjoyment - cinemas did indeed come to represent this in the lives of the many Indians in Durban.

A similar notion of grandeur and extravagance seems to have been attached to cinemas in Nigeria in the form of names like the Palace and the Queen's theatre, but in this case rather seeking grandeur through a linkage with the British Empire. This was the case in Kano were cinemas in a similar way were aiming to introduce an experience of splendour into the lives of audiences there.[7]

Most of the cinemas in Durban showed Hindi movies, but they also showed English films, as black Africans under apartheid regulations were not allowed to attend the various white-owned cinemas where such films would otherwise be shown. Hence, some movie houses would also have a separate hall in the building showing English films alongside those where Hindi movies were screened (Leader, 1969).

Hindi movies would be mainly shown from Monday to Saturday. The most popular shows were the Saturday five o'clock and seven o' clock shows. Although the films were in Hindi, and Indians of other language groups went to watch Hindi films as would Indians of different religious backgrounds. This was due to two factors - first, that cinemas did not import films made in other Indian languages as they were more difficult to come by, and secondly, that the languages of Urdu[8] and Gujarati are similar to Hindi, and therefore Hindi was fairly understandable to the language groups that were most prominent in Durban and South Africa.

Another reason for the exclusive importation of Hindi films was of course their popularity as Bombay is the centre of popular film production, and Hindi is the language of the Bollywood film. Thus, being in Hindi became part of what was making a film popular – even today when copies of films in other Indian languages are more easy to obtain, it is very rare to see an Indian movie screened in Durban which is not in Hindi. Films by Satyajit Ray or even Mani Ratnam may only be glimpsed at an occasional film festival.

The Tamil language is very different from Hindi therefore the understanding of Hindi films was more difficult for the Tamil speakers, but many of them still went to watch Hindi films. It is strange that Tamil films were not being shown to a greater extent, as the Tamil speaking population is very large among the Indians in South Africa. In Durban, the early cinemas did not show any Tamil films, and it was only

[7] Cf. Brian Larkin's "Colonialism and the Built space of Cinema in Nigeria" in the present volume.
[8] Many South African Muslims speak Urdu, however many Muslims also speak Gujarati.

with the opening of the Naaz cinema by Mr. Goshalia in 1953 that Tamil films came to be billed at all. "These were a hit instantly" (Naidoo, 2001). "Naaz would run a Tamil film for four shows a day and the film would run for up to four or five weeks continuously, Monday to Saturday. These shows were always well attended"[9]

The first Tamil talkie to come to this country was called *Vanmohini* and one of the stars of the film- called Pandharibhai - is still living. Initially when Tamil films were not being shown in South Africa, people would put on shows in the cinema halls in Tamil which tried to imitate stories from films as people were acquainted with them through reading by word of mouth. These shows would have a set of musicians playing music as well as dance acts included in them - this form of entertainment in the Tamil language ended when the screening of Tamil films in South Africa began (Naidoo, 2001).

During World War 2, there was a dip in the screening of Tamil films as they became more difficult to obtain. Hindi films, however, were still shown on a regular basis. The decline in the screening of Tamil films and the demand for them led to the formation of a new company importing Tamil films. This set up competition for the Naaz Company.

The new cinema company was called Mayville Theatres and was owned by the Pathar Brothers. Mayville Theatres challenged the Hindi movie world here by showing Tamil pictures and met with very positive response. [10] It became like a pilgrimage to go to watch them - especially on Sundays when people used to travel from all areas of Natal - from Chatsworth (which was then still a farming community), from Tongaat and the city of Durban (Naidoo, 2001).

The screening of Tamil films led to an increase in the interest in Tamil music. "Through the movies people would learn new songs and then they would go to Goshalia's music shop to buy gramophone records which sent Ramnikal's record sales up". [11] Tamil record selling began to make serious money for the Goshalia family, and they imports of music records from India went up. At the time, records available were all 78rpm which meant that songs had to fit theformat of the shellac record, which was three minutes and baceame the standard for both Hindi and Tamil film songs. In this way, Tamil film music gained a great influence also on musicians and singers in South Africa.[12]

The success of the screening of Indian movies in South Africa during the

[9] http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/specialprojects/greyStreet/cinemas.htm, Title: Grey Street, Durban: Cinemas- the "Silver Screen"

[10] Those Tamil people that went to watch Hindi film as there were not many Tamil films now could go and watch Tamil films, this would have led to the decrease in crowd. Nevertheless, Indian film was in such demand I doubt that it really affected the Hindi film market.

[11] http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/specialprojects/greyStreet/cinemas.htm, Title: Grey Street, Durban: Cinemas- the "Silver Screen"

[12] Gujarati and Urdu speaker mainly watched Hindi film in cinemas and only with the advent of Television and the video machine could they watch Gujarati and Urdu films. With the advent of the Global Asian channels such as Sony, B4u and ZEE T.V. do Urdu and Gujarati speakers get to view more their language films, though this is also kept to the minimum as Gujarati and Urdu films are usually aired around once a week.

1950s to the middle of the 1970s was quite phenomenal. Every Saturday the cinema owners were guaranteed a full house - many people would book a week in advance to see a film. At times, it would not matter what film was showing, and the owners themselves often had no idea as to which film they would have on by the end of the week. When this occurred the film was termed a "surprise feature", and people would go to watch a film only to find out in their seats what the title of the film was.

The popularity of Indian cinema also affected the type of films being imported which were mainly commercial and mainstream movies. This tended to create a one-sided view of the Indian film industry in South Africa as poeple did not get to see instances of the art cinema which was also being produced in India. A directors like Satyajit Ray is almost unknown in South Africa – partly because he worked in Bengali. In South Africa, only the Bombay film industry received attention and later Madras with the screening of Tamil films.

The arrangement of space within the cinema house and the dynamics that were involved in the arranging of the seating were often quite complex. Primarily, cinemas aimed at attracting the Indian population of South Africa as their main patrons but this does not mean that they were not also interested in other customers.

Due to the Group Areas Act, the area in which the theatres were situated would determine the race of people that patronized it. Problems arose as there were no cinemas built in the urban areas to service the African Coloured population. Africans were supposed to travel a long distance to view a film in the townships - if a township cinema was at all in existence.

Although Indian-owned cinema houses in Durban were situated were in the predominantly Indian areas of Grey Street, Victoria Street and Queen Street, Africans and Coloured people were also allowed to occupy certain spaces within that part of the Central Business District. In fact, the relationship between the Indian and the Coloured communities of Durban has been one of fluidity. The interaction between Indian and Coloured people led to many different forms of inter-racial relationships, and many Coloured families lived in Indian areas and Indians in Coloured areas.[13]

The cinemas found that it was almost impossible not to allow Coloured people into their theatres as many Coloured women and men were married to or in a relationship with Indian women and men. Finally, on the 8th of December 1958, a permit was issued to allow Chinese, Indians and Coloured to attend the same cinemas, but the permit was refused to Africans.

The owners of the various cinemas aimed at attracting the African, the Coloured as well as the Chinese market with the English films they screened. In fact, there are many records of applications to the Secretary for Bantu Affairs by the

[13] The areas that were designated Indian and Coloured under the Group Areas Act, those no longer exist.

Indian cinema owners[14] to be allowed to bring African, Coloured and Chinese audiences into the cinemas. Coloureds and Chinese were granted permission to patronize certain cinema houses but, Africans were consistently denied entry.[15]

On 7th November 1959 a report with recommendations was submitted by the Chairman of the Group Areas Board concerning permission to give Africans access to cinemas. At the same time, the Scala Cinema was granted permission to build a theatre on a plot of land near the Indian trading area. It was located on the corner of Mansfield Road and Warwick Avenue.

This became the only cinema at the time to cater to a black African audience - it was screening films from 9:00am to 10:00pm, and its patrons were made up of seventy per cent Indian, ten percent Coloured, and twenty percent black African people. When the Avalon Cinema in Victoria Street also opened its doors to people of other races, it only did so in the afternoon and evenings. Chinese people were not allowed to attend these types of cinemas, as there were no separate seating arrangements available.

The cinemas claimed that they were providing a service for the Group Areas Board who were concerned with having too many 'natives' loitering around the street. The cinemas provided a place for them to go to at night when waiting for buses and it cliamed to aim at attracting the many Africans and Coloured people who used to hang around there all day (NTS,).

The above-mentioned applications, rejections and finally acceptance and approval of the screening of films to members of different races at the same time illustrate the rigid control over space and movement that the state in those days exerted over the urban population.

There were many concerns about how to keep the "idle native" occupied. The Indian cinema owners used this to their advantage, making money out of the state's problem by providing a way to take the Africans off the streets and into the enclosed spaces of the cinemas. However, for Africans to be allowed into the cinemas, there had to be separate seating arrangements. An example of this were the seating arrangements of Shah Jehan. It had two thousand seats and only three hundred and eighty seats of them would be made available to "natives only".

In addition to this, the cinemas had to provide separate entrances and exits as well as separate toilets. Just as the architecture and structure of other cinemas in Africa were being influenced by the colonial conditions, these Indian owned cinemas were being influenced by the condition of Apartheid. In Nigeria, e.g. similar divisions of space in the theatres were not uncommon with certain seats being reserved for "whites only".[16]

More informal and discreet were the mechanisms of gender segregation,

[14] By Indian cinema owners I mean the owners of the cinemas were Indian. This reference does not denote the type of films screened.
[15] See (NTS,) for applications submitted between 1959-1960 by the Raj Cinema
[16] See Brian Larkin, "Colonialism and the Built space of Cinema in Nigeria" in the present volume.

which meant that it was very rare for female Indian cinemagoers to ever go to watch an English film where they might both be exposed to immoral contents and the company of an audience of pre-dominantly non-Indian males. While in Lamu in Kenya, Indian cinemas had formalised "ladies' nights", this segregation in Durban along gender lines seems to have been effected more informally.

The increase in petitions to have access to wider audiences illustrates the importance of cinema in both promoting Indian culture in Durban and also as a means of creating the economic wealth. Cinema helped to create a specific class of prosperous Indian businessmens and led to the establishment of further businesses that depended for their prosperity on cinemas and moviegoers. The increase in business for buses that would now gain an extra route on the weekends to the cinemas, for the many record companies that sprang up and for the fashion retial industry was spectacular. The sari shops had a steady stream of customers always looking for the latest saris worn by the film stars.

The cinema houses of Durban were thus not only a communicative tool that allowed for the passing on of ideas from India, but also as a vehicle that created economic growth which was vital for the maintenance and transformation of notions of Indian identity.