

'Movie'-ng on in Bengaluru

Kiran Natarajan



Old movie ticket stubs for some of Bengaluru's iconic single screen cinema halls (Source: Ravishankar Neelam (personal collection))

During my years of work, life and travel, particularly in Europe, my observation of the smallest of towns and cities being celebrated officially on set dates (for instance, the anniversary of Picasso's residency in the village of Vallauris or the Bastille Day across towns in France), often prompted sympathetic thoughts for my home city whose value and significance for locals and visitors alike remains unacknowledged. After returning to Bengaluru, interactions with several practitioners in history and culture led me to appreciate varied viewpoints

of the city's existence and evolution that became relevant for their different priorities and perspectives - for some, the closer-to-heart areas were historic buildings, for some others, natural heritage and for even others, traditional rituals and festivals. In the process, it also set off my collecting of city-based memorabilia and ephemera. This initial exercise in curiosity developed into an interest to conserve and engage with an online group of like-minded individuals focused on archiving nostalgic memories and images of Bengaluru.

As a collector, and curator of the aforementioned social media group, I find that among the topics for such (usually pleasant) recollections, several revolve around food and drink, sports and quite surprisingly, movies! This came to mind when I was invited to contribute my understanding of cinema halls in Bengaluru, their transformation over time, and associated nostalgia as places of recreation and recalled memory. It was also interesting to reflect on how different categories of places find nostalgic value and retention with different generations and audiences over time.

We use 'cinema hall' as the generally accepted Indian English term for a venue that screens films, the more popular term being 'theatre' (widely pronounced as 'thay-tar'). These are adaptations of other usages - the American 'movie theatre' and the British 'cinema'. Perhaps the vagaries of social and linguistic evolution caused the addition of 'hall' to the British English 'cinema' and the dropping of 'movie' from the American 'movie theatre', to refer to the same type of venue. Nevertheless, Indians instinctively know what someone means when they say 'thay-tar'.

Bengaluru's cinema halls have had a varied evolution and no particular historical narrative. So, this essay attempts to understand them from the key perspectives of (1) Zones & Genres, (2) Styles & Habits, and (3) Architecture & Transformation.

In the first perspective of Zones & Genres, it is necessary to introduce the 'Cantonment' and the 'City'. Cantonment refers to the military and residential area that grew around the initial space created for the British garrison stationed in Bengaluru as early as 1806. City refers to the largely commercial and residential space that grew around the old fort and market zone (Bengaluru Pete) established by Kempegowda I around 1537. The Cantonment was directly under the administration of the British Government, while the City was under the jurisdiction of the Maharaja of Mysore until the post-Independence administrative mergers of 1947. However, the terms 'Cantonment' and 'City' (Pete) were in popular usage and continue to date. Until recently, a majority of the cinema halls in the Cantonment zone typically screened English films. A few also screened Tamil films - a direct reflection of the zone's history, where the initial British and Anglo-Indian residents were served by a largely Tamil-speaking migrant populace. Many of them arrived from towns in the erstwhile Madras Presidency which Bengaluru was then a part of. This became a known pattern, drawing English movie-seeking

audiences across the city to the Cantonment zone. Famous theatres in this zone (mainly around the South Parade of yore that comprises today's MG Road and Brigade Road) included BRV (a military-owned theatre), Empire, Liberty, Plaza, the twin cinemas Blu Moon and Blu Diamond, Rex, Symphony, Galaxy, Lido, New Opera and Imperial - in somewhat of a walking order as one traversed MG Road from West to East, with a short segue onto Brigade Road. The oldest theatre in this zone was the Elgin which was located in the old 'New Market' (today's Shivajinagar) area.

With time these cinema halls came to represent distinct genres and fame (and infamy). For example, Lido became the screen of choice for new James Bond releases; Blu Moon and Plaza for action and classics; Rex for family and rom-com entertainers; Galaxy for annual blockbusters such as Superman and one-off hits such as 'The Exorcist' and 'Mr. India'. On the other hand, New Opera and Imperial gradually took on the darker flavour of B-Grade movies.

In the City zone, an interesting parallel emerged in the form of the 'Movie Strip' of Kempegowda Road (KG Road) in Gandhinagar (popularly known as 'Majestic'), which was (and remains) an important transportation hub comprising the City Bus Stand and Railway Station. The densely populated area also had many travellers' lodges that catered to interstate visitors and commuters from outside Bengaluru. As a result, the cinema halls in the Majestic zone screened mainly Kannada and Hindi films, while a few halls catered to fans of other South Indian languages. Majestic was also a centre for local movie distribution and film trade. So, while the Cantonment cinema halls had a Hollywood quality and upmarket factor, the Majestic zone's cinema halls were the nerve centre of local movie fandom and pop culture for the City.

Halls of yore in Majestic included Santosh, Sapna, Nartaki, Alankar, Kalpana, Kempegowda, Sagar, States and Prabhat that could be seen as one traversed from the western end to the east of KG Road. There were also the 'branch offices' off 'Movie Main' - Sangam, Aparna & Triveni just across the Bus Station, and Himalaya, Kapali and Movieland near the travellers' lodges. As one drove away from KG Road, there were Geetha and the iconic Majestic which lent its name to the entire zone. Standalone sentinels like Menaka, Abhinay, Kailash and Tribhuvan had particular production house partnerships and patronage. Not to forget off-zone mavericks like Vijayalakshmi in Chickpete. And

Bharat and Shivaji on JC Road, which (along with Sangam) introduced innovative offers like cheaper reruns and student discounts.

Every new film release at these cinema halls triggered fan fervour that brought together multiple classes of people as one. Movies of legendary stars such as Dr. Rajkumar and Amitabh Bachchan set the benchmark for waiting time - even days ahead - to buy tickets, as well as black-market prices for the precious entry tickets. In the heydays of the standalone cinema halls, release days meant that the entire zone was covered with tall cutouts of film stars, banners and twinkling lights. Entertainment permeated piety with the garlanding of banners and painted cutouts; well-wishing *pujas* (religious ceremonies) performed for divine blessings, and distribution of *prasadam* (religious food offerings) among the film-fanatic crowds. Landmark runs of movies meant further celebrations; this time accompanied by members of the film community. These collective, yet intimate, practices that merged screen space and audience space, are surely what most set apart the single screen cinema hall from its contemporary counterpart, the multiplex.

From the second perspective of Style & Habits, some obvious patterns can be highlighted. It was common knowledge that the 'movie-going and later hanging-around' crowd in the Cantonment were the self-appointed trendsetters for fashions (hairstyles, clothes, accessories and even mannerisms) that then spread around the city. And so it came to be that people from across Bengaluru visited cinema halls in this fashion-forward zone for more than just the movie. The visits took shape as truant outings with classmates or recreational time with friends or family, that included the whole experience of film, fashion, food and beverages. In time, the 'beverage' part went on to evolve from dine-in restaurants and standalone bars to Bengaluru's famed pub culture - a wide variety of pubs and craft beer outlets and eventually, micro-breweries.

Apart from the movies, some cinema halls offered other attractions that had a fierce fan following in themselves. For instance, the small but popular snacks stalls on-premises or nearby (the popcorn or Softy at Plaza; the cutlet and burger stalls at Rex and Galaxy) were conveniently - and hastily - consumed before heading in for the movie. Evening and night shows sent out hungry nocturnal diners who contributed to a new gastronomic subculture of late night restaurants that began to stay open after midnight. This magical mix of facilities ensured that

the average citizen had a good day out, in different budget buckets, regardless of the movie watched!

On the other hand, the Majestic zone lent itself to a different type of movie-watching experience - a potent combination of household shopping, food and movies, since Majestic was not just a transportation terminus and hub, but also Bengaluru's wholesale and retail centre. Therefore, for many movie-goers, visiting Majestic with friends or family, buying weekly essentials from Janatha Bazaar or impulse purchases in retail outlets was the norm; as was satiating hunger and taste-buds in popular local restaurants (some of which have unfortunately disappeared with the cinema halls).

The last perspective of Architecture & Transformation is a widely discussed topic today as a growing number of single screen cinema halls give way to malls, arcades, offices or hotels. With the advent of multiplexes and growing real estate pressures, financially unviable cinema halls on large plots are easy targets of commercial demands for prime urban land. In parallel, the onslaught of Internet streaming technologies, DTH and OTT platforms in recent years have become newer competitors to venue screenings. There still remain a few spaces such as consulate auditoriums, independent film societies and clubs that do not face direct and imminent commercial pressures, but the survival of single screen cinema halls in the prevalent socio-cultural milieu is debatable.

Very rarely do we come across an example of the reverse, but Doddanna Hall in Kalasipalayam, started out in the early 1900s as a public / community structure and was later converted into one (Paramount), and later two (Pradeep and Parimala) film theatres. This was where India's first silent film *Raja Harishchandra* was screened and later, *Sati Sulochana*, the first Kannada 'talkie' film was shown here in 1934 for the first time in Mysore State. Like many counterparts, these theatres eventually succumbed to commercial pressure.

It is also worthwhile to remember the role that some of Bengaluru's cinema halls played in the city's architectural evolution. Early cinema halls in the pre-Independence and post-WWII decade were inspired by colonial architectural styles such as the Indo-Gothic, or the more flamboyant Art Deco. Things changed during Bengaluru's 'expansion era' in the 1960s when cinema halls opened in the suburbs - here we may recall names such as Nanda, Shanti and Swagath in Jayanagar (South); Uma and Sanjaya

in Chamarajpet (Central); and Sampige, Swastik and Navrang in Malleshwaram and Rajajinagar (North/West).

Many cinema halls that were constructed in the 1970s adopted innovative materials, newer layouts, features and design. Be it the expansive gardens of Sanjaya, the swooping carpeted ramps of Urvashi and Galaxy, or the impressive plain wall façade of Nanda - each tried to outdo the other in aesthetics and grandeur, thus playing their own niche role in informing the personal design sense of patrons who sometimes adopted the same in their homes and other properties. Some of the cinema halls also became landmarks and meeting points ('Meet me at Rex'; 'turn next to Symphony'), thus becoming familiar household names. These continue today - in name if not in actual physical presence - as some have been transformed to spaces of different use, but retain the memory of the older venue in the new name. Examples include 'Bagmane Pallavi' or 'Jayanagar Nanda' which are office complexes that replaced Pallavi Theatre and Nanda Talkies respectively, or Lido Mall where Lido Theatre once stood.

In summary, there was a period in the past century when Bengaluru was reputed to have the highest number of single screen cinema halls theatres in the world (according to the Karnataka Film Chamber of Commerce, there were about 190 cinema halls in Bengaluru in the first decade of the 2000s). As integral components of the city's social, cultural and spatial fabric, Bengaluru's single screen cinema halls have witnessed generations of patrons go through life events and cycles. Today, some halls have survived, while others have not ... and yet, they all remain an intrinsic part of Bengaluru's identity.

Related references

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Kiran Natarajan is a software (FinTech product strategy and design) professional, who collects ephemera and memorabilia of Bengaluru. He is a moderator of the Facebook group 'Bangalore - Photos from a Bygone Age', and a columnist and speaker on topics of heritage and history.
Email: kirannatarajan@gmail.com