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The Critical Need to Restore and Preserve Our Classic Films

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When I first met Shivendra Singh Dungarpur in 2014, he had just started his Film Heritage Foundation (FHF) in Mumbai. I was then the Chief Executive Officer of Prasar Bharati in Delhi and he wanted archivists from Doordarshan to join his proposed workshop on restoration and preservation of films and audio visual materials. He had captioned it as the 'first Film Preservation and Restoration School India' which was to be held in February 2015. When I butted in to say that we already have the National Film Archives of India (NFAI) in Pune, he explained quite passionately, why his venture was quite different. Apart from acquainting the participants with the state of the art technology of both restoration and preservation of film materials, which the NFAI did not focus on, he spoke of his different methodology and deliverables, as also the highly qualified foreign experts he expected for his 'school'. I must say that I was impressed, but what alarmed me more was his statement that more than 70 percent of the films already produced in India over the last century are already lost or destroyed. This was, indeed, shocking and I promised to help to the extent possible, as we had already taken up a national project to salvage the archives of Doordarshan and Akashvani, and needed well trained people in our set up also.

I was reminded of the hue and cry that had broken out in mid-2009 when I was doubling up, for quite some time, as the Information and Broadcasting Secretary, in addition to my duties as the Culture Secretary of India. Apparently, Mrinal Sen could not take some of his classic films to a prestigious foreign film festival as the prints had deteriorated a lot. NFAI was pulled up and so was the Ministry of I & B. As Secretary, I faced a lot of public and media questions and criticism. We instructed the NFAI to find an immediate solution, which they did, by outsourcing the restoration job to a foreign firm that had links with India. This set us thinking that if Mrinal Sen's 'recent films' had come to such a sorry state, while he was alive and widely respected as a very senior film maker, what must be the condition of other films whose directors and producers were long dead and gone? I must admit that NFAI did attach greater urgency to its task, even if much of the work is outsourced to expert agencies. But the task is so enormous that unless all-out efforts are put in right now, we are losing a part

of our priceless heritage, every month. In other words, we need many more dedicated organisations and require a huge number of trained technological persons every year to undertake the onerous task and to retrieve, if possible, a part of the loss. Besides, converting them to digital format may ensure immediate solutions but restoration is far more complex than mere digitisation. It requires frame-by-frame treatment, which is a laborious job, and calls for intricate skills than just pressing the right button.

As Culture Secretary, I had handled national-level organisations and laboratories that were involved in the restoration and preservation of cultural artefacts, like stone, metal, wood, boards, paper, textiles, rugs, glass, etc, that were equally critical to our nation's heritage and history. I was, therefore, already sensitised to the high level of skills and techniques required — for each class of material. And also realise the love and care that each object under restoration needed. When I came to Prasar Bharati and started reviewing the progress of archiving and preservation of historic records in Akashvani and Doordarshan — right from the days of silver coated disks to different types of spools, tapes, and other formats, I found quite a sorry state. We will not discuss this story here, except to mention that almost everyone thought that their task of restoration ended as soon as the materials could be transferred to a digital medium. I had to explain that digitisation often resulted in the loss of quality, by one to two generations, in the process of transferring from the original tapes and celluloid. Not everyone knows this. Then, we are not certain whether digital technology as it exists today is stable enough to last for several decades or centuries. When and if we realise in future that the digital was perhaps not the best medium to preserve, it may be too late to save our irreplaceable heritage.

I resigned from Prasar Bharati in 2016, but Shivendra Dungarpur kept in touch, even though I had shifted to Kolkata and my relationship with Prasar Bharati had ceased altogether. He dropped in twice or thrice and updated me on the progress of his film preservation initiative. In the middle of last year, he met me again in Kolkata and mentioned with all seriousness that his next workshop would be held in our city, as part of the Kolkata International Film Festival, KIFF. When I asked him why, he said that Bengal has lost for ever all the silent films made here between 1918 and early 1930s, except one film, Jamai Shasthi of 1931. I was astonished to learn that Bengali films were the most affected by deterioration of original films and when it came to preservation. Shivendra Dungarpur mentioned that his FHF had done its homework and had listed over a hundred Bengali films that must be preserved and restored at any cost, right now. Among these are Bimal Roy's Udayar Pathe (1944), Suchitra Sen-Uttam Kumar starrer Harano Sur (1957), Tapan Sinha's Kabuliwala (1957), Satyajit Ray's

Parash Pathar (1958) and Teen Kanya (1961), and Mrinal Sen's Padatik (1973). The State government and the film producers who possess these reels just do not have the wherewithal to do this critical task. This is why we must wake up immediately and put our shoulders to the wheel.

I supported him and promised to put in a word, but I was apprehensive of the support that slow and often-negative governmental organisations would extend. This was more so because I had been actively associated with the growth of KIFF from 1997 to 2004 and knew how troubled the organisers become before and during the festival. In fact, it was in the Festival Advisory Board meeting of 1998, presided over by Vasanta Choudhury, that Goutam Ghose had volunteered to contact FIAPF, Paris for 'international recognition' of the Kolkata festival. FIAPF is the French acronym for the International Federation of Film Producers' Associations, and from 1933, it has been guiding and monitoring international film festivals in all parts of the world. Goutam Ghose was successful in convincing FIAPF to agree and it was only after this FIAPF approval, that our film festival was officially renamed as KIFF — Kolkata International Film Festival. We were allocated an inviolable period, from 10th to 17th November each year, when we had to hold the festival without fail. But since presently I am not connected with KIFF's extravaganza, I was worried whether the West Bengal Government would agree or not to Dungarpur's proposal. I was pleasantly surprised to learn that Vivek Kumar, the dynamic Director General of the Film Festival, offered wholehearted cooperation and assistance. The KIFF welcomed Dungarpur and his FHF's proposal to organise the much needed film restoration and preservation workshop, even though its participants were not restricted to West Bengal only. Vivek Kumar later announced just before the 2018 KIFF that FHF's workshop that was supported by the International Federation of Film Archives was a "very important component of the festival" and that eleven of the most qualified archivists and film restorers of the world were participating in the workshop. I must not only thank him and the Government of West Bengal for their appreciation of the problem and for agreeing instantly, but I must also thank Sudhansu Vats, an old friend and CEO/MD of Viacom18, for extending financial and other support to this much-required task.

2019 is an important date to us as we celebrate a hundred years of the first Bengali feature film of the silent era, Billwamangal, that was produced by an enterprising Parsee, Jamshedji Framji Madan, a theatre and film pioneer of Mumbai and Kolkata, under the banner Madan Theatre. Let us not forget that this film was released on 8 November 1919, only six years after Raja Harish Chandra, the first full-length Indian feature film was distributed. But even before this, Hiralal Sen had embarked on short non-feature and advertising films through his Royal Bioscope Company. He produced

scenes from the theatrical productions of several popular plays that were performed at theatres like Minerva, Star, Madan and Classic. In fact, the craze for 'bioscopes' began then and the next great to follow Sen and Madan was Dharendra Nath Ganguly (known as D.G.). In 1918, he set up the first Bengali-owned production company known, strangely enough, as the Indo British Film Company and brought out silent movies like Bilat Firat (1921). These and other silent films produced in Bengal in the 1920s have been lost and we have thus failed to preserve evidence of this historic phase of the film history of Bengal and India. Madan Theatre also produced Jamai Shashthi, the first Bengali talkie film in 1931, on the 11th of April, which is less than a month after India's first talkie movie, Alam Ara, was released in Bombay — on the 14th of March. But it was the next Bengali talkie, Debaki Bose's Chandidas of 1932 that marked a major breakthrough when sound recordist Mukul Bose found a solution to the problem of spacing out dialogue and frequency modulation. We need to reconstruct the history of that period by an all out hunt for old films, that are often discovered in the unlikeliest of places, and restore these gems, as well as preserve them. Not only that, we were lucky to have internationally respected icons like Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen and Ritwik Ghatak, whose works also need the best of handling and preservation.

Since governments can only move this effort upto a point, experts like Dungarpur have to be roped in to lead the way and train preservationists. The NFAI also needs to concentrate a bit more on Bengal, but ultimately the mission effort has to be carried forward by the producers and the owners of priceless cinematic material, with active support of film lovers, scholars and viewers. Let this be our collective pledge for 2019, the centenary year of the Bengali film industry.