

Picture Abhi Baaki Hai

Updated: Jan 20, 2020, 07:34 IST | Fiona Fernandez | Mumbai

Grant Road and Byculla's single screens are a unique ecosystem that must be preserved as key players in Bombay's diverse cinematic landscape



Regal Cinema. Pic/ Suresh Karkera



Though the public lecture organised by Art Deco Mumbai Trust held at the Chhatrapati Shivaji Vastu Sangrahalaya was all about single screen cinemas in India, the audience, and I am pretty sure about this, didn't feel the need for an intermission. Popcorn would have added a nice touch, but the masala chai that was served before the session kept me in a toasty space.

The two main speakers at the session held last week were Professor Mary Woods of the Cornell School of Architecture, and Vani Subramanian, filmmaker. Both have been working together for a while now on a documentary about single screen cinemas in India. Their insightful presentation gripped the audience, as they drew them into the many-layered ecosystem of this cinematic universe from a societal standpoint and about reimagining its position in the future. From a city context, they took us on a trail of some of the marquee single-screens like Liberty and Regal as well as Byculla's Palace Talkies and Super Plaza in Grant Road, both known for screening Bhojpuri flicks. It was during this section that I got drawn into the enormity of a role that they played in fuelling and feeding the city's huge migrant population. This parallel world was truly a fascinating one, like so many other elements in Bombay that add up to make it the true

melting pot; these spaces offered an oasis of entertainment, a sanctuary really, for the lakhs who would have left their homes back in Bihar or Jharkhand, to seek new opportunities, new direction and find their own little slice of glory in the City of Dreams.

Most of these cinegoers probably enjoyed watching films even on their smartphones but the lure of the big screen continued to catch their fancy, as Professor Woods pointed out later, during a panel discussion on the subject. It was this thought that got me thinking about this fantasy wonderland and their fragile existence in today's Bombay. And more importantly, why it is important that they continue to have their place in the sun, in the city's heady, chaotic and ever-churning film industry. While their somewhat decrepit versions of Art Deco themed interiors (on a smaller scale compared to Regal and Liberty) have a rustic vintage touch, it is the charm of the contrast that will make the first-timer smile at what's in store. The interiors are dark, dingy and not in great shape, overall. Yet, once the projector starts rolling, all is forgotten, and life becomes the movie for those two or three hours.

These single screen cinemas, like say, the threatened Udipis or the fast-fading Hindu Lunch Homes, face an ever-looming threat from several factors, many of which are not even in their control, like real estate sharks, high rentals, redevelopment, and then, there is all-pervading impact of an unpredictable economy. In such scenarios, even a ticket worth R50 or R60 is an expensive pastime for this migrant worker who depends on daily wages or a low income job in a retail store to realise his dream. The cinema hall owner and his prime audience member are in reality, staring at the same precarious future.

Who can step in to insure their existence? Several solutions came up at that session, and yet, some, like a theatre manager in the audience, shared a few hard facts about single screen owners being under tremendous pressure to stay alive. Some, like the resilient late Nazir Hoosein, had opened up Liberty for other events like film festivals and performances. The city's single screens for regional cinema like those in Byculla and Grant Road cannot be allowed to fade away because of their truly unique contribution to the cine landscape of Bombay. One hopes that the 'House Full' sign outside these technicolour dream houses remain, and that they never have to shut down. How they manage to sustain themselves going forward is something that their owners ought to keep in mind and act accordingly.

Bombay will be poorer without them, for sure. The City of Dreams ought to play out its part towards a happy ending for them long after the credits roll, shouldn't it?

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