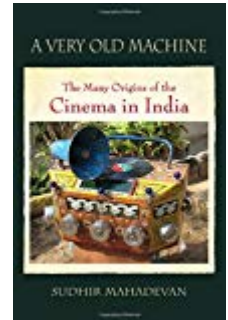


Sudhir Mahadevan. *A Very Old Machine: The Many Origins of the Cinema in India, 1840-1930.* Albany: SUNY Press, 2015. 256 pp. \$27.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-4384-5829-8.



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Sudhir Mahadevan does the impossible in *A Very Old Machine: The Many Origins of the Cinema in India*. He shows how various technologies that emerged in nineteenth-century India shaped its current cinema. In doing so, he focuses on broad social trends and individuals who featured in them. And, important for press history, he delineates the critical intersection of print, photography, and film that marked the birth of photojournalism. Further, by moving from outdated devices to contemporary multiplexes he creates a cinema history and historiography. As a result, his work fits well with the burgeoning body of literature on Indian film.

This book, with an introduction, seven chapters, and a postscript, begins with a statement of goals. Chief among them are to identify the antecedents of cinema in everyday life and to demonstrate how common and uncommon activities enabled film to become a notable part of Indian mass culture accented by a global perspective. To accomplish these aims, Mahadevan prefaces

his study with a review of colleagues' scholarship, which he skillfully relates to his own research.

The opening two chapters, grouped under the heading "obsolescence," discuss the nineteenth-century "techno-bazaar" (p. 21) and the "bioscope-wallah" (p. 43). Commencing with pre-cinema's magic lanterns and scroll paintings, this segment emphasizes how later inventions and the people using them contributed to the reception of cinema. So, for example, the British hand camera connoted expertise and the Indian photographer's studio connoted status. Similarly, traveling showmen brought foreign films to rural folks, while indigenous filmmakers relying on discarded equipment ran small-scale operations. Although these pioneers laid the foundation for a national enterprise, their endeavors extended beyond community adoption and adaptation. As Mahadevan notices, imperial and transnational technological innovations expanded perceptions of film, perceptions sometimes overlooked by historians.

Chapters 3 and 4, together labeled “mechanical reproduction and mass culture,” continue the dialogue of cross-culturalism by centering on how circulation of favorite mechanical images and of pirated reels sparked copyright disputes within South Asia and between that region and Europe. At the same time, the interest in protecting chromolithography, which Mahadevan situates as the midpoint between woodcuts/engravings and mass cinema, prepared the way for a debate about whether film was a big business of profit or a popular institution of stature. In answer, Mahadevan profiles D. G. Phalke, painter, engraver, photographer, and producer of feature films intended for the English-speaking middle class in Europe and the United States. Such transcontinental circulation allegedly did not impress his competitors any more than did his linkage of domestic films to Swadeshi. Instead, Mahadevan explains how *fin de siècle* Parsi theater’s romance and mythology sired a lucrative Indian cinema of comedy, action, and melodrama. And he reflects on how the next generation’s historical films, burdened by British restrictions and foreign competition, remained on the sidelines of the nationalist movement.

The volume’s third section, tagged “intermediarity,” examines newspaper journalism and cinema politics. Initially, the text assesses the impact of amateur European photographers. Delighted by the hand camera, they snapped shots everywhere. The consequent shift from posed to impromptu pictures had, Mahadevan theorizes, a “democratizing” effect as when Kodak aficionados capturing the ordinary exposed heretofore private settings to public scrutiny.

Concurrent with this outcome was the debut of the halftone process that spawned photojournalism and configured it in dailies. The juncture of print, photography, and eventually film, Mahadevan asserts, prepared the way for the subsequent foray of journalists into urban politics. Particularly helpful to journalism historians, chapter 6 tracks themes and events as they crossed and

recrossed media, employing one medium to service another. For instance, political theater advertised in a press simultaneously covering not only performances, but real-life behavior that often resembled drama. But most significant in this chapter are Mahadevan’s carefully crafted definitions of viewers, whom he names “mass,” “crowd,” and “audience.” He constructs the mass as random, those “improperly influenced” by cinema (p. 149); the crowd as enumerable, those loosely measured by ethnicity or cosmopolitanism; and the audience as discrete, those who based their choice of a film on how it accorded with their convictions.

The final chapter and a postscript, gathered as “archives,” comment on film historiography from two angles. The first memorializes the past, which Mahadevan salutes. Nonetheless, he recognizes that it is spun, like all history, from the present. To validate his position, he concentrates on three films. He argues that *Cinema Cinema* (1979), a movie about a documentary, screened a new rendition of film by reordering its past. He interprets the more complex *Film Hi Film* (1983), with a storyline about a producer’s bumpy career, as an attempt to save the past by juxtaposing jumbled, incomplete movie scenes. And he construes *Through a Deep Lens* (1986), a government documentary, as a reminder that the Indian archive is more than a repository because it frames and re-frames the past, making remembrance forever modern.

Mahadevan’s second take on film historiography also addresses modernity but in its materiality. He contrasts a plan to erect a lavish “Bollywood”-style museum in Mumbai and a chance encounter in Delhi that led his discovery of a stockpile of old film reels and posters. To him, the proposed building and the existing cache both confirm his thesis that Indian cinema’s materiality had a multitude of origins. To the reader, this book reconfirms that, in composing history, objects of the before now are as valuable as words.

Following the narrative are useful “notes” wherein Mahadevan probes his sources deeply and widely and offers sophisticated analyses of myriad topics. His bibliography of thirteen pages is equally thorough. If one were to fault the text, it would be to call attention to the tendency to repeat ideas.

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