

Coronation Cinematograph

1912

Mumbai Legacy Project
D Ward



Coronation Cinematograph and Variety Hall, also called Coronation Cinema, was built in 1912 at Narayan Chawl, Girgaon. It screened major films like “Raja Harishchandra” and the picturisation of the Marathi stage play “Pundalik”. It also hosted a diverse range of entertainment shows. These shows included a duette and dance performance by Miss Irene Delmar, comical sketches by the McClements, and a foot juggling show by Alexandroff.

Mumbai’s cinema industry is one of the oldest profitable industries in India. Early glimpses occur in late 19th century when films were introduced in India by the Lumiere brothers of France, who showcased their ‘moving pictures’ at the Watson Hotel and later at the Novelty in 1896, using their cinématographe, a three-in-one device that could record, develop, and project motion pictures. Bombay, Calcutta and Madras were among the first cities to showcase this new technology to the people as they were major financial centres of British India and had good connectivity to Western countries, which helped foreign filmmakers travel with their equipment easily.

The first cinema theatre in Mumbai was the Gaiety Theatre, built by Kunvarji Paghtivala as a performing arts theatre and converted into a cinema in 1928. It was renamed Capitol Cinema House. Some other famous cinema theatres, mostly single-screen with a high capacity for spectators, were the Imperial Cinema House in 1905, Edward Theatre in 1914, Regal Cinema in 1933, Royal Talkies in 1911 and New Roshan Talkies in 1930.



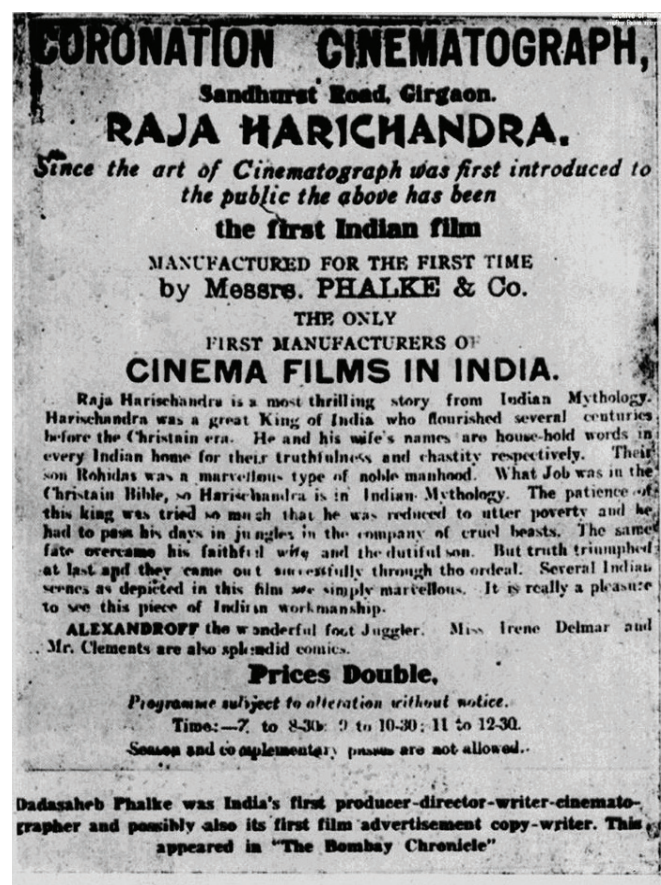
Another such cinema hall was the Coronation Cinematograph built near the junction of South Bombay’s busiest streets, Sandhurst Road and Khetwadi Road, it was recognized as one of the ‘Sandhurst Road Cinemas’. This cinema enclave also featured the American-India, the Olympia, and the New Alhambra, serving as landmarks in Bombay’s cinematic landscape from 1910 to 1917. This period saw the creation of approximately 1,300 silent films (Sinha 2016). As with other theatres of the time, along with screening movies, Coronation Cinema also showcased entertainment shows and dramas for the people at economical entry fees. R.P. Tipnis managed the cinema. Narayan Govind Chitre, Tipnis, R.G. Torne and cinematographer Mr. Stevenson, picturised the stage play “Pundalik” performed by the Shripad Sangeet Mandali, a professional theatre group of Nasik at Mangaldas Wadi near Grant Road (Rajadhyaksha and Willemen 1999: 1293). The film was released on 18th May 1912 at the Coronation Cinema (Saran 2012).



Another important film, “Raja Harishchandra” was screened here, which etched the name of the cinema in history. The film, directed by Dadasaheb Phalke, was released in 1913. Its success bestowed the title of ‘Father of Indian Cinema’ on Phalke, however this title is disputed by film historians who refer to Torne as the first to make a film in India. Even though ‘Pundalik’ was a recording of a stage play in India, it required British technicians. It was also edited in London (Bose 2013). Phalke had made his film with Indian actors, and had himself directed, produced, and edited the footage. Inspired by Alice Guy-Blaché’s “The Life of Christ”, Phalke aimed to make an Indian film with Hindu deities to bring people together against the British Raj. “Raja Harishchandra” was based on the legend of the king of the same name, whose truthfulness and honesty made him a popular figure in both the Ramayana and the Mahabharata.

Surprisingly, the 40-minute film was a remarkable success, not with the movie-going audience enamoured by the films of the West, but with natives who were often unable to shell out even two rupees for a show. There was no attention given to these shows by English newspapers, except an advertisement in the Bombay Chronicle of 10th May 1913 (Barnouw and Krishnaswamy 1908, 14). Along with the screening of “Raja Harishchandra” on May 3, 1913, there was a dance act by Miss Irene Delmar, the MacClements: A Comical Sketch, and a foot juggling act by Alexandroff. The hall owner arranged these acts as he was unsure whether the Westernised Indian audience and the working class would be interested or would pay to watch a Hindu epic on the big screen, but his worries were unwarranted. The film was housefull for an entire week, which was an unprecedented success for any film at the time. Even the showtimes had to be extended by 12 weeks due to popular demand and other states in India too began requesting shows in their theatres (Sen Gupta 2023).

Another early pioneer whose life was shaped by the Coronation Cinema was S.N. Patankar (Arif 2023). He worked as a decorator at the cinema in the early 1910s. He was able to see many imported films and Phalke’s several indigenous creations. Inspired by Phalke, he started to make movies such as “Satyavan Savitri” in 1914, “The Murder of Narayanrao Peshwa” in 1915, “Bhakt Prahlad” in 1917, and many more. He and his film company with Dwarkadas Narayandas Sampat, named ‘Patanekar Friends and Company’, was said to be the first and fiercest competitor of Dadasaheb Phalke.



As with the growing population, globalisation, and the steep advancement of technology, many British-era buildings soon saw foreclosure. The Coronation Cinematograph shared the same fate and was closed down in the late 20th century along with Majestic Cinema. It was replaced by an office complex. However, the nearby Cosmopolitan Restaurant, a witness to the immense crowds at the cinema houses in the area, is still standing. One can still imagine the spectators of the first Indian feature film leaving the premises of the cinema house and discussing what they saw over a meal at the restaurant. The present lamentable state of Mumbai's once-renowned cinema halls prompts reflection on an era when India embraced a simple form of cinema, only to witness it fading into the backdrop of the city.

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