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Published online: 03 Aug 2015.

To cite this article: Ravikant (2015): Popular Cinephilia in North India, Journalism Studies, DOI: 10.1080/1461670X.2015.1054161

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2015.1054161

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POPULAR CINEPHILIA IN NORTH INDIA

Madhuri shows the way (1964–78)

Ravikant

Amongst the Hindi film magazines Madhuri stands out as an engaged, earnest and agenda-driven journalistic intervention. It acted as a crucial bridge, an effective mediator between several disparate segments and stake-holders: the film makers, viewers, stars, fans, state, industry, litterateurs, directors, “Urdu” and “Hindi”, music makers, listeners, exhibitors, theatre-patrons, “commercial” and “art” cinema types, regional, national and world cinema-lovers, and so on. It also continued with the ongoing task of educating Hindi readers about the intricacies of the film medium and its evolving history, ran vigorous campaigns advocating adoption of Nagri (Hindi) script for credit-rolls, and identified progressive literature waiting to be scripted; excavated new locations for shooting films, and more generally, invented a new form to narrate in words some of the classics of Hindi cinema. This paper argues that the restraint, irony as well as exuberance evident in its editorial choices, content and design were very much grounded in but not circumscribed by the aspirations of an expanding middle class nurtured on a print universe marked by Hindi nationalistic sensibility of the 1960s and 1970s. All the same, Madhuri’s unique crowd-sourced campaigns lent a sense of civic identity to its readers, who started clamouring for better sonic, visual and hygienic facilities and comforts at cinema halls.

KEYWORDS Arvind Kumar; cinema halls; crowd sourcing; Hindi film journalism; north India; popular cinephilia

Introduction

In the hitherto scarce history of ephemeral Hindi film magazines, Madhuri (named so from the sixth issue after its launch as Suchitra on the Republic Day, 1964) enjoyed a remarkably robust health in a longish career spanning close to three decades. Reduced to a shadow in translation, it still survives in its new avatar as Hindi Filmfare, but I propose to revisit its long founding decade to analyse its effort at finding a foothold and gaining respectability as a family film magazine speaking to a literature-loving north Indian public. Run by a small band of journalists with Arvind Kumar as the editor, the magazine made innovative use of what is today known as crowd-sourcing. It turned its readers into contributors by soliciting comments on a range of issues such as: how happy they were with the films being made and what could be done to improve their quality and “purposefulness”, and even more importantly, how good/bad/adequate were the cinema halls in their respective cities/towns/qasbas—each named and described in detail, giving us the sense of an expanding cartography of cinematic pleasure and civic desires. Since cinema in South Asia has always been a listening experience too, Madhuri’s generous focus on film music, lyrics and story-telling provided a lot of gramophone, radio and audio-tape listeners and recyclers with an instant connect. To absorb, record and comment on the unmistakable echoes of cinema as an ever-changing technology, art, craft, trade and cultural experience, Madhuri kept renewing itself in terms of content and design in the entire period under discussion.
“Going to cinema was considered a sin (qufra) when I took over as the editor”, ruminated Arvind Kumar several decades later (interview with the author, 5 May 2009). And here is his editorial written within two years of its launch:

Cine-journalism in Hindi has been more or less neglected by its well-educated and highbrow elite. Even cinema has not been completely accepted by our families. Going to movies is taken for a sign of defiance and indiscipline by the elders, and some film makers have only confirmed this belief by making cheap films. Gaining a respectable foothold in this social context was not easy at all for a film magazine.

Cinema has become the most important and essential means of entertainment. So a society would do no good to itself by running away from it. On the contrary, we need to take a deeper interest in order to improve it, and make it worthy of our developing nation. Our youth if armed with a new understanding of cinema may be better equipped to welcome healthy entertainment. In a project like this the role of responsible magazines and journals cannot be overemphasised. I am making an effort to play this role by providing the right kind of information about films. And the kind of reception I have received in the families assures me that I am on the right path. (Madhuri, February 11, 1966)

Written in the first-person singular, the editorial was a direct address by the magazine to its readers. In the first place it was a gentle critique of the highbrow and well-educated Hindi elite, familiar from as early as the 1930s (Joshi 2009). Secondly, it was a manifesto of its editorial ambitions. Thirdly, struggling with the entrenched prejudices of the past, it addressed the youth, the next generation. Fourthly, it was not satisfied with the way cinema was, but wanted it to become worthy of the developing nation. All these catchphrases of the 1960s thus projected the picture of a magazine that meant business. Finally, it wanted to be a popular family filmzine, and to that successful end it exercised tremendous self-restraint, so much so that notwithstanding its radical views on several other issues, it could not become as bold as Filmfare in the period under study, even though it gradually and cleverly pushed the normative boundaries of permissiveness on or off-screen. To that extent, Madhuri’s editorial stance was broadly contoured though by no means limited by the diversity of stances its readership offered, but it was quite sure-footed about the kind of cinema it wanted India to have.

Arvind Kumar recalled that he took its first issue around for feedback to several friends and some big names of the film industry and how V. Shantaram’s comment about it being under the undue influence of Filmfare struck a chord. So Madhuri charted out its own Hindi route. Kumar, an autodidact without a regular higher education, had picked up the skills of printing and publishing as an apprentice typographer at his father’s press in Meerut, and had acquired editorial acumen working with a couple of Delhi Press Group magazines such as Sarita in Hindi and Caravan in English, for which he wrote film reviews (A. Kumar, interview with the author, 7 September 2014; Anurag 2011). He came to Bombay on a call given by the Jains of the Times of India Group, then contemplating the publication of a Hindi film magazine along the lines of Filmfare.

Armed with a small team, his friendship with Raj Kapoor via lyricist Shailendra, a resourceful insider Ram Aurangabadkar, and a good Times of India infrastructure, Arvind Kumar thus set out on a memorable personal journey lasting for 14 years.2 Almost immediately it gained the reputation of a dependable magazine for the fast growing number of middle-class households in the big and small urban centres of north India and beyond. By presenting a wholesome fare in terms of content and colourful pages in the
form of photographs of film players as blow ups, centre-spreads and even calendars, it became more popular than the other Hindi film magazines, and even its sisterly *Filmfare*.

The lavish pictoriality of a filmzine forces us to look beyond the notion of a middle-class literate readership. In South Asian contexts marked by resourcelessness and a certain cultural habit, sharing has been a norm rather than an exception: from community listening to radio and neighbourhood television watching down to the public phone booths, e-cafés and e-chaupals. So we must imagine a larger itinerant readership at the roadside tea-stalls, barbers’ salons, doctors’ clinics, public libraries or even the train compartments for *Madhuri*. Part of this readership would simply ogle at the images, unless read to by a helpful friend or stranger. This non-reading readership rarely wrote back, so we have to work with the outpourings of a writerly readership in which the opinionated middle classes disproportionately dominated the proceedings. But Shiv Lal Arya (Nai or barber) from Yevetmal, already on the listening map for sending song requests to radio stations, did after all write back, jolting us out of our lazy assumptions:

In the issue dated May 29, Raj Mishra of Lucknow writes, “*Madhuri* carries more photographs than matter, which might be of special interest to barbers and teenagers (*chhokras*) [‘and certainly not to the enlightened readers’].” As far as I can imagine there are barbers in every corner of India, and *Madhuri* is subscribed to in each salon. Once he has read it the barber leaves it for people from all classes visiting the salon to read. On the basis of my experience at “Savita Keshbhusha Griha” I can say that all kinds of people read *Madhuri* with great interest, especially the non-Hindi speaking people. This must be because ordinary people understand its language. The profusion of images in the magazine is matched by the amplitude of [reading] matter. The magazine sheds light on diverse aspects of cinema and provides reviews of the latest films. The distaste of the letter-writer for such a beautiful magazine runs so deep that she has chosen to rage against the barbers, which must have shocked other barbers like me. To say that the barbers are like teenagers in age and wisdom looks like her own original piece of wisdom. But we would like to inform Mishraji that along with *Madhuri* we read literature of the most serious kind, and would like to know from her if she has read Pantji’s “Chidambara” or Prasad’s “Kamayani”? (*Madhuri*, July 10, 1970, 46)

This no-holds-barred exchange, somewhat typical of the Hindi public domain, is packed with a wealth of socio-cultural meanings. At one level, it showcases the divergent expectations the readers of a hierarchically divided society could pile up on film magazines. At another it demonstrates that the intellectually dominant upper-caste attitude towards cinema had not changed radically; the stock language of derision, however residual, was still in currency. While Miss Mishra betrays an elitist Brahmanical bias in her response to the so-called morally corrupt world of Hindi films, and in the larger text she launches into a cynical attack not only on the editor for his “abject apologia”, but the entire industry “without exception” (“and I challenge you to name that exception”) for being given to “drinking, womanising, and income tax evasion” before slipping into a generalised casteist and ageist vilification (*Madhuri*, May 29, 1970; May 1, 1970, 46). Little wonder that Arya was shocked and hurt, and to bolster his claim for aesthetic tastefulness he took recourse to a bibliographical terrorism of a high literary kind! His conjecture was right: the morally high-brow “enlightened” position of Miss Mishra was very much sourced from, or at least widely shared by the high literary domain. So he took the battle to where it belonged. All the same, isn’t it worth speculating if Miss Mishra was not insinuating a
clientèle with a lustful male gaze in some of the public spaces we listed above? Perhaps. One must also note that the editor made a clever selection from a number of responses he must have received to Mishra’s uncouth outpourings. In any case, Arya’s rebuttal was the one that effectively challenged the elite assumptions about film literacy, on the one hand, as it also reinforced Madhuri’s campaign against those who regarded cinema as less than respectable. It thus showcased cinema’s, and Madhuri’s own, potential outreach.

Making a careful selection from the past and existing popular features and columns of its predecessors, Madhuri recycled them under new names. The letters to the editor column dealt strictly with film-related “respectable” queries. Humorous and ironical responses of writers in rival film journals like Baburao Patel (Filmindia), or anecdotald understatements of the Dehlavi (Shama-Sushma) flavours were replaced by cryptic answers by movie icons like I. S. Jauhar, Dev Anand and Mahmood in a chronological succession (Mukherjee 2013). Publishing poetry as caption for the stars’ photographs persisted, the critical difference with contemporary Shama-Sushma being that Madhuri was more inclined towards using Hindi lyrical poetry or even blank verse than Urdu couplets. Urdu came to the magazine mainly via the film lyrics and dialogues, and an ugly debate raged over whether the language of Bombay films be designated Hindi or Urdu when iconic poet and lyricist Sahir Ludhyanvi proclaimed that 97 per cent of the film vocabulary was Urdu, and campaigned for it being given the second state language status in Uttar Pradesh. The editorials were sharp and focused, but the editor wrote an additional column “Chale pawan ki chal” (or “Blows Like a Wind”)—borrowed from a philosophical Pankaj Mulick song—to comment on the burning cinematic issues, under the pseudonym Filmeshwar (God of Films). One abiding feature that had traditionally connected the three worlds of music records, oral performance and print—swarlipi/notations—and had made an easy transition after the film songs edged out non-film genres into niche occupations from the mid-1930s onwards was a regular. The column with the photographs of the featured lyricist, music director and the singer/s forked into a collectible sub-column called “Raag Madhuri” in which notations of the raga-inspired film songs were described with the beats of instruments used. This had been a speciality of a magazine like Film Sangeet, which Madhuri happily incorporated, making it a readers’ request feature. On the popular side, it published political, social and cultural parodies of popular film songs, written by such veterans as Kaka Hathrasi and Barsanelal Chaturvedi. The trend soon caught on and a slew of excellent parodists emerged from amongst the readers, which beautifully indexed the practice of popular remixing of cinematic content, a paradoxical instance being the sacred “kanvariya” or “Bhagwati Jagran” cassettes and CDs taking off on such ribald items as “choli ke peechhe kya hai?” (what is under the blouse?) in more recent times. Each issue of Madhuri published a four-page newspaper “cinesamachar” or cinema news with reports on seminars, awards, musical nights, charity shows, policy statements, trade disputes, strikes, technical innovations, and on the making of very select national and international films. Like Filmfare, Madhuri had allocated a couple of pages for Hollywood film stories, with colour transparencies mostly of actresses in skimpy attire, which might be understood as a pact of conformity in the home and the world mould, because readers rarely objected to these culturally-offshore-therefore-safe images. Coverage of major national and international film festivals was rigorously pursued in consonance with the magazine’s stated policy of promoting serious-realistic-meaningful cinema. By contrast, the readers looking for star-related gossip were likely to be thoroughly disappointed as the two columns—“Around the Stars”, and “Second Sunday is a Holiday” by Itwarilal that could potentially provide juicy scoops hardly delivered any. Cartoons drawn
by a distributed authorship often spoke to the text on the page which could be an ironical
take on the “purposeless” run-of-the-mill commercial films, on censors’ inconsistent policy,
everyday situations about writing for films, history of film making, going to the cinema,
watching cinema—the whole film culture. The play of ironical humour must have appealed
to the part of the readership still morally ambivalent about for-profit films.

Crowd-sourcing

Madhuri’s true editorial acumen, however, lay in the unprecedented amount of
contributions it could source from its readers. It headed out to engage with the most
articulate sections of society in a series of roving discussions—“Cinema and Society”—
on the state of film-making in general. Typically, a local writer or journalist would meet four to
six people (students: makers of tomorrow and teachers: makers of the nation’s future) asking
certain basic questions, such as: how significant was cinema’s impact; were they happy with
the films being made; what did they expect from cinema, the films they would rate as good,
etc. Most respondents predictably expressed unhappiness with the standard of films being
made, criticised Hindi films for being obscene, formulaic, repetitive, and full of unnecessary
songs and dress changes, and wanted the filmwallas to embrace literary plots and design
socially uplifting, realist treatments. The respondents from Kolkata produced overwhelming
evidence for good cinema in the literary names of the cinema halls in the city and the
linguistic fact of a single word “boi” carrying a double meaning for book and film, as well as
the numerous adaptations Bengali film makers had made from the works of litterateurs
like Sharatchandra and Tagore. The survey was clearly skewed as we do not see Madhuri
visiting any non-middle-class household or a semi-public space such as a barber’s salon,
but the subaltern presence could sometimes be heard behind the respondents’ voices.
Explaining the delay in opening the door, Mrs. Kalpana of Jamshedpur complained, “Forgive
me, our Baisakhu [servant] has gone to see Haqeeqat today, and I was taking milk from the
milkman at the back door. These servants are so intoxicated on cinema that they do not care
for their duties. They watch 3–4 films every month even in these inflationary times and you
can hear them singing those juicy songs at work all the time!” (November 5, 1965, 26). The
drawing room discussions took a hypocritical, highbrow position which helped Madhuri
shape its own reformist agenda of making cinema socially useful. For the respondents
the films were rarely good, the names were those that we would hear time and again in
the Hindi avant-garde magazines and souvenir volumes produced on 50, 75 or 100 years of
cinema. Thus a whole new cannon of “good” films was also being built through a survey
like this.

However, the debate was on with the younger generation coming out in support of
the mainstream films. Shyamli Bose of Patna, a student of classical music, found in cinema
a repository of folk forms and idioms, and denied any negative energy to cinema. But
Mrs. Manjurani Verma, a lecturer who sang ghazals by Sahir and Shakeel, pointed out that
cinema handed to young men certain songs as legitimate tools to harass women on the
street. Indicating its deeply undesirable impact, she also related an apocryphal—for her
downright scandalous—tale of a fashionable lady who would take her tailor to see films!
A third instance of a science college student, Santosh Singh Thakur, brought out the
hypocrisy of such positions rather succinctly, thanks to Rajkamal Choudhary, the celebrated
Hindi fiction writer of morally uncertain repute, the man conducting the interview. Thakur
admitted the bad influence of cinema, “Go to any room and you will find a student lost in
the imaginary, colourful, luxuriant, almost Kashmir-like dreams found in the films, often fantasizing himself in the company of a heroine... Thakur stopped midway as Choudhary’s eyes panned to the wall with Vyjayanti Mala’s calendar on the one side and a Kashmiri figure in the shape of Sharmila Tagore sitting with a radio on the other. Thakur blushed “inadvertently” (Madhuri, September 24, 1965, 21–22). Another student, Manjushree Sharma, pointed out that cinema entertained the common people, and if they found it good enough, we should not listen to the ivory tower intellectuals. Speaking for herself, she extolled Gemini’s old Chandrolekha for showcasing some thrilling circus feats, Jhanak Jhanak Payal Baje for presenting Indian dance in various colourful styles; “Junglee made it possible for us to see the beauty of Kashmir for the first time, and Shahar aur Sapna made us encounter the complex dilemmas of a metropolitan existence. How can you say that our cinema is neither beautiful nor new?” Gulshan Oberoi of Ujjain was so inspired by Haqeeqat that she enlisted herself for the National Cadet Corps (NCC) the very next day (Madhuri, February 11, 1966, 31). Yogkar Jha, a student schooled in historical materialism, talked about De Sica’s films, and saw in cinema the tool most suited for a post-feudal industrial society that helped the world come closer to us. In general terms one can notice a generation gap in the enthusiasm or lack of it in the respondents and the Delhi discussion was a good example of this (Madhuri, September 10, 1965). Admitting an inherent weakness for romantic films and female stars, an unmarried Dr Upreti from Agra loved Meena Kumari in Chitralekha and Saira Banu in Junglee, and loathed Ashok Kumar as Kumargiri, thought Hindi films should get rid of certain unrealistic conventions such as “showing a hero sing in a jungle with the full orchestra, as if he carried it in his pocket! And how does it happen that the heroine sings at her rooftop, and the hero sitting hundreds of miles away sings along with her!” (Madhuri, October 22, 1965, 19–20). One could cite an apocryphal story in response to Dr Upreti’s crude realism. S. D. Burman was once asked a hard realist question: where does music come from in an otherwise deserted scene in a film? His characteristic response: from the same source as the camera!

The roving seminar was dynamic also in another sense that the focus of discussion kept changing with location. Dehradoon discussed the possibility of nationalisation of the industry, the thorny question of mindless imitation of the West, and disproportionately lavish budgets splurged on advertising films through Radio Ceylon, posters and itinerant bands and rickshaws, and wondered why Satyajit Ray Moshai did not consider making a Hindi film (Madhuri, June 3, 1966, 20–21). Kanpur picked up the purported relationship between cinema and crime, while Mathura appropriately evaluated the genre of bhakti films (Madhuri, January 28, 1966, 33–34). Depending on the place and the person, the discussion could veer around Bhojpuri, Marathi or Bengali films as well.

**Satellite of Cinema in a Hindi Literary Orbit**

If the Urdu–Hindi journalism of rival magazine Shama-Sushma used Urdu poetry and fiction to create a familiar literary context for localising cinema, Hindi Madhuri took recourse to a whole range of old and new poetic forms to accomplish the same objective. Easily remembered compositions from medieval devotional poets were parodied and remixed with film-derived content. For example, a chaleesa is a bhasha form of Sanskrit devotional prayer (stotra/stuti) and cinema merely produced a fresh playing field, a leelabhumi as it were, for a new set of avatars in the film players whose achievements and virtuosities were listed in the following “film chaleesa” which followed the tarz/metre/tune of the most
accomplished and popular of all—the Hanuman Chaleesa, written by the best-selling Tulsidas. Sample the following lines for the flavour:

Jai jai Shri Ramanand Sagar, Satyajit sansar ujagar [Victory to Ramanand Sagar, Satyajit [Ray] is known to the whole world]

Dara Singh atulit baldhama, Randhawa jehi bhrata nama [Dara Singh is a powerhouse, Randhawa is his brother]

Dilip “Sangharsh” mein ban Bajrangi, pyar karai Vyjayant sangi [Dilip played Bajrangi and romanced Vyjayanti [Mala] in Sangharsh]

Mridul kanth ke dhani Mukesh, Vijay Anand ke kunchit kesha… [Mukesh has a sweat voice, while Vijay Anand got curly hair] (Godhra 1972, 15)

For a hagiographic roll call of film celebrities like this, the chaleesa is quite representative. Producer-directors, heroes, villains, singers, music directors, item dancers and comedians are all listed here. A triumvirate of heroines are packed up in the all-important concluding couplet, the exception being Meena Kumari, whose death was still fresh in memory, and whose career and persona combined literary and social genres, two clear favourites with the Madhuri readers. And it is not a mere celebration via substitution of a single monkey-god by so many film players; the penultimate passage is a tongue-in-cheek critique listing the fair and unfair “rewards” of a career in films—bungalow, car, male and female servants, fan mail, black money, good food and alcohol. Bombay is the place to be in, but the ultimate destination for every film devotee is a pilgrimage to Marilyn Munroe’s grave. Notice also how the parodist demands work in the film industry like the saint poets would ask their deities for liberation (moksha) from the cycle of birth and death. In other words, the parodist is not singing from an uninterested outsider’s high pedestal, he is a devotee like so many other readers of the magazine, wishing to get as close as they can to their idols.

Parodies quite often acquired explicit political overtones: the following one, inspired by the Sangam title song, dealt with the eternally excruciating theme of inflation. With one ironical difference that Indira Gandhi does not speak up at all here, unlike the situation in the film where the bagpiper-playing-modern-avatar-of-Krishna-stealing-gopis’-garments Raj Kapoor blackmails Vyjayant Mala into a u-turn: her initial emphatic “no” (nahin, nahin, nahin) becomes a “yes” (hoga, hoga, hoga) in the end:

Bol Indira Bol

Rising price of rice, and rising price of wheat
Tell us Indira, if the prices will go down or not!

Hours I spend in the ration shop everyday
The boss invariably scolds me on the delay
Will these clashes ever come to an end or not
Tell us Indira, if the prices will go down or not!

We live to die, like the goat in the abattoir
On each breath we take, kindly load tax one more
Won’t you breathe easy, if half the people are no more?

Tell us Indira … (Shukla 1967, 10)

Modern lyrical literature too was generously deployed to domesticate cinema. Old and new Hindi lyricists came together in the print versions of the poetry meets on festive occasions, so the readers could watch the stars playing Holi or lighting lamps while reading their favourite poets in the same issue. It was a clever attempt at creating a common platform for cultural identification for three discursively disparate and differentially glamorous domains of the star, the literary/film poet and the amphibian reader.

Madhuri also worked hard to dispel the misapprehensions about cinema amongst Hindi littérateurs by organising round tables on “the status of writers in Hindi films” (August 29, 1975) or on the differential formal features between Hindi literary lyrics and film lyrics (June 2, 1967). Similarly, some prominent ones like Pant, Bachchan and Dinkar were invited to watch films and record their experiences (June 2, 1967; February 24, 1967). It was natural for Madhuri to provide generous coverage to the literary adaptations such as Teesri Kasam (Renu), Usne Kaha Tha (Guleri), Uski Roti (Mohan Rakesh) and Sara Akash (Rajendra Yadav). Since the film makers often complained of lack of good stories, and since the mountain had steadfastly refused to go to Mohammed, the magazine ran a series on the classical and new fictional works it thought film-worthy in the desperate hope that they would be filmed.

Cinematic Civic Consciousness

By all accounts, cinema halls continued to grow in number in the post-independence period but there was no proportionate improvement in the viewing conditions, comforts or basic conveniences offered by them. As Krishna Shah’s film Cinema Cinema (1979) was to show, even the exhibitors did not treat their clients with much respect till the late 1980s, which in a way mirrored the larger social attitude. Lathi (baton) charge by the police or the hall management, the people jumping queues, jostling against or riding over each other’s bodies to get tickets, black marketing, stinking toilets, cat calls in the theatre—these were scenes so generic that we would not even notice. The halls themselves were often ramshackled makeshift arrangements, modified godowns or cold storages, with creaky rickety seats infested with bloodsucking bugs and mosquitoes, and the roofs covered with tarpaulin, asbestos or tin. The insides were equipped with rundown second-hand projectors, sound boxes and torn, faded or patchy screens. Power cuts were routine and the generator took time to restore the supply, giving the phrase “cinema of interruptions” an entirely different purchase (Gopalan 2002). Spoilt as we have been by the luxurious, royal comforts of the multiplex cinema halls, it is not easy for us to imagine that the people watched films sitting for all three hours on carpets or wooden or iron benches without backrests, sweating all the way in sultry conditions. Smokers could smoke anywhere they pleased, paan or tobacco chewers could spit into every possible corner, and viewers at large could sit in any possible position they fancied. Might was often right, and rogue men walked with a swagger, with their collars up, brushing meek men, and groping women on the way. In short, going to the cinema at least in the small towns of north India in the 1970s and 1980s was nothing less than an adventure, rife with the possibility of being molested, assaulted, humiliated or at least disgusted. The Upahaar cinema fire tragedy with 53 deaths and 103 injured made for shocking news in the capital.
of India in 1997, so we can imagine the state of safety and security in the rest of the country in the 1960s.\textsuperscript{6}

It was this underclass predicament of the cine-goers against which Madhuri raised a systematic and thorough public campaign lasting for the entire period under discussion.\textsuperscript{7} The obduracy on the part of cinema owners must have been really strong and the government will equally fickle for the unfair arrangement to have lasted for as long as it did. Going by NDTV anchor Raveesh Kumar’s (2010) blog report on what he called \textit{khopcha}plex in the suburbs of Delhi, such conditions might still be prevalent in some godforsaken parts or even in the backyards of the shiny multiplexes we go to. The inspiration for Madhuri’s campaign seems to have come from the readers themselves whose complaints appear first in trickles in the letters to the editor column. Very soon the frequency rose to torrential proportions, and then Madhuri, alert as ever, grabbed the opportunity to formalise it as a column, following a special comprehensive issue on the history of cinema halls and their current state in different parts (June 30, 1967). To get a sense of travails the cine-goers have historically undergone, let us go through a selection from these hilariously ironical reports sent in by the readers.

From Chakradharpur in Bihar somebody wrote that betel leaf stains and peanut shells were a common site in the theatre and people lit up their cigarettes and \textit{bidis} the moment the “No Smoking” sign came up. The Films Division documentaries were invariably in English and the people responded to nature’s calls just as the national anthem played. In the same issue, the news from Hoshangabad read that somebody had converted a warehouse into a cinema hall, providing no drinking water, but free water could be had by buying food. The letter writer made a modest appeal for disinfectants being sprayed at least once a month, and the toilets be kept clean, and the waiting period be made a little comfortable by facilitating sitting lounges. Jhansi said that in a population of approximately a quarter of a million, there were as many as seven cinema halls in the town, but all but one were in complete disarray with tattered seats and yellowing screens; the audience jeered “kaun hai [Who is hell is that]” or whistled at the power cuts or breaks in reels. The gatekeeper sold tickets informally, and flexed muscles if objected to; the parking was a good place to get tickets, only if you parked your cycle there. Films—English or Hindi—took their own sweet time in coming to this town, and if the concerned authorities did not act, warned the revolutionary resident of the town of the Rani Lakshmibai, the local people would have to quit watching films altogether. A resident of Bikaner boasted of three cinema halls, but felt uncomfortable with one adjacent to a college, with the queues of the ticket-seekers spilling over to the road and the noise into the college premises, disrupting the classes. Even the seats in the first class were designed with sadistic intentions, just as the air conditioning —“it was better to stand in the sun”— and there was absolutely no cleanliness on the hall campus. The balcony in the other cinema hall was worse than the first class, “The viewer, immersed in the film suddenly feels a sting, when he looks around he finds a rodent in the seat. Little wonder: there are several rat-holes in the hall” (Madhuri, September 8, 1967, 21).

A film-goer from Sardar Shahar complained that the entrance was really narrow, and two pillars stood right between the audience and the screen. The horrible acoustics were competitively matched by the loud noises from the fans. When it rained it poured right into the hall, and the chairs had lost at least one of their arms or feet, and even the back rests. Getting the licence for a new hall was not easy. Darbhanga reported that three out of four halls were simply not fit for the higher classes, the National Talkies being a pigeon-
house. People just barged in and ordered tickets right from their seats. At the screening of *Mera Saya*, a shadow of the rod of the fan fell over the screen, and such being the nature of the film, we kept waiting for some diegetic secret to unravel. “This is however not a laughing matter. Who will solve these problems—the government or the managers? I am afraid none, because their coffers are getting filled in any case. Boycotting the cinema hall seems to be the only way.” A viewer expressed his anguish with fellow viewers after what he saw during an *April Fool* show in Gurdaspur, “People surpass all moral limits by raising a hullabaloo over love scenes. That is the reason why rarely do gentlemen venture out with their mothers and sisters … The doors of the hall are left open during the national anthem, so people sneak out and the ones remaining inside either scratch themselves all over or yawn endlessly … The good successful films that come to some other parts of the Punjab at the beginning of the year reach here by the end, with the result that we get to see the Republic Day News Reels by the Independence Day! And as can be expected we still wait for *Anupama* and *Aaye Din Bahar Ke.* According to a report from Khadagpur in West Bengal, during *Aai Milan ki Vela* our reporter was dumbstruck at the beating received by Dharmendra at the hands of Rajendra Kumar because the projectionist had run the reels in reverse order resulting in a cause–effect confusion—as the “subsequent” reel showed, the former had kidnapped Saira Bano! (*Madhuri*, December 29, 1967, 22).

A writer came back from Ara to say:

Had gone to Ara for the vacations. Was really upset with the apathy of the management in the cinema hall there. Tickets are for sale at the paan shop nearby while the people line up in vain at the counter. A romantic scene brings out the worst cacophony of shouts and whistles. There is no fixed time for the film to begin. If an officer is to visit with his family, the film will begin only after their arrival. And young fellows are in such a hurry to get inside that they often barge into the family suits. (*Madhuri*, December 29, 1967)

The scene looks like a straight lift from David Dhawan’s *Raja Babu*, in which a rich and spoilt young brat Govinda roams about in a plummy red Enfield Bullet with his sidekick Shakti Kapoor, and when they reach late for the show, he makes the projectionist rewind the film, and goes on to insist on rewinding his choicest scenes, the protest by the audience notwithstanding. That the real small-town babus [bureaucrats] would not hesitate in throwing their weight around impervious of the inconvenience caused to the people they were meant to serve is borne out by several other accounts as well. It could be worse, as another reader complained, several years down the line, during The Emergency, when the movie was stopped after 45 minutes, only to be rewound for the local Superintendent of Police and after several balcony seats were vacated to accommodate his entourage (*Madhuri*, November 21, 1975, 55).

Also the big cities did not always offer narratives substantially different from the small towns:

Some of the old Delhi cinema halls are in a horrible condition. The women here are privileged only in one sense that they get tickets rather easily. Enter inside and what you see is that people at the back are resting their feet, as a matter of their right, on the front seats. The audience chitchats about their domestic worries even while the film is on. If you forbid them they would start a quarrel, and sitting as you are with your mother and sister, you would not want to attract undue attention. And hear them go berserk with
choicest expletives when a love scene comes along. To say nothing of the wolf-whistles that look like preloaded in sync with the background music. They would not let an opportunity of molesting a woman go by. All this happens because the audience in the cinema hall wants a two-way entertainment. Not even a tolerant person will like watching films in such an ambience. (Madhuri, December 29, 1967, 22)

A lot of these letters, it is obvious, were as much about the “uncouth” nature of public male behaviour in a common public space such as the cinema hall. What the complainants failed to see was that the show in the hall was quite simply an extension of the shows available outside—whether a Ramleela (musical performance around the Rama story), yagna (a fire sacrifice) or a mujra (performance by professional dancers). That is one way in which one can explain the widely reported incidence of the audience throwing coins at the Jai Santoshi Maa screenings. Or for that matter, the ritual of worshipping the television screens during Ramayana telecasts in the 1980s. This is still benign and innocent, ridiculous to some, but still understandable. What about the wolf-whistles and other abominable acts the complainants felt justifiably incensed about? Part of the explanation lay in the complainants’ own hypocrisies. We cannot help noticing that all of them, without fail, went to cinema with mothers and sisters! Clearly, the middle-class men had not yet developed the language of heterosexual companionship. It is also borne out by the memoirs of going to cinema in the 1980s in Bihar, in which young women were ritually taken to the cinema by their brothers-in-law, not without considerable anxiety from the matriarchs in the household (V. Kumar 2013) The jeeja-saali relationship represented that liminal zone where family norms were relaxed just a wee bit; a younger brother was still sent along on double duty of the chaperon and the watchful eye. The publicness of the cinema hall gave the elders added assurance that things could not go really too far. From the other end of the spectators’ spectrum, the atomised individual, or even a youth collective in a male-bonding situation, felt liberated enough in the darkness of the hall to let their suppressed steam out the moment they saw in public, on the screen that is, what was not permissible in family situations. So the middle-class invocation of the asexual family (mother, sister) of the Madhuri letters represent only the flip side of the same coin. Suppression and outlet are not eternal antonyms, but determined by context and company.8

In any case, Madhuri, the middle-class film magazine which wanted to be popular in the family while educating the youth, had to take up the cause of better cinema halls, and in the effort it exhibited the tireless optimism of a believing activist. It did want these complaints to reach out to the last man, to use a gendered term. Also it seems from the odd letters praising a rare cinema hall, or the management writing back to the magazine, and sometimes action in the shape of the suspension of the licence of Bombay’s Novelty, that at least some of the concerned authorities were listening (Madhuri, August 3, 1973). Theatres in bigger towns at least did get better with time: the provision of enclosed spaces like balcony, dress circle, boxes, and the presence of bouncers and separate waiting areas for women cordoned them off from the rogue male gaze and touch. Ashok Cinema in Patna, self-styled “The Pride of Patliputra”, was widely acknowledged as the ideal family hall not only because it put up social films, but enforced the civic norms that Madhuri’s readers were clamouring for. Several cinema halls emerged as architectural wonders and exemplars of good public behaviour in the period under study, so much so that visitors to those cities also went to see those halls only to return with celebratory accounts.9
Conclusion

“Perhaps [the film magazines] have been neglected because they seem too trivial, not about films at all, but consisting instead of stories of the exciting and scandalous lifestyles of the stars of the film world presented in a manner guaranteed to titillate bored, middle-class metropolitan housewives”, lamented Rachel Dwyer (1993, 253) in the early 1990s, while S. V. Srinivas referred to some early struggles to democratise the film exhibition space in class and caste terms in south India. Madhuri’s own efforts in the 1960s and 1970s in the north suggest that in order to wash the social stigma attached to the film world, it pitched the category of “family” as the principal addressee to win the confidence of the critical and articulate sections with morally high-strung stances towards cinema. Scandal or gossip could not have been the agenda for such a project, so it took recourse to what Neepa Majumdar (2009) has labelled “reticence and literary innuendo” as stylistic strategies for the journalism of the pre-independence period. Literature was profusely used to package and naturalise the cinematic content, including colourful images of the film players, and campaigns for Nagri credits were used to assure the Hindi-reading public that the magazine was actually working towards extending the frontiers unconquered by Hindi. All the same, Madhuri insisted on the cine-viewers’ democratic and civic rights, and deployed their energy to shape a film culture that was at once socially responsible and realist in a nationalist sense.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank the following for their help, hospitality, and wisdom: staff at NFAI, Pune, colleagues at CSDS; Prabhat, Sanjeev, Saumya, Vibhas, Karunakar, Pankaj and Vandana Raag, Sangeeta and Rajesh Ranjan, Piyush Daiya and Shahid Amin. The usual disclaimers apply.

NOTES

1. The author would like to thank the following for their help, hospitality, and wisdom: staff at NFAI, Pune, colleagues at CSDS; Prabhat, Sanjeev, Saumya, Vibhas, Karunakar, Pankaj and Vandana Raag, Sangeeta and Rajesh Ranjan, Piyush Daiya and Shahid Amin. The usual disclaimers apply. One of the pioneers amongst film scholars writing on film journalism through Stardust, Rachel Dwyer (1993, 253), is simply inaccurate about Madhuri when she says, “Filmfare had a Hindi version (Filmfare Madhuri Samahit) from 1964 but it was not very successful and soon ceased publication”. This name was given to the magazine in the 1990s, just before it closed down after a successful run. See my article (Ravikant 2011) for a fuller account of Madhuri’s stellar contribution in shaping the film culture in north India. To be sure, film scholars have always used film magazines, especially filmindia and Filmfare as sources, and in spite of some recent efforts made by Debashri Mukherjee (2013, 2014) and Neepa Majumdar, film journalism is yet to have an independent monograph-length study in English, though survey essays have kept
appearing on what may be called jubilee occasions of cinema in India; Ramchandran
(1985), Shrivastava (1976) and Murai (2013) are good examples. Although Lalit Joshi
(2009) made a notable start, the wealth of bhasha film journalism is yet to be explored
fully.

2. The issue dated June 2–18, 1978 was the last one edited by him and appropriately
enough it has Raj Kapoor on a photoframed cover with the story, “Why do I make films?”
See also Arvind Kumar (2013).

3. There are examples galore in Hindi films of parodies based on earlier film songs. Johar in
Bombay (Shantilal Soni, 1967) showcases one such medley of four different mukhras in
Rafi’s own voice parodying “teri pyari pyari surat ko kisi ki nazar na lage [May your lovely
face be protected from evil eye]”. Madhuri’s film review took note of the parodies in the film
(see “Parakh”, September 7, 1967, 35; also Manuel 1993).

Literary critic Indernath Madan said he could not sit for more than 15 minutes in a film
show and one respondent held cinema responsible for the rise in drinking habits among
the girls (Madhuri, December 17, 1965, 27–28).

5. According to the figures presented in the Government Annual Reports, there was a
steady increase in the permanent as well as touring cinema facilities; from 2807 in 1956,
the total number had almost trebled to 7588 in 1972. Yet, Madhuri’s readers often cited
the demographic figures from their own towns to suggest inadequacy in the sheer
number of halls that could cater to the rising local demands.


7. S. V. Srinivas (1999) mentions some early journalistic campaigns for caste-equality in terms
of the non-Brahmin audience’s entry into the cinema halls in south India for a period as
early as the 1940s. His argument that the democratic potential that cinema represented
in terms of public co-habitation cutting across caste lines had to be actually fought for
is well taken, even though we do not see much of caste conflict in the pages of
Madhuri.

8. This came to me while watching Peepli Live (Anusha Rizvi, 2010) in Pune, in an area
inhabited by software programmers. Each time the rustic characters in the film used
those raw expletives, a part of the audience burst out. It was obvious that the film was
regurgitating in them a reconnect with a suppressed and linguistically detached past,
and they could not help but laugh uncontrollably, otherwise a taboo in those sanitised
weatherproof buildings they worked in.

9. Sanjeev Kumar (2013) has recorded the excitement of growing up in the neighbourhood
of a cinema hall.

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