



# Reel Lives: How Indian Cinema Shaped East Africa's Urban Culture

By Rasna Warah



At a time when “social distancing” is becoming the norm due to the coronavirus pandemic, it may appear self-indulgent to reminisce about a period when going to the cinema was a regular feature of East African Asians’ lives. But perhaps now that the world is changing - and many more people are watching movies at home on Netflix and other channels - it is important to document the things that have been lost in the war against COVID-19 and with the advent of technology. One of these things is the thrill of going to the cinema with the family.

What has also been lost is an urban culture embedded in East Africa’s South Asian community - a culture where movie-going was an integral part of the social fabric of this economically successful minority.

Those who pass the notorious Globe Cinema roundabout, which is often associated with pickpockets and street children, might be surprised to learn that the Globe Cinema (which no longer shows films but is used for other purposes, such as church prayer meetings) was once *the* place to be seen on a Sunday evening among Nairobi’s Asian community. I remember that cinema well because in the 1970s my family used to go there to watch the latest Indian - or to be more specific, Hindi (India also produces films in regional languages like Telegu, Bengali and Punjabi) blockbuster at 6 p.m. on Sundays. Sunday was movie day in my family, and going to the cinema was a ritual we all looked

forward to. The Globe Cinema was considered one of the more “posh” cinemas in Nairobi; not only was it more luxurious than the others, but it also had better acoustics.

As veteran journalist Kul Bhushan writes in a recent edition of *Awaaz* magazine (which is dedicated entirely to Indian cinema in East Africa from the early 1900s to the 1980s), “Perched on a hillock overlooking the Ngara roundabout, the Globe became the first choice for cinemagoers for new [Indian] releases as it became the venue to ogle and be ogled by the old and the young.”

Indian movies were – and are – the primary source of knowledge about Indian culture among East Africa’s Asian community. The early Indian migrants had little contact with the motherland, as trips back home were not only expensive but the sea voyage from Mombasa to Bombay or Karachi took weeks. (At independence in 1947, the Indian subcontinent became two countries – India and Pakistan – hence the reference to Indians in East Africa as “Asians”.) So they relied on Indian films to learn about the customs and traditions of the country they or their ancestors had left behind.

Exposure to Indian languages and culture through films was one way Indians abroad or in the diaspora retained their identity and got to learn about their traditions and customs. I got to learn about the spring festival of Holi and goddesses such as Durga from watching Indian films. I also learnt Hindi, or rather Hindustani – a mix of Hindi (which is Sanskrit-based) and Urdu (which is also Sanskrit-based but which borrows heavily from Persian and Arabic) – which is the lingua franca of Northern India and Pakistan, and which is the language most commonly used in the so-called Hindi cinema.

On the other hand, the sexist culture portrayed in the majority of Indian films also reinforced sexual discrimination among East African Asians. The idea that women are subservient to men, and that it is the woman who must sacrifice her own needs and desires for the “greater good” of the family/community, were – and still are – dominant in Indian cinema. Love stories portrayed in films – where young lovebirds defy societal expectations and cross class, religion or caste barriers – were not supposed to be emulated; they were considered pure entertainment and not reflective of a society where arranged marriages were and still are the norm. I heard many stories of how if an Asian woman dared to cross racial, religious or caste barriers she was severely reprimanded or stigmatised.

Watching Indian movies was also one way of keeping up with the latest fashions. Men and women often tried to copy the hairstyles and clothes of their favourite movie stars. When the hugely successful film *Bobby* was released in 1973, many girls adopted the hairstyle of the lead actress (who was barely 16 when she starred in the film) Dimple Kapadia. (I used to have a blouse at that time that was a replica of the one the actress wore in the film.) When the famous film star Sharmila Tagore dared to wear a revealing swimsuit in the 1967 film *An Evening in Paris*, she opened the door for many Indian women to go swimming without covering themselves fully.

Since music often defined the success of a film, top playback singers, such as Lata Mangeshkar, Kishore Kumar and Muhammad Rafi, were held in high regard, and people flocked to watch their live concerts in Nairobi. Wealth and opulence were in full display at these events.

## **The Golden Age**

The 60s, 70s and 80s are often described as the Golden Age of Indian/Hindi cinema. Nairobi, Mombasa and Kisumu, where there were large concentrations of Asians, had many cinemas devoted to showing films made in Bombay (now Mumbai) – often referred to as Bollywood. This was the time when actors and actresses like Rajesh Khanna, Hema Malini, Amitabh Bachchan and Sridevi became superstars.

Cinemas in Nairobi were always full, especially on weekends when Asian families flocked to the dome-like Shan in Ngara, to Liberty in Pangani, or to the Odeon or the Embassy in the city centre. (except for Shan cinema, all the others are no longer cinema halls but are used for other purposes. Shan was rescued from decrepitude by the Sarakasi Trust, which changed its name to The Dome; it is now used for cultural activities.) Over the years, an increasing number of Africans began watching Indian films. Oyunga Pala, the chief curator at *The Elephant*, recalls going to the Tivoli cinema in Kisumu, where he first got to see Amitabh Bachchan in action.

“Right next to the Liberty Cinema was situated the clinic of a very popular Indian doctor,” recalls Neera Kapur-Dromson in an article published in the Indian cinema edition of *Awaaz*. “The small waiting room was always crammed with patients. But that never deterred him from taking ample breaks to enjoy a few scenes of the film being screened...”

But for Asian teenage girls and boys in Nairobi, the place to be seen on a Sunday evening was the Belle Vue Drive-In cinema on Mombasa Road. Young Asian men would show off their (fathers’) cars and young women would display the latest fashions – all in the hope of catching the attention of a potential mate. Food was shared – and sometimes even cooked – on the gentle slopes of the parking spots. Going to the Drive-In was like going for a picnic. And as the lights dimmed, the large bulky speakers were put on full volume so that everyone (usually father, mother, and three or four kids in the back seat) in the car – and beside it – could hear the dialogues. Fox Drive-In cinema on Thika Road was also a popular joint, but mainly with the younger crowd who preferred watching the Hollywood movies which were a regular feature there.

It was the same in Kampala. Vali Jamal, recalling his youthful days in Uganda’s capital city, says that the Sunday outing to the Drive-In was the only time there was a traffic jam in Kampala. “Idi Amin got caught in one of them, driving back to Entebbe with his foreign minister Wanume Kibedi,” he writes. “‘Where are we?’ quoth the president, ‘In Bombay?’ And the expulsion happened.”

He continues: “Well, let me not exaggerate, but South Asian wealth was on display on the Sundays accompanied by their notions of exclusion, and let us not forget that those two variables – income inequality and racial arrogance – figured heavily in Amin’s decision to expel us.” (In August 1972, President Idi Amin expelled more than 70,000 Asians from Uganda.)

### **Urban conversations**

In her book, *Reel Pleasures: Cinema Audiences and Entrepreneurs in Twentieth Century Urban Tanzania*, Laura Fair describes how the Sunday evening shows became a focal point of urban conversations among Tanzania’s Asian community. They were meeting points, like temples, mosques or churches, where people sought affirmation.

As in Kenya, Sunday shows in Tanzania were family and community bonding events. “Cinema halls were not lifeless chunks of brick and mortar; they resonated with soul and spirit. They were places that gave individual lives meaning, spaces that gave a town emotional life. Across generations, cinemas were central to community formation,” says the author. Indian cinema thus played an integral role in the social lives of the South Asian community in East Africa.

It all started in the 1920s when Mohanlal Kala Savani, a textile trader, imported a hand-cranked projector and began showing silent Indian films in a rented warehouse in the coastal town of Mombasa. In 1931, when two brothers, Janmohamed Hasham and Valli Hasham, built the Regal Cinema, he began renting the venue to show Hindi films. Two years later, he built his own 700-seat Majestic Cinema in Mombasa, which showed Indian films and also hosted live shows.

The late Mohanlal Savani was a man of vision, recalls his son Manu Savani in an article chronicling how his father expanded movie-viewing in East Africa. "As time progressed Majestic became an established cinema on the Kenyan coast. The owners of Majestic also became fully fledged film distributors with links stretching, to start with, to Uganda and [what was then known as] Tanganyika."

Famous Indian movie stars began gracing these cinemas in order to increase their fan following. Notable among these were the legendary Dilip Kumar, a 1950s heartthrob whose portrayal of jilted lovers set many a heart fluttering, and Asha Parekh, who made her name in tragic love stories such as *Kati Patang*.

Indian cinema had wide appeal not just in Kenya, but also in neighbouring Zanzibar, where the urban night life was dominated by Indian movies. Many a *taraab* tune came directly from the hit songs of Indian movies. As opposed to Western movies (often referred to as English movies), Indian films appealed to Swahili sensibilities, with their focus on values such as modesty, respect for elders and morality.

In Zanzibar, Lamu and other coastal areas where segregation between the sexes was strictly observed, there were special *zenana* (women-only) shows, where women dressed up in their finest to join other women in watching Indian and Egyptian films. For many Asian and Swahili women, the *zenana* afternoon show was a rare opportunity to leave their cloistered existence and let their hair down, and also to meet up with friends outside the confines of their homes. (I once went to a women-only show at Nairobi's Shan cinema on a Wednesday afternoon with my grandmother when I was about eight or nine years old and I can tell you there was less movie-watching and more talking and gossiping going on during the show.)

Unfortunately, the old cinemas in Zanzibar are no more, which is surprising because the island is host to the Zanzibar International Film Festival. Cine Afrique, the only standing cinema in Zanzibar when I visited the island in 2003, was a pale shadow of its former self, with its cracked ceiling and broken seats. I believe it has now been demolished to pave way for a mall. The Empire, another famous cinema on the island, is now a supermarket and the once impressive Royal Cinema is in an advanced stage of decay.

### **The decline of the movie theatre**

There are many reasons for the decline of Indian movie theatres in East Africa, among them piracy, declining South Asian populations and technologies that allow people to watch movies from the comfort of their homes. The introduction of multiplex cinemas in shopping malls has also lessened the appeal of a stand-alone cinemas, and made movie-going less of an "event" and more of something that can be done while doing other things.

Indian cinema has also evolved. Unrequited love, family dramas, good versus evil and the "angry young man" genre popularised by Amitabh Bachchan - constant themes in the "masala" Indian films of the 70s and 80s - have been replaced by more sophisticated and nuanced plots, perhaps in response to a large Indian diaspora in the West which is more interested in plots that are more realistic and reflective of their own lives. The escapism of the Indian cinema of yesteryear has given way to realism, which makes cinema-going less "entertaining".

Indian actors and actresses are also getting more roles in films made in Hollywood, and American and British films are increasingly finding India to be an interesting backdrop or subject for their movies, as evidenced by the huge success of films like *Slumdog Millionaire*. This has expanded the scope and definition of what constitutes an "Indian movie".

Some would say that Indian cinema has actually deteriorated, with its emphasis on semi-pornographic dance routines and plots revolving around upper class people and their angst. So-called “art cinema” produced by award-winning directors like Satyajit Ray and Shyam Benegal, which portrays the lives of the downtrodden and addresses important social issues, or distinctly feminist films like *Parama* (directed by Aparna Sen), which explores the inner worlds of Indian women, are few and far between.

But as any Indian movie buff will tell you (and I include myself in this group), the experience of watching an Indian film in a cinema cannot be matched on a TV or computer screen. Indian cinema in its heyday was a feast for the eyes. If you wanted to enter the magical world of Indian cinema, complete with elaborate and well-choreographed dances, heart-stirring music and emotion, you saw Indian films in a movie theatre.

Alas, those days are fast disappearing thanks to terrorism, technology and now COVID-19. And along with this, a distinctly East African urban culture has been lost forever.

---

*Published by the good folks at [The Elephant](#).*

*The Elephant is a platform for engaging citizens to reflect, re-member and re-envision their society by interrogating the past, the present, to fashion a future.*

*Follow us on [Twitter](#).*

