

# Wanted A Film Movement

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The concept of film society movement in India was imported from Europe. To the English educated intellectuals the film club was, like similar other subjects, a sign of modernity in the domain of culture. A pioneer organiser of the film society movement once stated, quoting from a French article that, the degree of modernity of a city could be measured by the number of film clubs located there. The three cities—Chennai, Mumbai and Kolkata—where the number of film clubs were larger than those of other cities—were port towns places of dominant English education and spaces of European culture.

The organisation of the film society movement from its inception was intellectual-dependent. And the intellectual-organised movement remained solely intellectual-oriented. In the film society movement in India, film clubs were formed. They were approved by the government. A federal body was constructed—Federation of Film Societies of India. All the film clubs were to be affiliated to the Federation.

The film clubs were member-based. Any person who had the capability to pay not-so-little money at a time and in courses annually and occasionally and had some kind of connection with the authority of the Club, could become a member of the Club.

The film society movement, unlike movements in other cultural spheres— theatre; literature, music—were member-based, member-oriented. But the desires of the members, their mind set, their activities beyond their professions, the impact of the film shown on their lives, their reactions towards commercial films were not known, not ever tried to be known.

This writer has not come across any list of criterion to be fulfilled by one, desiring to be a member of a film club. The major criterion was the capability of paying subscription at a high rate.

An organiser of a film club in Kolkata once told this correspondent that they wanted to fix the amount of subscription at a low level so that ordinary people were able to become members. After two years the same organiser said that it became difficult to run the club with small subscriptions. It was an inevitable conclusion. If a group of enthusiastic people wanted to form a club, needed to get affiliation from the Federation, and desired to make the members satisfied with the screening of film, the amount of subscription to meet the expenses for running a club had to fix at a level, out of the reach of common film goers. This was, basically, the rule of the structure.

A film club in Kolkata had tried to go beyond the structure. In place of screening the film for subscriber-members, they had shown film to the slum dwellers. They arranged disorganised on film, before and after this screening. But they were unable to continue after sometime. From where would come the cost of

rent and screening of film? This could not be met by the donation from a few wellwishers. There were also other problems.

The film society movement was for members of the film clubs only. The major programme of the movement was to show films—good films—to the members.

There was ample scope for debate on the 'goodness' of the film shown.

Film to be shown to the members by the film clubs were, collected from the Federation, the foreign embassies in India, this governmental organisations and from the market.

The Federation had to supply films to its affiliated clubs in exchange of the clubs' annual subscription to the Federation. The Federation as a body and a club as an individual entity used to collect films from foreign embassies through proper connections. Whichever collection of films, the Federation had acquired from whichever source, they used to pass those to the clubs. The embassies generally handed over to the Federation or to a club whatever stock they had at that time. As a result the film clubs had little option in the selection of the film to be screened. They were practically forced to show the films they got. Because if they became very selective about the quality of the film and had tried to reject the film and had tried to reject the film offered, they would be in trouble in getting film from these two sources the next time. Members of a film club used to judge the merit of a club not on the basis of the quality of the films but the quantity of the films shown during a tenure. And if the number of the members declined, it would have been very difficult to run a film club. Moreover collection of selected films from the commercial circuit was highly expensive. It could not be possible on a regular basis.

In case of screening of Indian films, there were prohibitory governmental rules and regulations. More-over less concentration was given on the Indian films.

The question—whether such screening of film had fulfilled the objective of the film society movement—had never been seriously raised.

In the structure of the screening of the films there emerged a pattern similar to the commercial circuit. The Federation and the embassies had acted as 'distributors' and the film clubs as 'exhibitors'. The difference was that the commercial exhibitors could select according to their own financial calculations, the film clubs could not.

There were two other forms of screening of film parallel to mainstream commercial screening. One was projection of propaganda films by governmental departments and the other one was open air show of films, arranged, by the local organisations at low prices. Both were very effective in their own terms. In both spheres—in the area of propaganda and in the space of common filmgoers—film clubs were absent. A film club according to the regulations could not organise film shows for non-members. A club planned to introduce a category—'student members' and was not allowed by the norms of the Federation.

In their own limited spheres, whatever 'motivated' programmes had been taken up by the film clubs, the results were disheartening. An example can be cited. A club, in order to spread the cultural solidarity among the people of different regions, had organised two regional film festivals. The presence of members was insignificant, the objective of the programme was not understood

by the members and there was no spread effect among the other film clubs. There were other similar experiences.

Besides the screening of films, the other declared programmes of the film society movement were publication of journals, organising seminars and film appreciation courses so that members could critically understand the merits of a film.

The results in those spheres were not encouraging.

A very few members had shown their interest either in contributing articles or in reading the articles in film club journals. There was a wide gap between the desire of the organisers and the real position of the members. What the organisers had published in the journals were not attractive to the members. On the other hand what the members wanted to read, the organisers could not cater to.

Similar kinds of results were observed in the case of seminars and film appreciation convened. The participation of members, either as speakers or as audience was highly insignificant, quite discouraging for the continuation of the programmes. Moreover, in the seminars what they spoke, they did not do in practice, what they uttered they did not do with conviction. The seminars were organised just as rituals.

Basically the film society movement here had created a two-tier structure of participants. In the first tier, there was a group of educated, intellectual members, who had developed a critical faculty. They used to see large number of foreign films, they did understand the grammar of films, they did write on films and those were also read by themselves. They carried on discussion on films, and those were heard by themselves. They did not have any kind of connections with rest of the spectators.

In the second tier were common members of the clubs. They used to see the films, whatever were shown to them. They did not attend special programmes of screening with specific objectives. They remained absent in seminars, were not interested in joining film appreciation courses. They did not read articles in serious film journals. Yet they tried to keep themselves separated from non-film club spectators.

The members belonging to these two tiers had little interconnection among themselves. The film society movement either had failed to change the pattern or did not want to do it. The movement had suffered from intellectualism.

Any movement may be initiated by the intellectual, thus may direct the organisations, participate in the movement, but that does not mean that the programmes of the movement will only for the intellectuals. In the theatre movement here the intellectuals had thought over it, had written the script, had acted in it, but that did not lead to a situation where intellectuals were the only spectators. The drama could be staged anywhere—in the streets, in villages, in workers' colony. Anyone was allowed to come within its arena. Same was the case for the music movement and not the case for film movement here.

The problem was with the structure of the movement itself. The film society movement was initiated and developed within a boundary. Approval from the governmental departments, affiliation from a federal body, subscribed membership, restricted sources of film, screening in an auditorium—those

elements had drawn a boundary around the movement. The film societies were restricted to integrate with a larger audience. The theatre movement was not formed only with the subscribed membership. The literary movement was not created only for the registered members. The film movement could not be developed only with the film club members. What was tried was not film movement, but film club movement. In this limited frame what could have been done had already been done.

Wanted now is a film movement, not a film society movement. □□□