

## CINEMA OF PRAYŌGA:

## Indian Experimental Film &amp; Video



by Tanya Singh

*Launched at Tate Modern, Cinema of Prayōga is a UK tour of historical and contemporary Indian experimental film and video organised by artist film and video lab 'no.w.here'.*

*What follows is a free assembly of extracts from the accompanying catalogue of essays and interviews introducing and reflecting on the diverse forms of 'experiments in representation' that defines Cinema of Prayōga.*



Given that the first explorations into experimental, avant-garde and 'underground' films started in Europe and North America, it seems natural that the relevant theories about 'experimental film' have emerged from there. Why so? Isn't experimentation intrinsically universal? During Experimenta 2005 in Mumbai, film historian Amrit Gangar coined the term 'Cinema of Prayōga' as a *prayāya* – an alternative [*improvement*], to 'experimental film' and its synonyms. [*Prayōga* is pronounced as prayōg, and *prayāya* as paryāy].

A Sanskrit word, 'prayōga' has several connotations, including design, contrivance, employment, practice, **experiment** (opp. theory), exhibition, recitation and **representation**. The root 'yōga' incorporates the meanings of use, touch, magic, substance, and concentration of mind, while the prefix 'pra' carries the sense of vanguard. But unlike *avant-garde*, 'prayōga' is a non-military word; it is, in fact, artistic and meditative. The English 'laboratory' becomes more connected – as *prayōgamandir* (temple of prayōga) or *prayōgashālā* (hall or saloon of prayōga). The word is found in all major Indian languages, northern or southern, with interesting derivatives. *Prayogika*, a new word in the Gujarati lexicon, means 'a light essay'. In Hindi *prayōgavādi* is an experimentalist or experimentalistic, while in Bengali it becomes pragmatic or pragmatist. *Prayōga* in Malayalam means manipulation, with *prayōgābhinjan* referring to expertise in tactical performance.

These are times when, as Geeta Kapur has noted, the Euro-American establishment can only assimilate non-western art on manifestly ethnographic terms, while keeping the option open to reject it precisely on those terms. A term that captures flux in its inner self, the integrative *prayōga* avoids dualistic paradigms of west versus east, traditional versus modern (or post-modern, or post-post-modern). Let us explore the *cinema of prayōga*...

#### THE MAIN FILM BEGINS

"Phalke was named the father, because I think he also fancied that title. In those days everyone wanted to be a father, because they realised that nationhood also means fatherhood. Gandhi too was called Bapu – father. He was the father of politics, so that made Nehruji the uncle, Chacha Nehru! [...] Everything is family oriented here."

- Kamal Swaroop

When Dhundiraj Govind Phalke pioneered Indian feature filmmaking with *Raja Harishchandra* in 1913, India was still a British colony. The film, based on a story from the epic *Mahabharata*, was advertised as "an entirely Indian production by Indians," indicating Phalke's resolve to establish a new 'swadeshi' or India's own industry in those colonial times. Gandhi was yet to return home from South Africa...

Phalke occupies a significant space in Indian

cinema not only as a pioneer, but also because he personified the early *prayōga* spirit in his construction of the gaze, the frame, space and time. In comparison with Lumière, Ashish Rajadhyaksha has observed that in Phalke there is almost no definition of time; the contiguities are employed in the different states of seeing as they come together. From Phalke's surviving incomplete films, though Méliès had already made 'fantastic' films 10 years previously, we still get insights into the *prayōga* that was in practice – between the lithographic and oleographic iconographies, between folk theatre and *purānik* / epic literature, between the individual vision and national notion, and between myth and the machine of modernity.

#### INTERTITLE: A national *prayōga*

"New ideas, new approaches had to be found, encouraged, and put to work."

- Jean Bhowmagary

Paradoxically, the next major *prayōga* movement in India was born of governmental decisions and not from the impetus of filmmakers rebelling against existing commercial or popular cinema. In 1947, just months after national independence, the Films Division (FD) was established, as a mass media unit of the governmental Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. Later in the '60s, at the initiative of India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, the Film Finance Corporation, the Film & Television Institute and the National Film Archive were set up. Those were the times of cultural rejuvenation throughout an India that was still trying to build herself socially and economically after centuries of colonial oppression and loot.

This Nehruvian socialist context, an experiment in itself, enabled a category of 'Experimental Films' within this governmental organisation. Although bound to its role of producing and distributing information films and newsreels, Films Division's Chief Producers (including Vijay B. Chandra and Jean Bhowmagary) aimed to produce visually stimulating 'food for thought' to nourish India's millions of illiterate people, as well as films that would be free from the logic of capital and commerce. They took the risk of making films such as *Explorer* (Prمود Pati, 1968), *And I Make Short Films* (S.N.S. Sastry, 1968), *Trip* (Prمود Pati, 1970) and *Child on a Chess Board* (Vijay B. Chandra, 1979). In a similar way to the British GPO Film Unit, these filmmakers were given access to an infrastructure along with freedom to push the boundaries of filmmaking and experiment with ideas.

INTERTITLE: We are born experimental  
"We were taught Shakespearian classics, *Julius Caesar*, *Macbeth* and the Romantic poets. Simultaneously Doordarshan, the [government-run] Indian television channel, would bombard us with what the state considered classical, Hindustani classical music and Indian classical dance, from Odissi to Kathakali."

- Ashish Avikunthak

# 1913-2006



"[...] many of my friends who were really passionate film students have become farmers. Filmmaking is a means to an end. It is not an end in itself."  
- Amit Dutta

Shai Heredia, director of the Experimenta festival in Mumbai and Delhi, argues that one of the most interesting aspects of contemporary Indian film is that it is free from the "burden" of the 'schools' of the western 'avant-garde film' and 'experimental film'. Instead it draws on self-reflexive narrative traditions – the thousands of ways of storytelling in India. Recent works by filmmakers such as Ashish Avikunthak, Ashim Alhuwalia, Shumona Goel, and Amit Dutta reflect this by invoking music, poetry, ritual and documentary to examine the relationship between their status as filmic texts and the fictions-in-progress of their subjects.

Situated in societies riven with gross contradictions, today's Indian film artists explore ideas around migration, caste, class, gender, sexuality and religion. They challenge conventional forms of representation not only by questioning larger social systems, but also by simultaneously exposing the complex cultural relationships that they share with filmmaking as an artistic practice. Considering the cultural heterogeneity of India, and the particular relationship between selves and the concepts of 'community' and 'politicality' in the discourse of Indian democracy, these personal films become auto-ethnographic documents of the filmmakers' economic and socio-political contexts.

INTERTITLE: Routes, not roots

"At one level [migration] takes place out of desire [...] but at another level it results from compulsion and desperation, urgency, poverty and ultimately isolation."

- Navjot Altaf

"They poured petrol into the mouth of a six-year-old and threw in a lit match – he blew up like a bomb. Eyewitness account, Gujarat riots, 2002."

- from *Unity in Diversity*, by Nalini Malani

In the mid-1990s, as curator Johan Pijnappel notes, approximately 30 Indian artists (without a film background) broke out of the frame to expand their testimony to a wider public with installations and performances using video. Against a backdrop of horrific communal violence and rising Hindutva fascism, in a

period when India opened up to the international market, the grand Nehruvian dream seemed to be finally crumbling. But, far from cynical Western postmodernism, these artists saw in 'video' a medium par excellence, appreciated by the masses, appropriate for political engagement and consciousness-raising in a new context – the gallery.

With vigilance against historical amnesia, and passion for social transformation, contemporary video artists (including Valay Shende, Anita Dube, Pushpamala N and Surekha) are conscious of how subjective perceptions alter the process of remembering. [Re]inventing their own strategies, they develop narrative codes that inscribe the role of the storyteller, thus displaying an effective inventiveness and countercultural commitment.

A vast body of video/installation art has also grown out of the need to recognise and make visible those marginalised experiences (i.e. decolonised subjectivities, women, homosexuals, *Dalits*, etc.) written out of conventional histories. Thus, despite the obvious fact that nationalist discourses played a vital progressive role in the process of decolonisation, current explorations around the idea of location (e.g. by Raqs Media Collective) involve a rethinking of the relations between places and subjects.

INTERTITLE: History is an experiment

"How does one deal with 'contemporary' history? [...] How does one tell a story about something which has no story in the conventional sense, only an unfolding?"

- Sanjiv Shah

Over the past four years no.w.here has worked closely with its Indian partner organisation Filter to establish the Experimenta festival in India, providing a platform for Indian and international artists' film and video work. During this period they have excavated a rich vein of visual-arts based work that, despite the huge popularity of Indian cinema internationally, remains relatively unknown. The touring exhibition and publication *Cinema of Prayoga: Indian Experimental Film & Video 1913–2006* presents a comprehensive selection of these works to UK audiences, tracing a history of personal filmmaking outside of the 'Bollywood' industry. Now joined by two artists' residencies in London and Mumbai, this exploratory project is, necessarily, ongoing.

As Ritwik Ghatak has said, experimentation is an ever-living and never-dying thing. Experiment is part of life so why name it, why label it? Naming or labelling perhaps helps to give it a push, to polemicalise the thought that dies and takes birth again to die. So it is with the term *prayōga* – itself referring to the eternal quest, a continuing process in time and space...

THIS FILM HAS NO END

It is a *prayōga-in-perpetuation*



Extracted and adapted from the no.w.here publication *Cinema of Prayoga: Indian Experimental Film & Video 1913–2006* (2006, £9.95, available from [www.nowhere-lab.org](http://www.nowhere-lab.org)).

Images from the exhibition.

Tanya Singh is a writer, filmmaker and Project Manager of the touring exhibition *Cinema of Prayoga* which continues until Autumn 2007. For tour dates and venues see: [www.independentcinemaoffice.org.uk](http://www.independentcinemaoffice.org.uk)

