

Moving bus movies



Many of us seem to live life in the intervals between films

When we talk of films, we often exclusively focus on the projected image and not on the spectators and the act of seeing. So it was a pleasure to come across a new book, *House Full* by Lakshmi Srinivas, an anthropologist teaching in the U.S., which focuses on the movie-going experience. This book exhibits the multiple avenues that go into the production and creation of a film and engages deeply with the lived experience of 'going to the movies'.

Reading her book, I was reminded of repeated replays of bus journeys watching films. Recently, I travelled by a private bus from Bengaluru to Tiruchi. It was like many such journeys in an AC bus with tinted windows, pink satin curtains, unwashed seats and a surly attendant. It is impossible to travel in Tamil Nadu, or increasingly elsewhere, without being assailed, assaulted and submerged by movies or film songs. Travel is no longer a journey of introspection and exploration but of entering in the middle of one movie and exiting in the middle of a song.

No breaks

What is this obsession with cinema that it occupies so much of our public space and fills every nook and corner of our silence? I have no answer but only another experience.

From the moment I boarded the bus at two in the afternoon, I entered a world of loud film songs. The cotton I stuffed in my ears was like porous clouds. As we entered Tamil Nadu, a TV screen in front came to life. The movie was a love story, yet another twist to an already crooked Mobius tale with no beginning or end. I was actually beginning to enjoy it when suddenly the movie stopped, the screen went blue and there was an eerie silence.

Not one of us, intently watching the movie as we all were, moved to find out what the matter was. It was almost as if we were indifferent to whether we watched the movie or not; all we wanted was to see some moving images in front of us till we reached somewhere.

In the silence, I looked around the bus and realized how much like a mini-theatre it was. Not a theatre with Gandhi class (the front stalls in the pre-multiplex era) but an exemplar of a multiplex — reddish reclining seats, thick pink curtains, the cold blast of an AC, and a hot, tired world outside, almost suggesting that perhaps the first multiplex owners were bus owners.

As if the silence was too much to bear, another movie came on. I ineffectively plugged my ears again and like everyone else on the bus accepted the fate of yet another random film. But the movie, Villan, with 'ultimate superstar' Ajith, was engaging and watching it as we moved across scenic landscapes, vainly trying to peek through the curtains at the setting sun, I realised one simple truth: movies are not, for us, objects of art that have to be respected as such.

In Yakshagana performances, people walk in and out, talking loudly. Dogs saunter in and look around in bemusement. Our audiences get angry if they are asked not to speak on mobile phones in the middle of movies, concerts, theatre or dance performances. These acts don't indicate a lack of social skills alone, but are also a reflection of how art is viewed by most people.

When the bus stopped for toilet breaks, people walked in and out without worrying about missing scenes. A young girl sitting next to me was busy with her phone and mugging for a chemistry test, perking up only when she heard the word 'love' in the film. A young man surreptitiously wiped his tears as if it were only sweat drops in the ultra-cool bus, an old man laughed through his dentures, and the woman behind me kept saying into her phone, "keep hot idlis!", her urgency increasing as we came closer to Tiruchi.

This is the way we watch movies in moving buses, villages outside looking like yellow windows with hints of folded faces in between. In essence it seems that for many of us life itself is only an interlude between movies. All the world is not just a stage but only a fleeting film seen through the windows of my tinted soul.

Sundar Sarukkai is a professor of philosophy at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bengaluru. x