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FADING LIGHTS IN MUMBAI

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Once grand, the city's single-screen cinemas are being edged out by nearby multiplexes. Charukesi Ramadurai considers the grim fate of a former institution ...

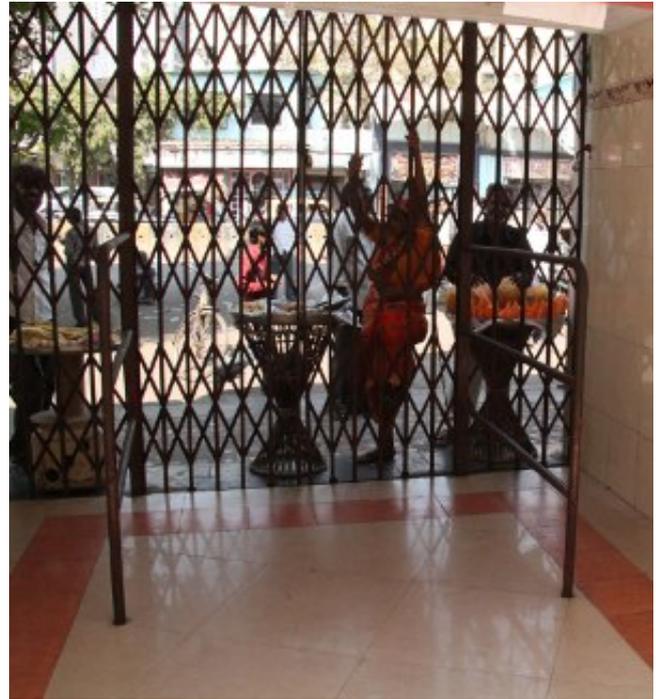
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These buildings in Mumbai could be ageing courtesans from another time and place. Faded, wrinkled, abused and world-weary, they are the old single-screen cinema houses scattered all over the city. Some still have the spirit to don the war paint in the hopes of luring customers. Others have just given up the struggle.

At four in the afternoon, Royal Talkies near Grant Road in South Mumbai appears desolate. In a hall capable of seating over 600, around 40 heads are visible in the dim light. All eyes are on the screen where an old mother is pleading with her wayward son to mend his ways. The movie is from the 1980s, with stars who have long since retired. The large posters outside the cinema hall announce other obscure films starring macho men from the Hindi hinterlands of North India. "We sell tickets for 20 rupees (roughly 30p / 45 cents)," says the cinema manager. "Anything above that and even this audience will not come. But how can we afford to screen new movies at that cost?"

Tickets at multiplex theatres cost ten times as

much, so the crowd here is more forgiving of whatever film is on. Everyone claps and whistles, jeers and cries along with the demands of the story. During the interval (a convention of Indian cinema) the audience steps out to the road, where vendors are ready with cut fruit, chewy omelettes, tepid tea and local sodas called Banta; no concessions are available inside, not even a bottle of drinking water. A cinema employee stands nearby and calls out the name of the film and the ticket prices to passers-by. These ticket callers seem in keeping with the seedy beckoning of the neighbourhood next door, the squalid red-light district of Kamathipura.



The security guards patrolling these cinemas seem inexplicably paranoid. Anyone asking questions or taking photographs is viewed with suspicion, even hostility, though the films themselves are fairly benign. (A few theatres do have discreet 10am shows of what are called “sexy films”, but customers in the know tend to quietly troop in on time.)

But after their initial wariness, some managers open up. “Why don’t you sell these photographs and give us the money to convert this theatre into a multiplex?” jokes one. “That is what people want anyway, that air-conditioned comfort.” Another has a different take: “The enemy is not the multiplex theatres. We cater to completely different audiences.” He then explains that the real problem is the ready availability of pirated DVDs of new films, which sell for 30 rupees. “The entire family can watch the movie and then return the DVD at half the rate to the seller. How can we compete with anything like that?”

Nestled in the city’s noisy bustle, Mumbai’s single-screen theatres are exotic anachronisms. Many of them have grand English names—Strand, Metro and, most famously, Opera House—which have long been used to identify the surrounding neighbourhoods. In their heyday, these cinemas were mostly playhouses patronised by upper-class Brits. The now-seedy Alfred was originally the Ripon, one of Mumbai’s first playhouses for regional drama.

The road along which many of these theatres sit is still called Pila Haus (a phonetic adaptation), although the entertainment is now limited mainly to old action films. Some owners of once-prosperous theatres in South Mumbai have been investing in restoration and reinvention. The Edward, for instance, has gamely tried to mask its ageing soul with a fresh coat of paint, and has lately been hosting a series of world cinema classics. The Roxy, having been shut for 12 years, now gleams with steel and chrome. Other popular theatres, such as Sterling and Metro, have been converted into multiplexes in recent years with sponsorship from large cinema production houses or theatre chains, such as Reliance Big Cinema and Inox.

But many have not been so lucky. Mumbai may have the largest number of art deco buildings after Miami, but conservation is not on the minds of most Mumbaikars. The few



locals who lament the destruction of the city's architectural heritage are not inclined towards activism. And the suburbs up north have readily embraced the spanking new multiple-screen theatres, which show new "multiplex movies" with slick production values, offbeat stories and timely celebrities.

In a city that can be fast and hard, there is very little room for nostalgia. Deepa Gahlot, a film writer and critic, sums up this view with an incident that left her frustrated. She had e-mailed a famous film actor asking for his help in preserving Capitol theatre, known for its superior architecture. His reply was bluntly dismissive: "Everything changes, we can't cling to the past."

Everyone in Mumbai has a single-screen story. My own has to do with late-night shows on Fridays with friends at Sterling in South Mumbai (when it was still Bombay). Specifically, with the taste of the caramel popcorn—then still a novelty—that lingered through the week. And the joy of finding tickets available for that much-anticipated film on the first day of its release, at a time when Internet bookings and simultaneous shows on several screens were unknown. Sometimes this would mean buying "black tickets" (ie, from touts who sell them at a premium). Built in 1969, Sterling is not as old as some of the other cinema halls in Mumbai, but it was one of the few that screened only English films, and was patronised by a rather young and hip clientele.

This is long before the word "multiplex" became part of the Indian vocabulary. Single-screen cinemas were the only option available. Some were known for their particularly good samosa, others for their dreaded creaky overhead fans, or for a reputation for attracting "rowdy elements". Some were massive sprawls with hundreds of seats while others were smaller and cosier. Every theatre had its own character and charm. Those were the days when I took them for granted.



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