

Rescuing and restoring the soul of Indian cinema

CHAITANYA K PRASAD

Cinema is more than moving images on a screen. It is memory, imagination, and history intertwined. Each film captures a moment in time, a reflection of who we were, what we dreamt of, and how we saw the world. Yet, like all fragile memories, films fade too. Neglect, decay, and time have already erased countless treasures from India's cinematic past. Recently, I came across a full-page advertisement of an upcoming event organised by the Indian Cinema Heritage Foundation's one-day symposium on cinema, 'Future of Memories', and I jumped with joy. As someone who truly cherishes films, I believe there's no better way to honour our cinematic past than by bringing its classics back to life through restoration.

Why film preservation matters?

Every restored frame is a resurrection of history. Film preservation is not just about saving celluloid; it's about protecting a piece of cultural identity. When we

preserve a film, we preserve the artistry, emotion, and vision of the people who created it. We preserve their struggles, their experiments, and their reflections of society. Each reel becomes a time capsule of fashion, architecture, speech, and values that defined an era.

For India, with its rich and varied film traditions across languages and regions, preservation holds even greater importance. Our cinema has chronicled the nation's changing landscape from the hopes of independence to the complexities of modern life. Losing these films would mean losing our collective story. Preservation allows us to revisit that legacy, to study the evolution of storytelling, and to appreciate the craftsmanship of the filmmakers who came before us.

What makes this moment particularly exciting is how technology has transformed the possibilities of film restoration. Advanced digital tools now allow experts to clean, repair, and even reconstruct damaged films with remarkable precision. Scratches are removed, colors are revived, and sound is restored to its original depth.

This technological progress has not only made restoration more accessible but has also helped Indian cinema regain its rightful place on the world stage. Restored classics are now being showcased at major international festivals, sparking renewed appreciation for the depth and artistry of our cinematic tradition.

A remarkable example of this is the restoration of Shyam Benegal's *Manthan*, a project undertaken by the Film Heritage Foundation (FHF) with support from the Gujarat Cooperative Milk Marketing Federation Ltd. (Amul). Released in 1976, *Manthan* (meaning *The Churning*) remains one of Indian cinema's most powerful depictions of social transformation. The film tells the story of Dr Rao, a young veterinary doctor played by Girish Karnad, who works with rural farmers to establish a milk cooperative. The film's ensemble, featuring Smita Patil, Naseeruddin Shah, and Amrish Puri, brings to life a story that is as much about community empowerment as it is about individual conviction.

What made *Manthan* historic was not just its theme, but its making. The

film was crowdfunded by over five lakh farmers who each contributed two rupees to bring the project to life, making it India's first people-funded film. In many ways, its recent restoration carries forward that same collective spirit.

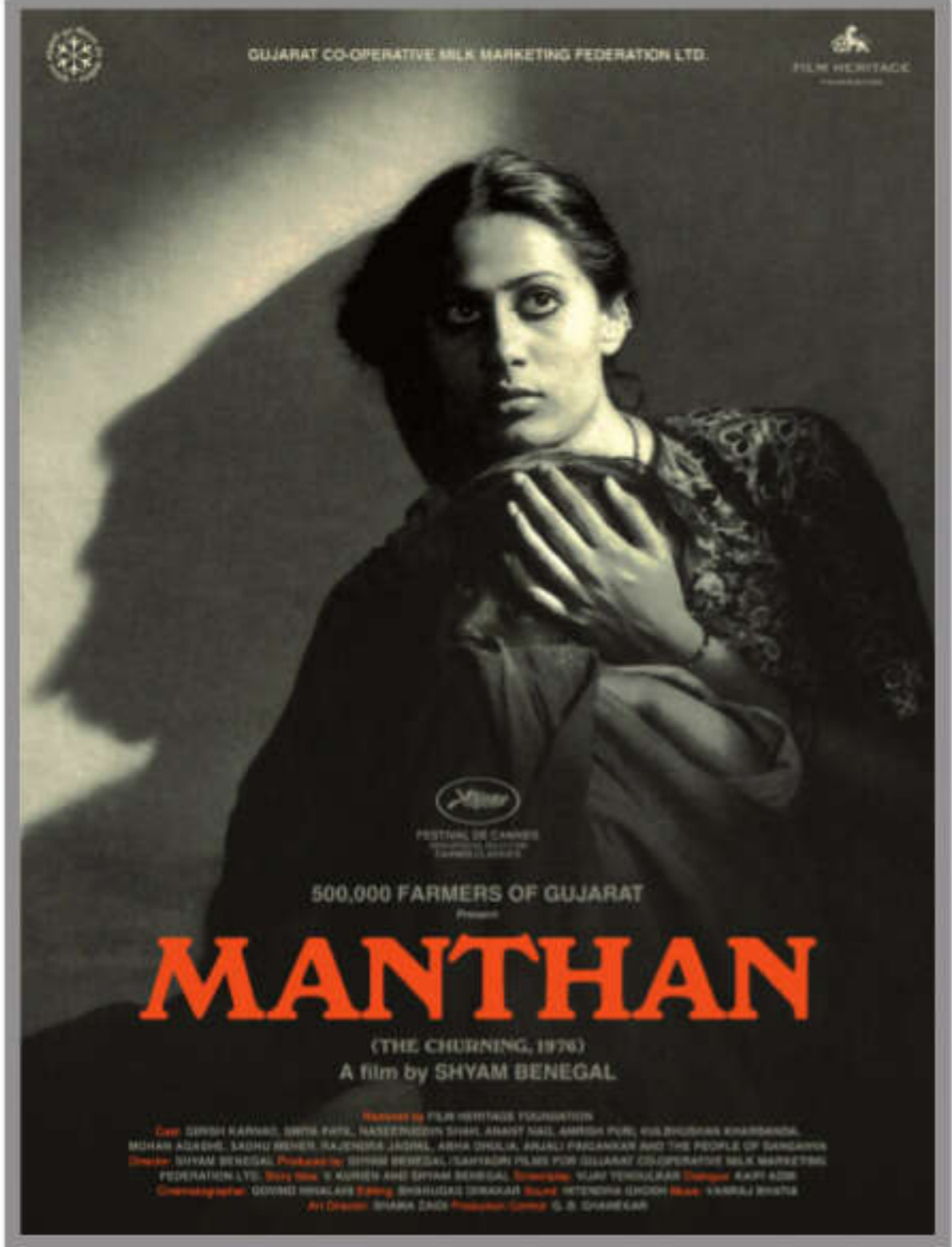
When *Manthan* was restored and screened at the Cannes Classics section of the Cannes Film Festival, it was not merely an aesthetic triumph; it was a reaffirmation of how deeply cinema is woven into India's cultural fabric. The restored version shimmered with new life, allowing international audiences to experience not just the story but the legacy of India's rural revolution and its cinema's humanistic power.

Restoring a film is like restoring a piece of history that can continue to inspire future generations. For students of cinema, these restored classics serve as invaluable archives of technique, storytelling, and cultural representation. They reveal how Indian filmmakers responded to their times, how they framed questions of gender, caste, modernity, and identity through their art.

Film preservation, therefore, is not nostalgia-driven; it is future-oriented. It ensures that the creative achievements of the past can continue to educate and inspire. It also brings inclusivity to the narrative of Indian cinema, giving long-overlooked regional and independent films the space they deserve in the national and global conversation.

Initiatives such as 'Future of Memories' play a vital role in nurturing awareness and appreciation for film heritage. They remind us that saving films is not the responsibility of experts alone; it is a shared cultural duty. Such forums also spark a new consciousness among the audience, encouraging people to look at films not just as entertainment, but as historical artifacts that carry our collective imagination forward. They highlight how preserving cinema is akin to preserving a nation's memory.

Organisations like the Film Heritage Foundation (FHF) have also been instrumental in safeguarding India's cinematic treasures. Through meticulous restoration, digitisation, and archival efforts, they have ensured that old classic films are not lost to time. Their work allows audiences in 2025 to witness these films as they were meant to be seen—preserved yet reinvigorated by



modern technology. Since film reels deteriorate with time, digital preservation is paramount to save India's rich cinema history for future generations.

Preserving films demands vision, technical expertise, and resources, but above all, it requires love. The work of organisations like the Indian Cinema Heritage Foundation and the Film Heritage Foundation stands as a testament to this passion. Their tireless efforts to rescue and restore India's cinematic gems are a reminder that cultural heritage cannot be taken for granted.

Films may be fragile, but their stories are enduring. Through preservation, restoration, and dialogue, we ensure that the soul of Indian cinema continues to

live, breathe, and inspire not just as history, but as a living, evolving legacy.

As modernisation accelerates, the desire to stay connected to cultural roots grows stronger. Old films serve as powerful reminders of India's artistic traditions, moral values, and storytelling craft. They provide a bridge between the past and the present, allowing audiences to reflect on where cinema has come from while contemplating its future. The preservation era is not just about nostalgia. It is a celebration of identity, heritage, and an enduring love for stories that have stood the test of time.

The writer is a former civil servant who writes on cinema and strategic communication. With inputs from Zoya Ahmad and Vaishnavie Srinivasan. The views are personal.



Traversing the cartography of timelines

RUDRANI CHATTERJEE

An abyss of spectral projections, where art takes form at the intersection of geometry and geography—such is the liminal tension that artist Radhika Khimji's third solo at Experimenter evokes. The Omani-Indian artist's pursuits traverse painting, drawing, collage, embroidery, and sculpture, deliberately resisting the confines of medium-specific categorisation. She studied at the Slade School of Fine Art, the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, and holds an MA in Art History from University College London. Through her material interventions, Khimji dismantles inherited notions of identity and belonging, situating her art within a realm of continual displacement and reckoning.

On view at Experimenter's Hindustan Road gallery from 5 November 2025 to 3 January 2026, *The Line is Time* unfolds as a meditation on spatiotemporal

reflexivity. Within this lexicon, her works distil lines, shapes, and textures that seem to apprehend the world beyond their edges. Speaking to The Statesman, Ms Khimji described the body of work as "a play on words, unravelling a timeline to think about temporality as something abstract and fragmented." Each installation invites an individuated reading, resisting the comfort of generalised exposition.

"These works are primarily about the journey I take up. Jebel Akhdar, a mountain in Oman, which I have been fascinated by for many years. I document my journey with a camera and then transfer these images onto wood, working on top of them with paint," Khimji explains. "The journey continues on the surface of the picture—a reflection of a different scale, a different duration."

Within *The Line is Time*, *Strait to the Gate*, an oil and photo transfer on MDF panel, stands as an arresting confluence of burnt orange and shadowed grey. Angular planes pierce soft, smoky gradients, while two crimson orbs anchor the composition like twin suns held in suspension. The structure feels both architectural and intimate—a crossroads between motion and stillness, where entry feels like a metaphor for inward transit.

Satiated to a Point reveals a subdued terrain rendered in sepia and ash, where pyramidal silhouettes rise in tonal gradations of rust and white. The rhythmic repetitions suggest both woven texture and geological layering, binding the earthly with the ethereal.

I've Wanted the Echoes to Find Their Ways into Me suspends crystalline configurations against a surface of amber and dusk. Veiled transparencies

conjure a trembling illusion of depth, the superimposed planes resembling prisms of remembrance.

The palette shifts from scorched rust and ochre to the contemplative coolness of blue and slate in *Pathways*. Fine lattices of red lines collide and diverge across the surface like veins of remembered fire. The composition reads like a map unmade—its trajectories neither leading nor ending, dissolving into quiet expanses of blue.

The Occultist's Gaze looks within, where darkness becomes both veil and revelation. Against its shadowed field, a pentagonal form stitched in red glows faintly. This red no longer signifies



warmth but resolve, holding its own against the consuming black. A quiet invocation of sight beyond light.

These works are fragments of a larger corpus, each negotiating its own rhythm of becoming. Through the measured interplay of pigment, stitch, and void, Khimji's art speaks of transition. "In my practice, I explore the relationship between the body and the landscape, and how the body connects to place and time," she explains. Ultimately, *The Line is Time* is less a linear narrative than an invitation to inhabit the flux between seeing and sensing, tracing the contours of memory, duration, and interpretation.

